



Weston Schools Federation

Bereavement Policy

Date of last review: June 2022

Date of next review: June 2024



INTRODUCTION

Bereavement is an experience which will be faced by everyone at some point. Within a school community there will almost always be some pupils who are struggling with bereavement – or sometimes the entire school may be impacted by the death of a pupil, member of staff or someone who is an intrinsic part of the community.

The term ‘bereavement’ refers to the process of grieving and mourning and is associated with a deep sense of loss and sadness. Empathetic understanding within the familiar and secure surroundings of school can be of benefit in providing support in difficult and upsetting circumstances.

AIMS

The aims of this policy are:

- To give a framework and guidance in how to deal sensitively and compassionately with a bereavement
- To support pupils and/or members of staff before (where applicable), during and after bereavement
- To enhance effective communication and clarify a pathway of support between members of staff, pupils, the family/carers and the community
- To identify key staff within the school who can offer support with a bereavement
- To offer staff training on grief counselling and how to manage bereavement situations
- To have clear expectations about the way the school will respond to a death, and provide a nurturing, safe and supportive environment for all.

In acknowledging these aims The Weston Federation of Schools recognises that grief may not always be apparent to the onlooker, but its invisibility makes it no less real.

- that differing religions/culture’s view death and bereavement from different perspectives and all viewpoints should be taken into consideration and given equal value in the school environment.
- that the death of a child has huge repercussions beyond the immediate teaching/care team of that child and every effort should be taken to inform and deal sensitively with the far-reaching contacts.

One of the main concerns must inevitably be the immediate family of the deceased and as a federation of schools we state our commitment to any such family as they may need practical, emotional and ongoing support.

PROCEDURES

When someone dies in the school community, whether the death is one that affects an individual pupil or of someone known to the whole school community, the school’s response will be remembered by everyone affected, child or adult. It will depend on individual circumstances and the needs of pupils, staff and the wider school community.

Family bereavement

When the school is informed of a family bereavement or loss the following actions should be considered:

- The Head (or a senior member of staff nominated by the Head) should contact the family to offer appropriate support

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- They will ask the family how much and what the child already knows and how they have been involved and explain how the school can be involved to support the child and the family.
- A child's true understanding of death is fairly dependent on their age, see Appendix 1, and this should be acknowledged when considering guidance.
- When the death affects an individual pupil, they should be asked how they would like the news to be shared. Do they want everyone, no one or just their close friends to know?
- Other members of staff may need to be involved, eg the Deputy Head Pastoral, School ELSA
- A selection of resources available in school can be of benefit, eg stories to gently introduce young children to the concept of death.
- Members of staff, in particular a pupil's class teacher should maintain close contact. This gives opportunities to discuss concerns but also remember that successes are equally important and can provide reassurance. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the pupil is coping.
- For members of staff experiencing close family bereavement, compassionate leave and ongoing support will be arranged in line with the Staff Employment / Absence Guidelines.

The death of a pupil or member of staff

In the event of a pupil or member of staff dying it is important that all people who are close to the deceased are told in a sensitive and supportive manner rather than risk them hearing it "on the grapevine". In both cases, discussions should take place with the family and their wishes considered as to what information they wish to share with the school. A simple confirmation of death may be required until more details are available. The school can help to prevent speculation and rumours, as well as be a source of support for the family and school community.

Initial Response

- If the school is open the Head will inform the Senior Leadership Team and administrative staff as they need, to help in the next part of the process.
- If the information comes outside working hours the person who receives the news will inform the Head who will then tell the Senior Leadership Team and any others who need to know initially, bearing in mind the impact of hearing such news not in person
- Members of staff should generally be told before the pupils. In particular teachers who had a particularly close relationship with the deceased. They should then be given time to process the news and start to grieve in an appropriate private space. See Appendix 2.
- Pupils may be told in small groups, or as a larger gathering depending on the circumstances. See Appendix 2.
- After the news has been made known, it may be appropriate to have a break in the timetable to allow the community to process the news and take some time out.
- It is also appropriate to let parents know in order that they can support or comfort their children.

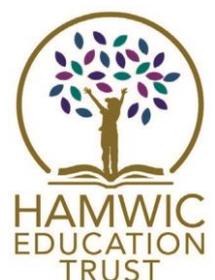
The first few days

In the first few days after a death of a pupil or member of staff we will aim to provide stability and normality as far as possible, although some flexibility may be necessary.

- Where possible a safe space will be allocated to allow anyone to take time out to grieve and manage overwhelming feelings.

