



Bereavement Policy Beacon Hill School

This policy should be read in conjunction with the home/school policy, communication policy and work on pupil voice.

Bereavement is something which happens throughout life and is something which we all have to face at some time. It can be especially hard for young people with learning difficulties to understand this. However the nature of some of the young people the school works with means that they may die earlier than would normally be expected. This policy aims to:-

1. Discuss definitions of grief and bereavement
2. Specific issues and approaches to ensure people with learning difficulties are enabled to manage grief in the best way possible
3. Discuss ways in which grief and the response to death can be especially problematic for young people with ASD.
4. Discuss ways in which cross curricular work can enable young people to develop a basic understanding of death and bereavement.
5. Set out agreed systems and procedures for how as a school we respond to the death of a pupil, member of staff or close relative of a pupil.

This policy aims to meet the aims of Beacon Hill School in the following ways.

Beacon Hill School and Business and Enterprise College is a community:

- that has high expectations for continuous improvement in order to raise standards for pupils

Standards for pupils will be raised where issues of death, bereavement and grief are dealt with positively, proactively and appropriately. This policy sets out systems which will support this work.

- in which all partners include, involve and inform each other.

This policy sets out ways in which the range of staff involved with children can work with them and their parents to ensure that issues of death and bereavement and dealt with consistently and thoughtfully.

- that actively develops parental partnerships for the benefit of the pupils

An important section of this policy deals with supporting parents at times of bereavement and also parents who might be finding it difficult to support their child when they are grieving.

- that values communication and provides the time and opportunity to make it effective.

Communication is especially important at times of bereavement and grief and this policy puts in place agreed systems to make this effective and consistent.

- that establishes an atmosphere of security, trust and respect for all

This policy aims to ensure that all people involved in school feel secure at very difficult times and have their feelings and beliefs respected.

1. DEFINITIONS OF GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

Bereavement is defined as 'the loss of something that is precious (*Good Grief* (2), 1989). It usually refers to the death of someone close, but can include a significant change in one's life or the loss of a significant object. All these life events may evoke a grieving process in pupil/student, and staff should be aware of this. The most catastrophic loss, however, is usually brought about by the death of a person.

Whether or not they are learning disabled, people react individually to grief, but most people share certain reactions. Because people with learning difficulties are restricted in their social interactions, it might be concluded that they do not form attachments to other people, and are therefore insulated from the grieving process. In fact they can be deeply affected by the death of someone close. On the basis of the evidence now available, four conclusions can be reached:

- All people react individually to bereavement
- They may share the 'common reactions to bereavement' and may be affected by the major determinants of reactions to grief.
- The problems and reactions of other bereaved people with learning disabilities may also be experienced by people with autism.
- The grieving processes of people are profoundly affected by their disabilities. This especially so for young people with autism.

THE PROCESS OF GRIEVING

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Grieving is a response to bereavement. It is best understood as a process where powerful feelings are experienced and come and go in an unpredictable way. Some emotions include guilt, panic, anxiety, anger and despair. For children and young people grief can be reactivated at times of transition in their lives.

Unresolved or complicated grief occurs when the bereaved has failed fully to experience the stages of grief or to have performed the tasks of mourning identified by J William Worden (1988):

- to accept the reality of loss
- to experience the pain of grief
- to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing
- to relocate the deceased emotionally (but to have an ongoing relationship in some new way)

2. SPECIFIC ISSUES AND APPROACHES TO ENSURE PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES ARE ENABLED TO MANAGE GRIEF IN THE BEST WAY POSSIBLE

- **Terms in which the death should be explained**

A simple, factual description of death is recommended both for children and for those with learning disabilities, along the lines of:

'His/her body won't work any more. It can't move, talk, walk, see or hear. He/she is not asleep, has stopped breathing, can't eat, drink, feel hot or cold.'

There should be no suggestion that there is hope of return, and euphemisms such as 'gone to sleep', 'left us', or 'you have lost your father/mother', should be avoided as they lead to confusion and distress.

