



## Educational Psychology Services

### COVID19 Support

# Bereavement Support for Children and Young People: A Guide for School Staff

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## Introduction

The aim of this guide is to offer advice to schools about how you can support a child if someone they know or a loved one becomes seriously ill or dies with COVID19 (or suspected COVID19).

Due to school closures, schools may not currently be able to offer as much support as they usually would to children who are going through difficult times. With closures and social restrictions in place, it is important for schools to consider how best they can offer support to children and their families when someone they know is seriously ill or dies with COVID19. This may be in person for those children and young people still attending school, or remotely for those who are at home.

The situation with the pandemic is unprecedented and ongoing. Families are perhaps more socially isolated now, at a time when they crucially need their support network in the face of serious illness or the death of someone they know. Parents may be feeling overwhelmed and may reach out to school staff for help in supporting them and their child. Sometimes, talking to a familiar and trusted adult outside of the home environment can be helpful for a child or young person.

School staff will also be feeling vulnerable and will be reminded of their own vulnerability whenever they provide support to others. They will empathise and identify with the bereaved and this will be will be upsetting at a time when the school's usual well-being support is disrupted.

## When somebody a child knows is seriously ill with COVID19

It is natural to want to protect children from distressing news such as somebody they know being seriously ill. However, children sometimes know more about what is happening than adults realise. This can happen through overhearing conversations and having access to information which may not always be accurate. Children can easily pick up on the serious nature of what is being discussed around them and this can become worrying for them if not addressed. They would benefit from having someone to talk to about what is going on, to help them make sense of it and to be reassured. It is better to be open and honest, and talk to children and young people about a serious illness. In the current situation with COVID19, it is more likely that the parents or carers would be the ones to share news about a serious illness with their child rather than school staff but the child may want to talk about this further and ask questions to adults they trust in school. They may be concerned that others they know will become seriously ill or may be upset if the person who is unwell is someone they are close to but cannot see in person due to social distancing.

## How to talk to and support children who know somebody who is seriously ill with COVID19

You may feel unsure about what to say to a child when someone is seriously unwell due to COVID19. Consider the following:

- A good place to start, where possible, is to have a conversation with their parent or carer. This will help you to establish the facts, such as how the person is being cared for and to find out what the child already knows as well as what the parent may not want them to know yet.
- When talking to the child, consider their age and level of understanding, the severity of the person's condition and the child's previous experience of illness and loss. Use your judgement to consider what is appropriate to say.
- When speaking to the child, it will be helpful to balance the support and empathy that you offer with hope that the person will recover, reiterating what you know is being done to help the person get better.
- Avoid offering false reassurances, such as telling the child that the unwell person will be ok or make a full recovery.

When speaking to the child, consider using the steps of the *CONNECT model* from *Emotion Coaching*, to offer emotional support (please see the link at the end of this guidance for more detailed information on each step). In brief, the steps involve:

- **Checking-in (with the moment and your feelings)** – be aware of your own emotions before supporting a child

- **Opportunity for teaching** – how can a child be helped to cope with their emotions? Refer to the psycho-educational information provided about common reactions and helpful ways of coping
- **Noticing their bodily reactions and feelings** – really listen and learn how the child expresses their emotions, what they say and their tone of voice
- **Normalising, labelling and validating** – normalise their emotions by talking about them, reflecting back and referring to common feelings
- **Empathising** – by accepting the emotional reaction and supporting the child to find ways to cope
- **Consider setting limits** – a child’s behaviour may be different at this time. Help them to know how to respond in more helpful ways
- **Team work** – problem solve together and explore helpful ideas with the child or young person around what they could do to manage their emotions.

### When somebody a child knows dies due to COVID19

Losing someone they know, especially if this is someone they were close to, is always difficult. The current situation with COVID19 may make it even harder for children and families to cope and for schools to support them. It is emotionally challenging for everyone. They may not have been with their loved one in the days leading up to the death and may not have been able to attend the funeral. At this time, a child and their family will need even more support from their social network but may find themselves more isolated due to the COVID19 social distancing rules. With so many people dying it is important to remember that every death is significant and the loss of a grandparent, for example is uniquely painful. COVID19 has impacted the normal grieving process for families and usual comforts and breaks from the grief may not be available.

### Children and young people’s reactions of grief following a death

Children can experience a mix of different feelings at different times when they experience a death. Some of the emotions they may experience include: anger, sadness, guilt, fear and shock. The way a child grieves can look very different to how adults grieve. For example, children can seem really upset about the death and soon after, appear happy or talk about other things before experiencing sadness again. They jump in and out of their grief and this is normal but can be confusing for adults. The way children respond to death is different for each child based on their age and level of understanding. Currently, all of this is compounded by their understanding of the virus.

- **Up to 2 years old:** Children at this age typically don’t understand death but do experience loss and separation. They might cry, withdraw or search for loved one who has died.

