



On the Death of a Child.....

The Brook on Broadwaters

Introduction:

The Brook Special Primary is a school in North London, for pupils with profound and severe learning difficulties, ASD and other complex needs. The Brook was formed as part of the merger between two schools, William C Harvey and Moselle in September 2011. Over the years some pupils at William C Harvey in particular had died as a result of their physical condition and, in the year before the merger, three children had died in just over a year staff members of both schools had also died over the years. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused more staff and our children's families to experience bereavement – often at a distance.

Death sometimes takes us by surprise and is sometimes more shocking than we can ever anticipate – no two deaths are ever the same – all we can do is our best on each sad occasion. We can never get it quite right but we will always try our best to support each other and our families. There are no rules – we think we have strategies worked out, but death often throws up something we had not considered but we must at least try to formalise the whole school strategies to deal with these sad occasions.

Principles

- Everyone needs to grieve over a loss as an individual in their own way. The same principle applies to organisations and their individual staff. The strategies contained in this document apply to everyone but we must always remember that the needs of the individuals may differ according to the circumstances around the death of any child.
- There is a need to acknowledge the death of a child and the fact that he or she has suddenly gone from the class group, no matter how young the pupils are.
- Tears and shows of grief should be accepted as the norm even in front of the pupils – they and other staff need to know that it is acceptable to grieve in their own way.
- The class staff need to tell the child's classmates as soon as possible. According to the age and ability of the pupils this can be through stories, photographs or favourite songs/music. If a death occurs very soon after the class has moved to another staff group, then the staff best known to the children could tell them.
- There needs to be a flexibility around the death of any child so long as the following strategies are followed:

Whole School Strategies:

Supporting Staff in working with fragile and dying children:

- Ensure that the atmosphere is as positive as possible in the classroom
- Staff need to be vigilant to the child's state of health but not to the detriment of them missing out on experiences
- Include the child in all activities/sessions as much as possible – carry on as normal as far as possible, so that the child does not feel "different". However, flexibility is the watchword here as sometimes the child may be extremely tired and unable to take part at certain times. – on those occasions they should have the opportunity to be simply resting alongside the rest of the classroom activities.
- Offer additional staff and/or support to be offered if needed to ensure that the child can enjoy particularly valuable/favourite sessions.
- Make the pupil as happy and comfortable as possible
- Support newer staff members who may find it more difficult to cope with the prognosis than more experienced staff
- Staff need to know formally and as soon as possible if a child is not to be resuscitated. This should be discussed as a class group with the school nurse.

- Head Teacher or member of SMT should be at the first palliative care meetings with class groups to discuss implications. Everyone in the class should be told of the situation.
- A clear plan needs to be discussed and shared with the class staff including procedures such as when to call the ambulance and who will do that/who will call parents and carers etc. with responsibilities for each stage made clear.
- All meetings should be an opportunity for staff to discuss their feelings and to ask any questions they may have.
- Staff need to tell the other children in the class of their classmate's condition, explaining in terms they will understand. This also applies to children from The Willow who may be working inclusively with Brook children – this should be negotiated with the Willow class teacher.
- The whole school staff should know of particularly fragile children so that they can support colleagues and class staff groups do not feel isolated.
- Staff may need time out of class during particularly difficult periods of a child's condition – not just after a child has died.
- Everyone should support each other and respect that they have their own ways of dealing with the situation

Procedures if a child dies in school.

This will vary according to whether the death is expected and there is a full care plan in place for the child. In this case the school nurse will deal with the circumstances with the Head and Senior Staff supporting staff and the other children. In the case of a sudden death staff will inform the Head (or Deputy in her absence)and the School Nurse and procedures within Health and Education will be instigated immediately.

Supporting Staff on the death of a child:

1. Staff are told the news of a child's death sensitively and quickly by the Head or a member of the senior team. All classes should be told plus other staff within school including the kitchens and the transport – we never know who may have felt particularly close to the child. During holiday periods, especially the long summer holidays it may be necessary to text the whole staff group – we will do this as sensitively as we can.
2. After a holiday during which a child may have died, especially at the beginning of a school year when staff and children change classes, the previous staff and class groups to which the child belonged need to be given time together.
3. Staff should be covered immediately so that they can grieve in their own way – this could be in the staffroom/other more private places or with the whole staff together – whatever they wish at the time.
4. We should also be aware that other staff, who have taught the child before the current class may also be very affected by their death. They should also be covered if they wish.
5. Part time staff or others who are not in school on that day should be telephoned by the Head Teacher so that they do not return without knowing of the child's death. This also applies to any member of staff who may be coming in later on that day.
6. The School Psychotherapist should be made available on the day of the child's death either for individuals or groups if available.
7. A flexible approach is followed to deal with curriculum/teaching needs on the day of the news so as to allow staff time out/time with the children to share responses and feelings and to support each other within informal friendship groupings etc.
8. A list of external counseling and support services for staff is available in Appendix 2. They may not be available for consultation immediately but telephone helplines may be of some help during the immediate aftermath of a child's death.