- **Explaining the cause of death**

In explaining the death, it is important always to be honest and consistent, without giving details which are unnecessary or disturbing. The cause of natural death can be explained by saying that the deceased 'was very old so that his (or her) body wore out and stopped working' or that they were 'fatally' (or 'terminally') ill, 'and the doctor could not make them better'. Care should be taken, when mentioning illness, to avoid using the expression 'very ill' which might later be used on an occasion when the pupil/student is ill, leading them to believe that they are on the point of death.

- **Explanations of death**

It is likely that many people with learning difficulties will share the difficulty children with normal intelligence under the age of 10 have in grasping all three of the aspects of death, - that it is inevitable, irreversible, and universal. However, children who have been prepared with a good biological explanation of death may be more able to accept and understand the concept of an after-life. All of the world religions believe in the continuation of the soul after death: Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs believing in reincarnation (that the soul returns as a new person many times); Christians, Jews and Muslims believe that a person lives only once, and that after death their soul will go to heaven or hell.

1. The body

What happens to the body can be understood by children if explained simply - that the dead person cannot have feelings, cannot feel hot or cold, hurt or sick. His dead body is of no use to him. A simple explanation is then given of cremation and burial.

2. The spiritual aspect

- **Are dead people sleeping?** A clear distinction should be made between sleep and death. Sleep gives rest and renewal. Death is when the body stops working.
- **What happens to dead people?** Our bodies wear out. Our spirit or soul, which enables us to give and receive love never wears out. We cannot see it, but people of all religions believe it lives on after we die. (The analogy is offered of a person leaving a house, which then ceases to be a home.)
- **What is heaven like?** The spirit or soul no longer experiences the sadness and troubles we have on earth. It goes to heaven which is where God is. Because God is love, heaven is a place full of love. No-one knows what heaven looks like or what it is.
- **Anxiety and misconceptions about death**
Young people with learning difficulties can have bizarre and distorted ideas of death. If staff detect misunderstandings about death in a young person, they should try to clarify their source and nature by sensitive questioning and observation, in order to tackle them effectively. An example of how this type of misunderstanding can arise is that of a young school leaver who was convinced that his own death was imminent. He knew that a staff member had died and therefore had left the premises, and he had watched older pupils depart, never to be seen again. When the staff discovered the source of his anxiety, they were able to arrange for him to speak to those pupils who had left, who told him about their lives in a new setting.

3. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN BEREAVEMENT OF PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

NB Although these issues have been identified specifically for people with ASD they may also be relevant for other people with learning disabilities.

- It is absolutely essential that those offering support to a bereaved pupil/student have not only a good general understanding of autism, but they must also know the pupil/student well and be skilled in observing and interpreting both their verbal and non-verbal reactions. The grieving process of people with autism is impeded by their disabilities of communication, and social interaction and difficulties of cognition. In fact young people with ASD may also feel bereavement in response to a loss of an object/ activity, as well as in response to change e.g. staff changes in school/ divorce/ changes in school/ classes peer group etc.

Staff need to be aware of some of the problems which may arise.

Failure to grieve after loss

Some people with autism and others with learning disabilities do not grieve after loss. These few examples do not justify an assumption that they do not have a capacity to feel emotion or that if an individual does not exhibit grief in an expected way, that they are not grieving.

Before it can be concluded that a bereaved individual is not grieving, staff need to verify their conclusion by careful observation, sensitive questioning, and checking on the behaviour of the individual in other settings. Furthermore, it cannot be concluded from the fact that there has not been a reaction to one bereavement that there will be no reactions to subsequent bereavements.

Delayed reaction to loss

Grief is often a delayed process for people with learning disabilities. They fail initially to understand the implications of their loss, but may come to feel the impact later. One young woman with autism who lived in residential care whose father died before Christmas accepted that she could not go home for the holiday, having been given a reason - that daddy had gone to heaven - but did not begin the grieving process until she went home the following Christmas and realised her father's absence. She then underwent a profound grieving process for a period in excess of two years.