- **2 – 3 years old:** Children at this age may believe that the person who has died can be brought back to life. They may blame themselves, repeatedly ask what has happened or act out the death with their toys.
- **6 – 9 years old:** Children at this age start to understand that the person who has died can't come back. They may start to have nightmares about death and may be curious about what happens to the body. The child might withdraw, become angry or aggressive, or complain of headaches or tummy aches.
- **10 – 13 years old:** Children at this age are aware that death is final. When grieving, they might struggle to interact with their friends and may be more dependent on their family for support. They might have big emotional reactions and may think about the long-term consequences of the death.
- **Adolescents:** Young people at this age may start to question what the point is of doing various things. They might try to keep busy to push away their feelings, they may express anger or withdraw. The young person may try to take on adult responsibilities and try to hide their emotions to protect the adults around them.

This is just a guide and the child you are supporting may not fit neatly into it so judge what you think is appropriate for their stage of development.

It is common for children who experience a death to feel worried that the same thing might happen to other loved ones. With COVID19, this worry may be even more intense because many people have caught the virus. The child would benefit from receiving reassurance from school staff about what they can do to keep themselves and others safe and well.

### How to talk to and support children who know somebody who has died from COVID19

School staff are often significant people in a child or young person's life and have an important role to play when helping them during a bereavement. Parents and carers may be finding it difficult to support their child emotionally when they too are grieving and may be more socially isolated than usual. As such, they may need even more support from school in order to help their child. Consider the following:

- Communicate with parents in order to establish the facts, find out about how the child and family are coping, and understand what the child has been told (including anything that parents do not want their child to be told).
- Find out about what arrangements are in place for the funeral or any planned memorials as this will help you to know when the family may need additional support and to decide what that support might look like. Children and their parents may be finding the bereavement particularly difficult if they are not allowed to attend the funeral due to social distancing rules or if cultural and

religious rituals cannot be observed. Maintaining rituals is important to the grieving process.

- Again, use your judgement to know what is appropriate to say according to the child's age and level of understanding.
- Use the *CONNECT* steps outlined previously, to provide empathy and emotional support to the child as well as their parents or carers.

Be aware that a child may experience the death of a parent from COVID19. It is important to consider the additional trauma that a child will be experiencing as a result of this. When someone outside the household dies, there will be more opportunity for routines to carry on as normal. However, with the loss of a parent there can be many changes at home, which will add to the difficulties the child or young person experiences. Other family members may also require additional support at this time.

### Support in school

If the child or young person is still attending school, you can help by:

- Keeping a routine – this gives the child a sense of normality and continuity,
- Keeping them included with group activities,
- Providing relief and time away from what may be an emotionally charged atmosphere at home,
- Giving them a safe space to express their grief,
- Providing resources such as stories and workbooks to help them to explore their own feelings – a 'one-step removed' approach can sometimes help,
- Allowing time and space to talk at their own pace and to be listened to – wherever possible, allow the child to choose who they feel safest to talk to but balance this with the individual circumstances of your staff. Some staff members may be experiencing their own bereavement and may not be able to offer support to the child at this time,
- Using simple language to explain what has happened (taking into account what the family have told the child),
- Being honest and offering reassurance where possible.

### Support remotely when face-to-face contact isn't possible

All channels should be used to maintain some contact with the family. When offering support remotely rather than face-to-face, there are some things to consider. In the absence of being able to use non-verbal cues, try to be more aware of your tone of

voice and how you can demonstrate that the child, young person or family member is being listened to and understood. Make sure you give the other person plenty of opportunity to respond and consider ways the family can return contact after they have had time to process the conversation.

You could agree a regular time with the family to check-in with the child or young person over the phone. It may be that one or two key members of staff who the child is close to carries this out to ensure continuity and trust. Again, be aware that school staff may be finding this time difficult or be experiencing bereavement themselves. It may be that whoever is in contact with the child needs extra support, or could even consider not being involved at all and this should be respected. You may wish to consider the following ways to offer support when contacting the child and family:

- Offer condolences on their bereavement,
- Ask what support they might want – you could leave this as an open invitation for the family to contact you once they have had time to process the conversation,
- Provide general reassurance to the family and child, emphasising that everybody's experience of grief is different,
- Encourage family members to keep a routine – this could be following the routine of a school day or just having regular bed times and meal times. This will bring structure and a sense of normality to the day,
- Suggest resources the family could use with the child or young person (see list and links at the end of this guidance),
- Emphasise to parents or carers, the importance of taking care of themselves at this time and signpost them to resources around self-care (see link below to self-care guidance).

### Supporting children on returning to school

Careful consideration about how to support the child or young person when they return to school will be needed, especially if they have been away from school for some time due to COVID19. They may still be experiencing strong emotions and due to the nature of death through COVID19, there may be other factors which need to be taken into account. For example, the child may be worried about leaving other family members in case they too become ill. They may also be concerned that being in large groups will be a risk to their health and may find this a difficult adjustment to make. It will be important to try and reassure the child as much as possible. Using the *CONNECT* strategy outlined previously could be a useful starting point for acknowledging the child's worries and finding a way to help them cope.