9. All staff who wish to attend the funeral of the child will be facilitated to do so according to the wishes of the family. Families may also like students to attend.
10. Staff may visit the family if they would like to and the family agrees.
11. Liaison over funeral arrangements and collections for flowers etc. should be carried out by the class staff and those closest to the child, if they wish – if not, the Head will do it.
12. The Head Teacher will coordinate arrangements with the rest of the school.

Supporting Students:

1. Photographs and work from the pupil should be kept on the walls so that staff and pupils can remember them.
2. A quiet, reflective assembly happens as soon as we know of the news and is run by senior management. The class may wish to do this but sometimes it is too soon for them.
3. A circle time before assembly in the classrooms needs to introduce what will happen in the reflective assembly.
4. An assembly to celebrate the life of the pupil happens later or as soon as the class would wish it and are ready to cope with it. The assembly can contain a slide show and celebrations of the life of the student – sharing food, sharing favourite toys or music, or a favourite activity the pupil may have liked.

Grief During Childhood:

- Birth to 3 Years: even infants grieve. If there were people who have been consistently in a baby's life, the child will have a sense of something missing.
- Three to Five Years: children at this age think that death is temporary and reversible. If they have language they will ask when someone is coming back. They need concrete explanations that the body has stopped working and will not start working again.
- Between Five and Nine Years: they understand that the person has gone but see it more as a separation
- After about Nine or Ten years: they begin to understand that death is final.
- Until children are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal. This will necessarily apply to almost all our pupils and we need to give a simple, honest explanation using the forms of communication used in your groups and for individual children.
- Don't be afraid to use words like "death", "dead" or "died" – using phrases like "gone to heaven"; "gone away"; "passed away" are especially confusing for very small children and children with learning difficulties as they may think they are coming back.
- Children also need reassurance when adults are showing their grief by crying etc. They need to see adults crying so that they know it is alright to cry but they also need to know that their teacher and staff will be alright later and it will pass – they are just very sad.
- Never talk about death as "sleeping" - this can provoke great fear in children.
- Children grieve but they do not have all the ways to cope that adults do. They often have feelings like sadness, anger, guilt, insecurity, and anxiety. They may sometimes show anger to members of the family and may start having behaviour issues at school. They may think that the death is their fault especially if they had once "wished" a person dead. Young children are likely to move on fairly quickly but sometimes they can remain unaffected by the loss and then express grief at unexpected moments.

Guidance on telling the pupils in the class

This is one of the hardest things anyone has to do but the following are some suggestions which may make it less painful for you and the pupils:

- Be honest – if you're upset don't be afraid to show it.
- Recognise that every death and every reaction to it is unique
- Make everyone in the group feel comfortable – staff may want to sit close or hold the pupils – this will actually come quite naturally!
- It may be useful for the pupils to hold a favourite toy of theirs which would give them a feeling of safety and security
- Talk about the death but remember the good things
- For some pupils it may be useful to do a circle over a period of time and to include the pupil in other activities eg this was.....'s wedge/standing frame/favourite toy
- You might want to light candles or create a peaceful atmosphere in other ways
- A shrine may be useful where photographs and particular pieces of equipment may be kept in one part of the classroom or the school and, gradually over time, items are removed until only the photograph of the pupil is left.
- Multisensory memory story about the pupil with pictures/activities can be passed around the class group
- Use the class communication systems – objects of reference/signs/symbols
- Talk as simply as possible “has died – we are sad”. Too much language can be confusing.
- Please remember that pupils can often hear adults talking amongst themselves about a child's death.
- Allow time and space for pupils to digest the news

Supporting Parents/Carers:

1. See above for the funeral arrangements
2. Head Teacher to write to all parents/carers on the day of the news as we can never know the network of friends there may have been.
3. Creating a memory box for the child to give to the family – full of favourite photographs, toys, music, sensory items.
4. Keeping in contact with the families and inviting them to whole school events.