Apparent failure to understand the irreversibility of death

The failure to understand the irreversibility of death is characteristic of young children without learning disabilities. This is also true of some people with autism, although there may be an apparent failure to understand, which reflects a language difficulty rather than a difficulty of comprehension.

It is normal in the early stages of bereavement to behave as though the deceased still lives or even is present, and to experience difficulty in accepting the finality of death. It may be that the pupil/student's repeated questions about the return of the deceased after the funeral and burial or cremation are a way of coming to terms with their loss. They may feel a need to check the consistency of the replies they are given or their questions may be their way of showing that they need comfort and reassurance. One young man with autism, who attended his father's funeral and cremation, persisted for some time in asking when his father would return.

Uncertain and inappropriate responses to bereavement

There have been a number of examples of people with autism who have expressed uncertainty regarding how they should react to death: 'Should I feel sad?'; 'How sad should I feel?'; 'Shall I cry?'. Others have reacted by giggling at the funeral or at the gravesite - perhaps a reflection of this uncertainty. This is also a reaction in children. Some have appeared callous and unfeeling, which is very difficult for

carers - like the girl who, on the death of her mother, immediately asked when her father planned to marry again. Some apparently callous comments can be the result of difficulties with verbal expression.

Disruptive or aggressive behaviour

Because of communication difficulties, the only way a bereaved person with autism may be able to express their grief is by disruptive or aggressive behaviour. It is difficult for staff to discover whether this arises from fear, anger or guilt or physical discomfort, all of which can accompany bereavement, or whether it arises from factors altogether unrelated to bereavement which may be as diverse as effects of medication or distress caused by the behaviour of another pupil/student. Staff will, of course, by means of sensitive questioning and observation wish to discover the cause, and take appropriate action. It is important to remember that even long after the loss has occurred; the pupil/student's behaviour can be affected by bereavement.

Limited means of expressing grief

It is generally agreed that people without learning disabilities, who are bereaved, find it helpful to talk to sympathetic family members and friends about the deceased and about their feelings. Grief counselling, proven to have a very positive effect on the grieving process, involves **listening** to the bereaved and commenting reassuringly and supportively. These therapeutic strategies are unavailable to most people with autism unless staff can enable them to discuss their thoughts and feelings by sensitive questioning and by supplying appropriate words, signs or pictures. Because of the demands it makes upon them, this kind of attention may be unwelcome to the bereaved, who may find it threatening. On the other hand, unexpressed grief may go on at an unconscious level, which may precipitate symptoms of unresolved grief, such as deep depression or neurosis.

Inability to request help

Because of their disabilities of social interaction, people with autism are unlikely to seek support when they are anxious, depressed or unhappy. Again, it is necessary for staff to intervene sensitively. Although a minority of people with autism do not apparently grieve when they lose someone close, the majority need to experience the grieving process and require help in order to do so. There is no need for staff to fear reactivation of the grief by active intervention - at least during the first few years of bereavement. It is likely to be present and should be expressed.

Limited number of relationships

The person with autism - as do others with learning disabilities - has a very limited number of close relationships. Consequently, there may be a very substantial emotional investment in these relationships, with the result that when they are terminated by departure or death the effect on the person with autism may be catastrophic. Because they have limited network of concerned family and friends, they may find it difficult to perform one of the tasks of grieving which must be

worked through if the grieving process is to be completed - to effect an emotional withdrawal from the deceased and reinvest it in other relationships. In common with others with learning disabilities, many people with autism are highly dependent for help on professional staff who may not be able to offer long-term emotional care or support.

Inability to seek activities which may help in the grieving process

People without learning disabilities have access to a number of strategies which can help to mitigate their loss. They may turn to violent exercise, pursue their hobbies, seek social contacts, travel, listen to music. People with autism may not have the self-awareness, motivation or experience to seek activities which might be helpful to them, and they often cannot have access to them without help from carers.

Introduction of undesirable habits or obsessions

Staff may need to intervene if undesirable habits or obsessions are introduced by the bereaved during their grieving process as a source of comfort, as these may persist long after the period of grieving, to the detriment of the pupil/student.