Working with the child's family at this time will be essential to support a successful transition back to school. Regular contact with the family and child or young person over the phone to prepare them for this could be useful. You may wish to agree with the

family how other members of the school community are informed about the child's bereavement and the pastoral care that will be needed once they return. Where possible, try to involve the child or young person in decisions about what might be helpful for them as everyone will find different strategies useful.

Children will differ in how long it takes them to work through their grief and continue with everyday life. Support offered can be all too short and this is even more likely with COVID19 when social support may have been difficult. Grief never completely leaves us and there will be times, even years later, when the emotions may resurface. They may find anniversaries and other key dates difficult. It is normal for the process of grieving to take some time, however, if after a few weeks it seems the child is still experiencing intense emotions and has difficulty getting on with normal life, speak to their parents or carers and consider seeking additional support. You could contact the organisations listed below, for advice. You may also seek advice if you are concerned that the child or young person's grief is delayed or that they are denying their grief altogether.

### Recognising changes in behaviour

When the child is in school, you may notice changes in their behaviour including:

- Alternating play and sadness
- Tiredness
- Mood swings
- Regression and loss of skills
- Anger and frustration
- High-risk behaviour
- Lack of response

Recognise that these kind of changes are a normal part of grief. Regressive behaviours should pass with time. However, be aware of how this behaviour might be noticed by other students and keep an eye out for any bullying which could arise. It is still appropriate to have boundaries and expectations for the child's behaviour but any behaviours should be addressed with empathy and understanding. If the bereaved pupil appears to be putting pressure on themselves to do too much or 'get back to normal' then take some time to talk with them and reassure them that grieving is normal and that they will need time. Extra pastoral support can be offered, or an opportunity to access a safe place when they are finding the classroom environment difficult. It could be that unstructured times are more difficult and a plan might be required to support at these times of the day.

***This is a time for the school to come together as a community and support those who need it. It is a time when the well-being of all staff and students will be a priority. There are services and resources that can help you to manage this in a way which will build resilience and hope for the future.***

## Helpful organisations and resources

- **The Child and Adolescent Bereavement Service (CABS), Northampton General Hospital:** Offering bereavement advice by phone to parents on 01604 545131, Monday to Friday.
- **Winston's Wish:** Offering advice on supporting a bereaved child or young person. Tel: 08088 020 021, Monday to Friday, 9.00am – 5.00pm. Alternatively, email [ask@winstonswish.org](mailto:ask@winstonswish.org). There is also an online chat facility available on the website ([www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)) and a Crisis Messenger service available 24/7 for urgent support (Text WW to 85258). There is also lots of useful information and resources on the website.
- **Cruse Bereavement Care:** Website include further information for parents and carers <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents> and there is a helpline: 0808 808 1677 open Monday-Friday 9.30am – 5.00pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when they are open until 8pm.
- **Young Minds Parents Helpline:** <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/>: Available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25. Tel: 0808 802 5544, Monday - Friday, 9:30am – 4.00pm.
- **#help2makesense** website: Offers information and support to young people <https://help2makesense.org/>
- **Hope Again** website: Offers information and support to young people. Young people can email a trained volunteer on [hopeagain@cruse.org.uk](mailto:hopeagain@cruse.org.uk) or can call 0808 808 1677 free, Monday - Friday, 9:30am - 5:00pm.
- **The Mix** website: Offers information and support to young people under 25 years old via telephone (0808 808 4994, open daily, 4.00pm – 11.00pm), email or webchat <https://www.themix.org.uk/>
- **NHS website:** Offers information and advice on COVID19, including guidance for adults on how to take care of themselves: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-COVID19/>
- **Video on how to answer children's questions about a bereavement:** <https://www.winstonswish.org/how-to-answer-difficult-questions-about-a-bereavement/>
- **Northamptonshire Educational Psychology Service** website: Offers further guidance and information around how to support children and young people in the context of COVID19 including adult self-care: [Northamptonshire Educational Psychology Service \(EPS\)](#)

### Books written for children to help them cope with grief

Sad Book by Michael Rosen - The book helps to normalise feelings of sadness and can be useful as a trigger to help difficult conversations.

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: Your activity book to help when someone has died - Designed to help younger children to cope with the death of someone close to them.

Milly's Bug Nut – The story of a family finding their way through bereavement.

Please see links below for a list of more examples.

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[| How schools can support children and young people - Winston's Wish](#) | [Managing grief guide for schools and parents - Child Bereavement UK](#) | [Supporting a child through difficult times Child Bereavement UK](#) | [Books and resources by age - Winston's Wish](#) | [The CONNECT model](#) | [Self-care advice for adults](#)

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help

observe

consult

assess

focus

advise

encourage

develop

appreciate

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