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- Nominated staff with responsibilities for supporting staff and children will have their normal activities covered if necessary.
- The needs of administrative staff who are taking telephone calls and dealing with parents will also be taken into account. It may be helpful to hold a special assembly to bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened, to reflect on and remember the life of the person who has died and to normalise and share grief. It can also give the message that it is okay to be sad but equally alright to not be affected and to inform pupils and staff of any support that is available.
- Anyone who wishes to attend should be able to be there: teaching and non-teaching staff, pupils and any family who may wish to attend. Many families find comfort in other people organising something special and appreciate being there. Others may not wish to participate but should be given the opportunity to do so.
- A special assembly should have a clear beginning, middle and end, explaining the purpose and length of the assembly. There should be a brief reminder of the circumstances surrounding the death and when it happened. Pupils may like to participate to feel involved and have a sense of doing something positive.

A temporary tribute/book of condolence may be set up, in a safe accessible area where pupils can be supervised. The family should be offered the opportunity to visit the school if they wish to, or the school can take photographs to share with them later. Staff and pupils should be consulted before removing any temporary tribute, giving notice to prepare them beforehand.

Support for pupils may be provided by school staff, external agencies or local services. The School will advise teachers to be alert to any pupils who are struggling with their grief and keep in close contact with their families to work together to support and comfort them.

Supporting bereaved pupils can be very stressful for staff who may themselves be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. At certain points in time, some members of staff may be more vulnerable due to circumstances in their own lives, and they should be encouraged to speak up if they are finding the situation unmanageable in order that they can themselves be supported.

The Pastoral team and other relevant members of staff to put in place any support that may be required. This may include taking a professional advisory role and providing therapeutic support to pupils, parents and staff.

Pastoral in commissioning external support from outside agencies (eg bereavement charities, social care) if necessary.

Funeral

Staff and pupils may wish to attend the funeral; this may depend on who has died and their relationship with the family. The school should communicate with the family to find out whether they welcome members of the school community before confirming any arrangements.

If the family consent, the Head should ensure that all staff are asked if they wish to attend the funeral. It may be that not all members of staff are able to attend due to staffing ratios, if the school remains open, but should this be the case, decisions will be made according to the nature of relationships between people and the person who has died.

Pupils may express a wish to attend or take part in the funeral service, but they should only do so with the prior agreement of the deceased's family, relatives or next of kin, as

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well as the agreement of their own parents/carers. Consideration will need to be given as to their supervision and decisions made as to whether they attend with parents/carers or as part of a school group.

The Head or in the case of unavoidable absence, the deputy, will always attend the funeral as a mark of respect and to represent the school.

After the service staff and pupils should be encouraged to meet and express their thoughts and feelings as such services are important in the grieving process

After a bereavement

For a bereaved child or member of staff, returning to school can be traumatic. It is an indication that life is “normal” yet their lives feel anything but.

- It may be helpful to meet with the pupil and family to discuss their return to school. This could be with a familiar adult such as their class teacher, or the Assistant Headteacher / SENCO or the Head. The purpose of this meeting should outline:
 - o Acknowledge the death
 - o Find out how the pupil would like to share the news
 - o Ask if the pupil would like to choose a member of staff with whom they feel to have a close attachment to be their point of contact within the school.
 - o Organise a safe space for the pupil to go if they feel overwhelmed by their grief and need “time out”. How will they inform staff of this? For example, a “time out” card, a non-verbal sign or message. How will this be communicated to all staff?
 - o Set guidelines for communication – with the pupil, with members of staff and between home and school.
 - o Consider providing support for peers when they have a bereaved friend
- Where there has been a close family bereavement, or following a meeting as suggested above, everyone (teachers, support staff, volunteers if appropriate and pupils) should be made aware of the situation before the pupil returns (provide the family agree)
- Teachers should try to foster an environment that is compassionate yet disciplined. Family life at this time may be distressing with routines upset and the future uncertain. As such school routines should be kept as normal as possible
- Bereaved pupils need time. It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of schoolwork again. They will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them. Teachers should explain to other pupils how the bereaved child may be feeling and encourage them to be openly supportive.
- It should also be noted that grief may impact a pupil’s progress. Some pupils may work really hard and put themselves under extra pressure to succeed, while others may find it difficult to focus in class. There may be changes in behaviour that need to be managed.
- Staff should be aware of anniversaries and significant days such as Mothering Sunday or Fathers’ Day as this can spark a revival of feelings of bereavement. There will also be other, more personal, dates such as a birthday or anniversary of death that it would be helpful to note, so that additional support can be given at these times.

- Over time it is helpful to share information about a pupil's circumstances so that they do not need to repeat their story at each transition point. Transitions can include, changing class, year or teacher or moving to a new school.
- It should be remembered that even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. Loss and grief are very grown-up experiences. School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty.

