

A STRATEGY FOR SCHOOLS

POSITIVE RESPONSES TO DEATH

A policy & procedures aid for a death
in the school community

June 2019

A PROCEDURE AID FOR SCHOOLS

These guidelines are intended to assist your school in developing a strategy to respond to a death in the school community, such as a member of staff or a pupil. Practitioners at Winston's Wish and school staff have put them together using experience gained over many years.

Please feel free to use it, copy it, change it and adapt it to best suit your needs. It can ideally inform the writing and implementation of your Major and Critical Incident Plan.

If you have any further questions, comments or suggestions, please contact our Freephone National Helpline on **08088 020 021**.

The pack is divided into three sections:

A. INFORMING STAFF AND GOVERNORS

B. INFORMING PUPILS

C. INFORMING PARENTS

INFORMING STAFF AND GOVERNORS OF A DEATH WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

A death can affect the school community in different ways and depends on:

- **The role that the deceased person had in school.**
- **How well known they were in the local community.**
- **Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide, or other violent or sudden deaths.**

The experience of working with many schools affected by death has taught Winston's Wish that adults and children benefit from being kept informed of a death. Rumour and gossip can be very damaging and can lead to both young and old developing the attitude that the death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity and if they are not informed of the circumstances, or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be affected.

The following guidelines may help when informing staff and governors:

- **Arrange a staff meeting as soon as practicable. Identify absent staff.**
- **If a death has occurred in a holiday period make sure that all staff are informed. Some schools have a 'snow' or other urgent communication system in place that could be used.**
- **Tell the story of what happened leading up to the death.**
- **Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred.**
- **Be prepared for obvious upset and feelings of anger/guilt. People may connect the incident to their own personal experience of bereavement, so feelings about past bereavements may need to be discussed. This is perfectly natural.**
- **To enable absent staff to feel part of a caring team, arrangements should be made to inform them over the telephone if a personal visit is impractical. Consider the relationship between the absent colleague and deceased.**
- **For a death that may attract media coverage (e.g. if the member of staff was a well-known personality or died tragically), identify a nominated spokesperson (e.g. Head Teacher, Chair of Governors) to provide a 'news statement' at an agreed time, as a way of dealing with media intrusion. Liaison with the individual's family is essential, prior to reporting information to the media, in order to respect their privacy and wishes.**
- **Establish good lines of communication with all relevant parties, this will always include family and staff, in other cases it may involve communication with emergency services, health, the Educational Psychology service, Social Care, and other support services.**
- **Provide details of someone who can be available to talk things through with a member of staff, parent or child if they are finding the situation particularly hard. This person could advise the family of support services available if required.**
- **Nominate staff to prepare a letter to parents and carers, example letters are in the 'informing parents' section at the end of this document.**
- **Provide staff with a script about what has happened so that consistent information is given to all of the pupils. Include where possible some answers to difficult questions that staff may be asked by the children, to prevent them needing to think of appropriate responses on the spot.**

- **Encourage everyone to consider how to meet their own support needs and take care of themselves, this may be from friends, family, support services and/or buddying up with other members of staff. Provide contact details for support in your local area.**
- **We recognise that speed and chaos may be a major factor on a day when a critical incident has happened – the speed and chaos meaning that constantly referring to plans and lists is not possible. DONT WORRY! Be confident enough to go with your gut instinct. Remember that keeping people as informed as possible is always helpful, and don't bear all the responsibility yourself, share it round.**
- **Trained and experienced practitioners are available on the Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021) should you want to check out ideas throughout the day.**

INFORMING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

People often think that children do not grieve, but even very young children will want to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly of all, what happens next?

The following guidelines will help you to inform children of the death of a teacher or other member of staff:

- **Identify those children who had a long-term and/or close relationship with the deceased to be told together as a separate group. Where possible inform all the pupils in the smallest group practicable. Class or tutor groups are ideal.**
- **Take account of pupils with specific needs including: pupils with past history of loss; pupils with a learning disability and pupils who have difficulty managing their emotions or behaviour.**
- **Experience has shown that it is more beneficial if all pupils are informed.**
- **It is always a shock when a death occurs in a school even if it may have been anticipated. In the eyes of the pupils, teachers are part of the fittings and fixtures in school and are not expected to die. Children expect to live forever, and so a fellow pupil dying whilst still young enough to attend school can also feel quite shocking. Provide staff with guidelines on how to inform children. For example:**
 - **"I've got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. I know most of you will have heard of cancer, and know that sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it. Mrs Smith, the Geography teacher and Year 11 tutor, has been ill with cancer for a long time. I have to tell you that Mrs Smith died yesterday in hospital".**
 - **"Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. Sadly, there are some accidents that cause people to die. I have some really sad news to tell you that might upset you. Yesterday Stephen, who is in Year 4, was in an accident and he was so badly injured that he died".**
 - **Refer to the person's name naturally, "Mrs Smith died from cancer".**
- **Children and young people will appreciate time to verbalise their feelings and fears. Allow space for "If only's..." to be acknowledged.**
- **Discussion – allow pupils to share their own experiences of death, eg. "When my pet/my gran died" etc.**
- **Be honest about your own feelings and experiences, and talk openly about the relationship that you had with the person.**
- **Answer pupil's questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like 'passed away', or 'lost' etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children.**
- **Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care.**
- **Plan and arrange how the school will collectively acknowledge the loss and remember the person, for instance with an assembly, memory book, and maybe in time a permanent memorial (garden, tree, bench, award...). Our *Guide to supporting grieving children and young people in education* has some notes on school assemblies.**
- **It is natural that children may be upset and/or need time to process information, make sure there is a quiet space for them to go to, support available for them both immediately afterwards and in the days that follow.**

INFORMING PARENTS OF THE DEATH OF A PUPIL

It is vital that parents and carers are provided with information as soon as possible so that they can support their children and help them make sense of what has happened.

These are two examples of a letter to parents. Please feel free to change them according to the needs of the situation.

Most schools have text and email systems for informing parents, so you may want to combine these methods, for instance texting parents to let them know that they have been sent a letter by email and/or that there is an important letter for them to pick up when they collect their child from school.

As with any other issues our Helpline is happy to offer advice on the wording of these type of letters in relation to different causes of death or other specific circumstances, information is also available on our website.

GLOUCESTER C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL

<Date>

Dear Parents

Your child's class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the tragic death of <Name>, who has been a teacher at this school for years. Our thoughts are with <Name's> family at this time and in an effort to try and respond to his/her death in a positive manner, all children have been informed. The children were told that <Name> died from an asthma attack on <Date>. A number of pupils have been identified as being asthmatic and <Name>, the School Nurse has today reassured them that it is unusual for a person to die from asthma. When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings - sadness, anger, and confusion - which are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

Yours sincerely

<Name> Head teacher

GLOUCESTER C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL

<Date>

Dear Parents

Your child's tutor had the sad task of informing the children of the death of <Name>, a pupil in <Year>.

They were told that <name> died from an illness called cancer. Sometimes people who have cancer can get better, but other times people die from it. <Name> had been ill with cancer for a long time and died at home yesterday.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion - these are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

Yours sincerely

<Name> Head teacher