

## ***Educational Psychologists (EPs) are trained in a range of problem-solving techniques to support children, teachers, parents and carers***

### ***Talking to children when someone has died***

Talking about death to children is not an easy thing. Our natural instincts are to protect children from things that might upset them but research has shown that children cope better in adulthood if they are helped to face difficult situations as they arise in childhood.

Modern media and the speed of information exchange means that children are now exposed to situations of loss and death from an early age. The television coverage of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and the uprising from the Arab Spring and the announcements of deaths of prominent national figures happen daily.

It is sad when a child experiences a more personal loss, such as the death of a family member, a close friend or a teacher. It is then that children need the support of adults who are close to them to cope with that loss and overcome the grief.



### ***How to tell children that someone has died***

Children should be told as soon as possible when someone that they have known well has died. Delaying providing the information may mean that the child will learn about the death inadvertently without recourse to supportive adults.

Children should be told about a death by someone who is very familiar to them and in familiar situations, where they are likely to feel secure. How one tells a child about the death will depend upon their age and developmental level and information about how different aged children experience death is appended to this document.



Tell children the truth about what has happened and avoid using euphemisms, such as "John went to sleep and did not wake up" which might be taken literally and engender fear. Provide them with the basic information that you have and answer their questions truthfully. If you do not know some of the facts that they ask for, tell them that you don't know those facts yet and consider with them how you both might find out the answers that they require. Expect that children will ask for facts to be repeated or ask more questions at a later date. It will be difficult for them to assimilate all the knowledge at once.

If the person who has died is someone that you knew personally and cared for, then you will also be dealing with your own feelings of grief. Making sure that you have thought

about your own sources of support will help you to provide support for the child. Remember that it is OK to express feelings of sadness; children learn much from seeing how adults cope with difficult events. There are other feelings associated with death, such as anger, which may be more frightening for a child to witness but you can explain to the child that you are feeling sad, frightened or angry at the moment but that you will be alright soon.

There are no right or wrong ways to talk to children about death. What you should aim to achieve is an open and honest environment where children feel free to ask questions.

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### ***Typical reactions and how to deal with them***

The reactions that are typically seen in grieving children are documented in a separate leaflet "Helping Young Children when someone has died". Children, like adults, experience a wide range of feelings at times of death but are less experienced at handling those feelings and may not be able to suppress some "unacceptable" expressions of grief, e.g. they may start to laugh or giggle.

Providing normal structure and expectations of behaviour, acknowledging that they will be more tired and may need to work at a slower pace or on simpler tasks for a while and encouraging them to express their feelings through drawing or writing may help them during the initial stages of knowing that someone has died. Grief is a process that is unique to each individual and support needs to be on-going. Parents and teachers need to be alert to signs that a child may need more specialist support.



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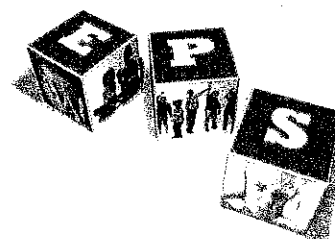
*We wish to acknowledge the following publications that were used to support the production of this leaflet:*

*NASP Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death and Grief- Tips for Teachers and parents (this article will be added to the resources on First Class)*

*ADAPP Talking to Children about Death, A Short guide to teachers (this article will also be made available on First Class)*

*Mary Turner; Someone very Important Has Just Died*

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## Schools Information Pack

Death is a subject that nobody ever wants to address. It is almost inevitable though, that at some point in every teacher's career, the school community will be affected by a death in some way or another. This might include the death of a pupil, the death of a staff member, the death of a pupils' family member, or the death of a key member in the school community such as a governor or popular visitor to the school.

The following pack has been designed by teachers, for teachers. It draws on the experiences of school staff and the input of Winston's Wish. The hope is that you will never have to use this pack. If however you do, it will give you confidence and plenty of ideas for how to deal with the subject in lessons, tutorials and assemblies, as well as on an individual basis.

Contained over the following pages are;

- ↗ Aids for speaking with a pupil about a death in their family
- ↗ Tips for speaking with pupils about death
- ↗ Learning ideas for classroom activities with National Curriculum references
- ↗ Assembly and whole school communication ideas
- ↗ Ideas for memorial activities

As you read the pack, make sure that you remain aware of your own feelings and emotions. Many of us will have to read these either having been affected by recent events ourselves, or having memories of past personal experiences.