Talking about Bereavement

People are often at a loss as to what to say or do to help a child who has been bereaved by the death of someone important to them. Every situation is different, and children will be affected to a greater or lesser degree, dependent on the circumstances of the death and the nature of the relationship they had with the person who has died. For a who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm. When a parent or sibling has died, children can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief. The following guidance may be useful:

- Do not avoid the subject, it can make matters worse. It is better to explain what has happened in a sensitive way to avoid rumours and whispers. Use the correct words 'death' and 'dead' rather than euphemisms such as 'lost', 'passed' or 'gone to sleep'.
- Try not to judge: Grief is a very personal experience. Every child and young person will grieve differently, even those from the same family.
- Check out the facts: Staff should familiarise themselves with the circumstances surrounding the death. Communicate with the family and make sure that what is said will not conflict with the family's wishes. Different information from home and school will confuse a pupil and complicate their grief.
- Acknowledge what has happened: Do not be afraid to use the word 'death', 'I was very sorry to hear of the death of your ... '. A card to a bereaved pupil from his/her class is often appreciated and helps to keep up contact with school if they are not attending.
- Responses will vary: Adults should not assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care. Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity. They should be allowed to express emotion and feelings and staff should not be afraid to share their own feelings of sadness.
- Children and young people need honesty. Although sometimes difficult, it is better to answer questions truthfully. If a child asks a difficult question, rather than answering straight away, ask the child what they think.
- Be prepared to listen: Schools are busy places and time may be limited, but an offer to spend a bit of quiet time with a pupil who clearly wants to talk will be greatly appreciated. Some will welcome the opportunity to just sit with a teacher and say nothing; for others it is enough to know that someone is keeping a look out for them. If teachers are discussing something in class that will refer to the person who has died, they should not be afraid to do so. Avoiding references to the person who died might be perceived as a denial they ever existed. If not sure, teachers should check with the bereaved pupil first, letting them know their intention.

Remembering

It may be appropriate and/or desired by the family to have a more lasting memorial in school. The Head or nominated person may wish to discuss suggestions for how to remember the deceased, for example a tree, special garden, piece of artwork or a bench.

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Pupils may also wish to be involved with plans. There will need to be an awareness of sensitivities of any future requirement for removal, relocation or replacement.

Terminally ill pupil/member of staff

Anticipated death can be as hard to deal with as sudden and unanticipated loss. Children and adults who are not expected to live may benefit enormously from normal routines such as attending school whilst they are still able to do so. This can present challenges for the school community. Sensitive but honest communication between the family and professionals involved will help overcome most of these challenges.

In the event of a child or member of staff becoming terminally ill, their wishes and those of their parents/guardians/next-of-kin should always be respected. However, the following guidance is useful:

- Pupils and adults who are constantly in and out of hospital should be welcome to attend school as far as their illness allows, to give an opportunity to have some normality in their lives. Continuing to take part in school routines as much as possible can give a feeling of achievement, with the emphasis on living rather than dying. It can also give back a sense of identity as a person rather than a patient.
- For children, the school and family, including the sick child, should decide together how to share the news that a pupil is terminally ill. It is not easy, but an open and honest approach is usually the best way.
- Classmates who have had the situation explained to them may be supported by being involved, such as giving them jobs such as wheelchair pushing. These tasks should be shared and not become the responsibility of just one pupil.
- If the child is receiving treatment from a local hospice or hospital, it may be possible to call on a nurse or social worker whose job includes visiting schools to explain to pupils about a friend's illness and treatments involved. This should help alleviate any worries that fellow pupils may have. It is helpful for the school to at least identify the key professional responsible for the ill pupil and how to contact the professional for advice and support.
- Young people deal with difficult situations much better when truthful explanations are given regarding absences, changing appearance, lack of energy, treatments and exclusion from activities such as sport. Being naturally curious, classmates will ask questions, and these should be answered sensitively but factually.
- On occasions the child may wish to talk to their fellow classmates about their illness themselves. Honesty about death dying may be the best line of approach. However the class teacher should be prepared to answer questions and reassure pupils.
- Teachers should aim to further maintain a sense of normality by continuing to expect usual standards of behaviour within the pupil's limitations. This helps to reduce feelings of favouritism amongst other pupils.
- The school will offer information to parents and carers on what to say to children when someone is dying. They may have concerns surrounding their own children being upset or made anxious by a classmate who is seriously ill. It can help to give reassurance that children and young people will have fewer anxieties if presented with the truth, rather than having to make up what is happening. With consent from the family of the sick child, information on the illness and treatments will help other parents and carers to understand and feel informed. The realisation that their children are contributing to an increased quality of life for the sick pupil may create a more positive approach.