Inability to predict future change

People with autism are unlikely to have an expectation that the pain and suffering which they are experiencing will eventually come to an end. They therefore lack yet another possible source of comfort. Staff should make every effort to explain the grieving process to them, bearing in mind that the intensity and duration of their reactions should be determined only by the bereaved.

Ways in which Beacon Hill works specifically with pupils with ASD in relation to loss or bereavement

- Preparation of the young person for a bereavement whether it be a person or object, preparation, planning and the students involvement is the key.
- School will work closely with parents to help the young person prepare/ cope with bereavement as well as include the families beliefs/ religion whether the bereavement is death/ divorces change etc .
- As young people with ASD have difficulty with communication and therefore their expression of emotions, their response to grief can be very different and could even be delayed or inappropriate. Due to their rigidity of thought young people with ASD will need help to recognise emotions both within themselves and in others. The young people will also need to be taught a meaningful and appropriate way of expressing these emotions.
- Our PSHE curriculum, enhanced curriculum and behaviour management plans allow students to work upon identifying and recognising the different emotions and how to express them appropriately.
- If school is informed that a relative is ill and death may be possible, school will begin to prepare the student using social stories which include the family's beliefs on death and religion.

- As bereavement cannot always be predictable we work with students to begin to prepare them with basic skills to help their understanding through our daily school routine. This includes the use of timetables, sequencing and knowledge of life skills which in the event of bereavement may help the students understand the process.
- Team Teach behaviour management strategies allow staff to observe and understand the meaning of challenging behaviours if they arise in response to bereavement. These strategies also allow staff and the student to work together to develop a more appropriate way of expressing their grief.
- Bereavement inevitably causes a change in routine/ activity. For a young person with ASD. Change can cause anxiety and stress in young people with ASD. Therefore school will also endeavour to provide structure and routine to create familiarity and confidence in the world around them at this confusing time.
- The use of social stories will be used to help the student understand how grief affects everybody in a different manner.
- Acceptance of a loss of a person or object does not mean the grief is over. As with all young people with or without ASD the grief may be life long and reoccur with memories, this will be taken into account when working with the students.

4. WAYS IN WHICH CROSS CURRICULAR WORK CAN ENABLE ALL YOUNG PEOPLE TO DEVELOP A BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT

The curriculum and work in school can help pupils develop and understanding of death and bereavement in the following ways.

- Specific subject areas contain opportunities to discuss death and help pupils understand its inevitability, irreversible and universal.
- Opportunities should be in Science taken to explain death simply and factually, as part of the life cycle, without speculation or prediction, using examples occurring in daily life, such as dead plants, dead insects and dead animals, establishing that they are biologically dead.
- In English there are many excellent stories such as Grandpa which deal with the death of a loved one. A box of these books is available on request from the school library service. Poems may also develop pupil's understandings of death.
- In PSHE the curriculum allows opportunities to discuss feeling and thoughts about loss and relationships.
- RE allows pupils to consider the different rituals different religions use to commemorate the dead.
- In circle time pupils may wish to share with their friends any loss in their family. This may initially be the loss of a pet rather than a relative or friend but this may give pupils a context in which to consider later bereavements.

Agreed systems and procedures when pupils or a member of staff (who has been in school recently) dies.