Support for the whole school community:

1. Memorial book with the child's photograph and birthday opened each year on the anniversary of their death.
2. Remembering to mark the birthdays of the children
3. Possibly an annual memorial day for all those who have died.
4. Following and respecting the different cultural approaches to death and grieving (Appendix 1)

Appendix 1:

Some examples of different cultural approaches to death and grieving

These examples have all come from the staff group

African Caribbean:

- Very much a celebration of the life of the person who has died.
- Within a very short time after their death anyone who has known them or their family goes round to the house to support the grieving relatives
- On days 1 – 8 after the death, the community visit the family sometimes taking food and drink to support them
- It is a very uplifting and celebratory occasion in order for the community to support the family. Games such as dominoes etc. are played, with appropriate music and talk. The community sometimes stay all night to support the family.
- On the 9th day the wake is held and then at a time after that (often after waiting for family members to arrive from abroad) the funeral is held – again a uplifting time for the family. The community is encouraged to wear bright colours.
- The real grieving happens when the family is left alone after the funeral.
- The coffin is brought to the house on the day of the morning of the funeral.
- A memorial is held one year after the death and the headstone is raised at that time
- A tradition around children is that the community cries when a baby is born because of the world it is born into and smile when they die as they will be going to a better place.

Ghanaian: Christian

- Quiet times of grieving but everyone comes round to the house. It is open house but the mourners do not necessarily eat but are offered a drink.
- After the burial the family will cook for the family and those staying in the house
- Traditions are dependent on the cultures of particular areas in Ghana
- Families wear black on the day of the funeral – black and white at the thanksgiving service.
- The grief is shown by very loud wailing and crying
- The family buries the husband or wife, not their partner.
- The family wears black for one year for a husband or wife and 40 days for parents.
- No flowers at the house

Greek Orthodox:

- On the death of a family member the men are not allowed to shave for 40 days
- Family members wear black for the rest of their lives
- Red is an insulting colour and must not be worn in their houses or by visitors to the house

Humanist:

- Very much a celebration of the life of the deceased with poetry, stories celebrating the life of; photographs; DVD's; music.
- No religious content

- Often linked to different forms of burial eg Woodland Burials

Nigerian: Muslim/Christian/other

- In Nigeria if a baby or child dies, the parents leave the home if the wake is to be held there. The community deals with the death as the parents are not allowed to bury anyone younger than themselves.
- A wake is held on the 8th day in Nigeria
- The coffin goes straight to the burial ground from the hospital
- Younger family members (from 17 years upwards) go to bury the deceased

Polish: 90% Catholic

- Very sad, sombre occasions
- Black mourning clothes are worn for one year after the death of a husband or wife/6 months for parents
- Babies are buried in white coffins and wear white as a symbol of innocence
- On 1st November each year there is a public holiday when families light candles and take flowers to the cemetery for anyone who has died during the year before. Graves are tended well.

Somalian: Muslim

- The funeral is held at the Mosque for the men and in the home for the women – the funeral is going on in both places and is just as valuable in either setting
- Women going to the Mosque in this country as can happen here must cover their heads completely and wear no make up. They will gather with the other women with the coffin situated downstairs in the Mosque with the male mourners.
- Women do not go to the graveside
- The child or adult would be buried as soon as possible sometimes leaving on the life support machine until the last possible moment before the funeral
- Visits to the home are welcome

White British: Christian/other

- Traditions vary from family to family and often families will follow the wishes of the deceased
- In some areas the funerals are very formal, in others a wake follows which is a celebration of the life of the deceased
- Cards and flowers are sent to the family
- Some funerals are with alcohol, some without
- Families and very close neighbours/friends are usually the ones to support the bereaved family with the wider community attending the funeral or memorial later
- Funerals tend to be very sad occasions with the tradition being to dress in black or sombre colours.
- The funeral usually takes place around a week after the death
- In some families the coffin is brought home to the house the night before the funeral or for as much as a week before.

The RE Curriculum:

We need to bring the culture of death into the curriculum in an objective way. We have to be careful not to stress the various religious elements which families may believe and which the child experiences.

Appendix 2:

Counselling and support services for staff

1. Child Death Helpline: Freephone 0800 282 986
2. Haringey Occupational Health: 020 8489 4551
3. Worklife Support and Wellbeing Resource: 08000 856 148
4. CRUISE – Christian Counselling organization
5. NEU
6. Unison
7. Employee Assistance programme