- Teachers should try to support pupils by taking a lead in helping the class decide how to deal with an anticipated death.

Other circumstances.

Every death is hugely personal and unique to those affected by it, however it occurs and for whatever reason. Further information on how to support death due to different circumstances can be found at www.bereavementuk.org.

This policy will be reviewed every 2 years

Appendix 1: Children's Understanding of death

Appendix 2: Guidance on speaking to children about the death of a pupil or member of staff

BEREAVEMENT POLICY APPENDIX 1

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

(FROM CHILD BEREAVEMENT UK)

Children and young people mature at different rates and their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age. The age categories given are guidelines

2-5 years:

Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality. Some may not appreciate the permanence of death. For example, a child could say: 'Shall we dig granny up now?' They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as 'passed away', 'lost' or 'gone to sleep'. Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened. As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death.

They are prone to fantasise at this age and, if not told what is happening, may dream up something scarier than reality.

5-8 years:

At about five years of age most children are beginning to realise that dead people are different from those who are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink. At around seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone. This can result in separation anxiety.

As they develop, they become more able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected. They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust. They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.

8-12 Years:

At this age a young person's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. An important factor is their deepening realisation of the inevitability of death, and an increasing awareness of their own mortality. This can result in fear and insecurity. Their need to know details continues, and they will seek answers to very specific questions.

BEREAVEMENT POLICY APPENDIX 2

GUIDANCE ON IMPARTING NEWS ABOUT A BEREAVEMENT

Guidelines for breaking news about a death to staff

- Arrange a staff meeting which should take place as soon as possible.
- Impart factual information. Never make assumptions or repeat what has been said by rumour. Give news sensitively and empathetically, being aware that people may react in different ways.
- Be aware of the relationships staff may have had with the person who has died.
- Other members of the school community should also be informed, such as:
 - o Part time staff not in school that day
 - o SEN team
 - o Other departments, eg transport, catering
 - o Previous school staff who worked closely with the child or teacher
 - o Any other professionals who may have been involved, eg Educational Psychologist
- Consider the best way of imparting the information to those absent e.g. by doing home visit, by telephone, text or e-mail etc.
- Identify individual members of staff who feel able to: a) support members of staff b) support groups of children. The most appropriate person to support the children should be well known to them and trusted.
- Identify a member of staff who will liaise with the individual's family, to deal with staff condolences and any funeral arrangements (if necessary).
- Identify an appropriate member of staff who will take 'phone calls and/or direct them as appropriate. Try to establish a "protected" telephone line to ensure free flow of accurate information. Telephone line providers may provide an additional line if the situation requires one.
- Arrange a staff meeting at the end of the day to ensure staff are coping with the situation.
- Identify any unresolved problems or ongoing issues.
- Ensure that those staff who live alone have contact numbers of friends in case of need.
- Identify sources of advice and support to access for help in coming to terms with the bereavement

Guidelines for breaking news of the death to the children/young people

- Inform the children/young people as soon as possible about the death.
- Where possible, the pupils should be informed in small groups i.e. class or tutor groups
- Identify those children who had a long term and/or close relationship with the person who has died so they can be told separately. If appropriate, a special assembly could be held at a later time in the day to remember the person who has died.
- Start by acknowledging that you have some sad news to give
- Be honest. Give the news stating simple facts, using the words 'dead/died', not euphemisms

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- If known, and with the permission of the family, explain briefly where and when the death occurred
- If facts are not known, say so, and that you will endeavour to find out. If rumours are rife, say which of these are not correct, if known. Where appropriate, remind pupils of their responsibilities and the impact of posting on social media
- Allow the children/young people to ask questions and answer them honestly and factually in terms that they will understand.
- Allow the children/young people to verbalise their feelings.
- Allow the children/young people to discuss the situation and share their experiences of death.
- Be honest about your own feelings and talk about your relationship with the person without eulogising them.
- Those children/young people who have had more involvement with the person should be given the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences either within the group or on a one-to-one situation.
- Ensure the children/young people understand that the death is nothing to do with anything they have said or done. It is in no way their fault.
- Reassure them that not all people who are ill or have had an accident will die and that many people get better.
- Acknowledge that not everyone will be feeling sad and that is okay
- Put an appropriate time limit on the discussion.
- Conclude the discussion with a prayer or special poem to remember the person who has died and their family.
- Allow a break in the timetable for pupils to process the news and take a little time out.
- If appropriate give pupils something practical and positive to do such as making cards, contributing to a book of condolence, writing or drawing messages, creating a piece of artwork
- Be available for any child/young person who needs additional help and support.



Signed Chair of Governing Body:

[date]

Signed Headteacher:

[date]

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