For Pupils

1. Pupils in the child or member of staff's class should be informed of the child's death by a member of the SMT usually the headteacher. This will be done at the most convenient time usually circle time or registration. Well known members of staff will be in the group. The head will tell the children that their friend has died and that they will not see them any more. They will emphasise that this does not mean that they should not talk about the person or forget about them just that they will not be able to see them any more. The head will acknowledge that they all feel sad and that's fine but that the saddest people will be parents and family of the child who died. The head will try to find out the wishes of the parents of the deceased child and if they have a religious view will tell the children that their friend is in heaven. If they do not the head will not say this. The children will be encouraged to sit quietly to think about their friend and their family. They will have the opportunity to ask questions.
2. Following this pupils will be able to discuss their friend with any staff they feel comfortable and their questions will be answered straightforwardly.
3. As soon as possible pupils will have the chance to work with their class staff on a table about the pupil or member of staff. They will be asked to suggest items or pieces of music or photos which remind them of the person and these will be displayed on the table. This aims to give the children permission to talk about the person who has died and the opportunity to do so. The table will usually be in the classroom and will remain for about 4 weeks depending on the situation. Children can also write letters or do drawings for the family of the child who has died.
4. Books will be available from the CYP for children to borrow which deal with the death of a loved one.
5. Occasionally parents wish pupils to be involved in the funeral or thanksgiving occasion. This is a decision to be made by the parents of individual pupils not school although any absence to attend such an event with a parent will be authorised.
6. It is known that children and young people can respond better to a death if they have been prepared for this. This is a difficult issue to consider in school not least because so many of our young people often seen on the point of death but then recover, another issue is the level of understanding of the young people. However there will be occasions when preparing the children for what is to come would be helpful and this will be done thoughtfully, in consultation with parents by staff well known to the young people who feel able to do this.

For Bereaved parents

1. The headteacher and class staff will make contact in person with the bereaved parents to see if there is any help which they need. A letter of condolence will also be sent formally from the staff and from the Governors.

2. Staff in office will formally inform the LA and other services of the death to try to ensure that parents do not receive any further information or circulars from the LA now that their child has died as this can be distressing.
3. Parents will be invited into school at any time and will be offered the opportunity to continue to have the newsletter by post.
4. Parents will also be offered a specific appointment within the first 4 weeks after their child dies to come into school to see the table in memory of their child and to chat to class and school staff. Staff will understand if parents find this impossible.
5. School will keep in touch informally with parents where this appears to be helpful.
6. Some parents ask for donations in memory of their child for school. It is important that this money is carefully accounted for and parents are told who has donated but not the amount. The money should be spent quickly on a specific project or piece of equipment relevant to the child and parents consulted about this. They should be invited to come and see this.
7. School will have available to parents on request information from Charities such as Compassionate Friends of "Winston's Wish" which offer help and advise to bereaved families and children.
8. Annually for up to 5 years after the child's death an informal card will be sent from school thinking of the family at a very sad time for us all.

For staff

1. Senior staff will make every effort to ensure that all staff are made aware of the death as soon as possible. Care will be taken to do this in person not by text or email and to ensure that staff on sick or who have recently left are informed also. Attempts will be made to inform members of the MDT. However practically mistakes may be made and staff need to accept that this is not deliberate or intentional.
2. Staff who have worked with the pupil most recently will be given priority in this communication.
3. If the news arrives in school time. Staff who are closest to the person who has died will be told out of the classroom and will be allowed to stay out, have a drink with each other and go home if necessary. In practice people prefer in this situation to be in school.
4. At the end of the day all staff will get together informally to ensure everyone has the correct information about cause of death, parents wishes etc and to discuss their memories of the child and any issues about the response of other pupils.
5. SMT will be aware of the end to support staff after a bereavement and will be aware that different people will require different levels of support for example if they have had several children die in their class, they have themselves had a child who died or they are close to the family concerned.
6. Staff who wish to attend a person's funeral will be able to do this if this can be covered safely in school. Other staff will facilitate this through putting classes

together etc. Staff however will be expected to return to school as soon as possible to ensure the needs of the rest of the pupils are met.

7. Staff will be told about the sources of support available to them from the LA in particularly the opportunity for counselling paid for by school should they find this helpful.
8. Parents may wish staff to play a part in the funeral of thanksgiving event for their child. If staff wish to do this staff will facilitate this and offer their colleague support. However it should never be assumed that staff will do this and if necessary the head will explain to parents why this cannot be done.

For the School Community

1. When a child or very recent member of staff has dies the school will send out a letter to the parents of the children in the class concerned. (See attached). This will let parents know of the person's death and also what their child has been told. If applicable details of the funeral arrangements will be given.
2. The next newsletter will contain information for the rest of the school. This will be written straight forwardly and care will be taken about the content of the rest of the newsletter.