For more help, advice or ideas please ring the Winston's Wish Helpline (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) on **08452 03 04 05** and speak to our experienced practitioners.

## How do I talk about it?

"My mum died and my life changed forever, it was the biggest thing that ever happened to me. My teacher never mentioned it."

Sometimes our natural reaction to death is not to talk about it. We assume that the bereaved person will not want to, that they will view us as nosy, and we fear that by mentioning it we will upset them.

The worst thing that could happen...already has! Most bereaved children will at some point be very glad to have the chance to talk about what has happened, and will appreciate that a teacher cares enough to ask about them and their feelings. Although the teacher involved with the quote above had acted with the best intentions, and had not wanted to upset their student, what the pupil perceived from their actions was that the teacher did not care. This only added to their hurt.

Following are some simple tips for speaking with young people about death.

**Be honest.** It is not an easy subject for anyone. If you are upset too – do not be afraid to admit it. Model the fact that difficult feelings are ok, and totally normal. A recent post on our website from a school pupil said this; *"Miss B showed us this website, she wrote down some things about her Nan, and she started to cry when she told us that her boyfriend never met her Nan, and her Nan would love him"*

- **Use clear language.** Trying to avoid the death by using phrases such as "your loss" and "gone to a better place" can frustrate older children and confuse younger ones. A six year old who hears that her Dad has been lost will try to find him, because that is what you do when someone is lost. Simply use language which is real and clear; "I was really sorry to hear that your Dad died last week, how are you feeling?"
- **Expect questions,** but don't feel pressured to provide immediate answers. Death often throws up many questions for us all. Some of these may seem straightforward and obvious under the circumstances, such as 'How does smoking cause cancer?' to the more complex 'Why do some people die so young without warning?' If there are questions that you are unable to answer, feel able to say so, and promise to look into providing an answer at a later point. There may be other questions where you have to admit total defeat...this is ok too.
- **Recognise** that every death and every reaction to it is unique. The way in which a child reacts to a death is dependant on their relationship with the person who died, the time of death in that child's development, the nature of the death (was it expected after a long fight against an illness or was it sudden?), the child's understanding of death, their support network and many other factors.

- **Don't assume** anything. Ask the pupil how they feel, rather than projecting feelings that you might expect them to have. Also, expect that other children in a class might be affected by a death in an immediate family other than their own.
- **Allow time** and space for pupils to digest the news, find out the facts and discover exactly how they feel. For some, this may be their first experience of someone they know dying.
- **Moving on** - expect children (especially younger ones) to 'move on' fairly quickly. As adults we tend to remain in a feeling or thought for a lot longer than children. If we are sad and reflective, we may be so for many hours. Children may be distraught one moment and then the next, need to ask what is for lunch, or express annoyance that it is raining outside. Although this sometimes shocks us, this is completely normal, so try not to punish it.
- **Act early** to prevent rumours from spreading, or gossip being spread around the school. Our response to death is often something that we mask when in public. Some people mask it with humour. Among children this humour can be less tempered by social graces and so can be very hurtful, as can rumours about a death or an individual. Try to prevent these at all times, but remember that nasty words are sometimes born out of fear. This does not, and should not excuse them, but may help us deal better with the pupils concerned.
- **Try to normalise** the feelings that a bereaved young person shares with you. They are probably very worried that they are the only person who has ever felt this way. Assure them that feelings of anger, fatigue, fear, worry, stress, sadness, exhaustion, guilt, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, lack of focus etc are all a normal reaction to grief.
- **Acknowledge** that some days will be better than others. A bereaved pupil may arrive for registration one morning and seem totally fine. The next day, for an obvious reason, or for no apparent reason at all, they may seem completely different.

## What are they feeling?

### **Children under 2 years old**

Very young children and babies are not able to understand death. However, if a death occurs in the life of a child in this age group they experience the loss as a separation from someone they have an attachment to. And although children at this age do not have much language to express their loss they will react to it. They may search for the person who died; they may cry inconsolably or be withdrawn.

Children this age will also be affected by the emotional state of other important people in their lives. It is important that as normal a routine as possible is maintained for the child. They will respond to a steady, loving, interested environment which will enable them to continue to thrive. As the child grows, so will their ability to understand and use speech to express themselves and so there will be opportunities to talk about the person who died and help them build their own story. When a child this young experiences the death of a parent it is particularly important they are helped to know about the person as it is an integral part of their history.

### **Children aged 2 to 5**

Children aged between 2 to 5 years think that death is reversible and that people who have died can come back. Their thoughts are characterised by what we call "magical thinking". Children can be convinced that it was something they said or did or thought that caused the person to die. The flip side of this thinking is that they can believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the dead person back. They need to be reassured repeatedly that the death was not their fault. Children's thinking in this age range is also concrete – they cannot grasp abstract concepts or roundabout ways of saying things. Instead use specific concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and give specific explanations about why the person died. Don't be afraid to be honest and tell your child if you don't have an answer.

It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to behaviour patterns they had when they were younger such as bed-wetting, use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Try to be tolerant. In time, these earlier behaviour patterns will probably disappear again, once family life resumes.

One of the most difficult aspects of a child's grief at these ages is how they ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to begin making sense of their loss. Children are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that your explanations aren't good enough - it is just the way they do things at this age. Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss. When they experience a death in this age range they are at their most helpless and are most dependent on adults to regain their balance.

### **Children aged 6 to 9**

In this age range the child begins to develop an understanding of death as irreversible and something that will happen to all living things but they may be confused about it. It is not uncommon for children to think of death as something spooky, like a zombie or a spirit that comes to get you. It is important that their specific worries are spoken about, that they share bad dreams and are told that what they're feeling is normal. Children are reassured by having their worrying and negative thoughts talked through, giving them skills and confidence to be in charge of them.

Children may display what you feel is an unhealthy curiosity with issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear explanations. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat, breath and keep warm. It is important to give them information and tell them that once someone has died, the body doesn't feel any more and they don't get hungry.

Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal but it is important that routines are maintained while gently acknowledging when someone important dies.

Children this age may have difficulty expressing feelings verbally and may retreat into themselves. In dealing with their feelings of helplessness, you may notice increased aggression. It is important to avoid clichés such as "You're such a brave boy/girl". Children will interpret this that you want or need them not to share their feelings. They need you and other important people in their lives to show them that it's OK to express their feelings.

### **Children aged 9 to 13**

In this age range children are much more aware of the finality of death and the impact the death has on them. They are able to understand death as both concrete and abstract.

Children may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers. The death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else.

It is important to find ways to build their self-esteem. Children at this age are beginning to think of the longer term consequences of the loss of the relationship. They are aware of the loss they feel in the present but also of the losses they will experience in the coming months and years when they encounter certain important milestones or occasions and realise that they won't be able to share these with the person who has died.

At this age children are beginning to move away from dependence on the family and they start to form important relationships with other children. The death of someone important can easily destabilise them, leaving them feeling unsafe and more dependent on the family. Their ability to manage their feelings may be disrupted and lead to mood swings or more definite up's and down's in their feelings. Big emotional releases (such as anger or distress) are not uncommon but can be scary for children at this stage. They will benefit from your willingness to listen and your assurances that the feelings are normal.

### **Adolescents**

Friends and peers are increasingly important as young people develop their ideas of who they are and what is important to them. They want to be accepted by other important people in their lives. Their bodies are changing, they are aware of all sorts of possibilities for themselves and are more aware of the future - their future. It is quite common for risk-taking behavior to increase during adolescence as young people test the boundaries.

They may struggle to make longer term plans as the death of someone important causes them to reflect on "the meaning of life" and ponder on the question "what's the point?" Or you may find that they are so busy with different activities they don't stop to reflect. This can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they are worried about losing control of their emotions.

If you notice a teenager who is withdrawing, acting very matter of fact and detached, or angry and protesting, then remain available for them - but don't push. Your job is to remind them that you're there and if they'd prefer to speak to someone else you'll help them find peers or other trusted adults to support them. Although an adolescent's growing process is most like an adult's they are still going through important emotional development at this age and are not ready to manage adult responsibilities even if at times they think they are adult. They need to be reassured of your love and support and to know that the limits you set are still enforced.