

## **The Milford Academy - Bereavement Guidance and Support**

Through providing a curriculum/systems in school that acknowledge and address loss, death, bereavement and grief we can improve the skills of children and young people to deal with and emerge positively from them. Our school is well-placed to help our children explore and develop an awareness and understanding of death, as well as to support those personally affected by it. An important part of this is the ability to support pupils, families and staff at times of loss and bereavement, as well as helping children and young people to support their peers, decreasing the sense of isolation that can be part of it.

Milford Academy is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff, pupils and students. We wish to work towards this in all aspects of school life, and to provide an ethos, environment and curriculum that support and prepare pupils for coping with the loss of a loved one.

Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different and this guidance has been constructed to guide us - professionally, sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.

### **General aims of these guidelines:**

1. For everyone to have a clear understanding of what bereavement means and to be aware of the different stages of bereavement.
2. To help children and adults cope with bereavement as well as possible.
3. To appreciate that everyone will react differently to bereavement.
4. To have in place a course of action / proposals

### **General information:**

Reactions to grief:

- Open distress
- Tears
- Panic
- Withdrawal
- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Refusal to co-operate

### **Use of words:**

When talking to a bereaved child/student about death, the words we use are very important. If death has been referred to as "falling asleep" it is logical for children/students to become fearful of sleeping or of going to bed. "Loss" implies that something is lost and could be found again.

Do not say to a bereaved child / student – "I know how you feel" – you don't. "You'll get over it" – they won't, they will learn that life goes on but that it will be different.

Do say I care. I'm here, anytime, anywhere. I will cry with you if need be – I will talk about your mum, dad, Nan etc, and we will laugh about your happy memories. I won't mind how long you grieve for – grieving is so natural and acceptable.

I don't know how you feel but with sharing perhaps I will learn a little of what you are going through. Perhaps you will feel comfortable talking to me – do you want to give it a try?

### **Definition of Death:**

This may be of use with some children/students.

Death is a natural part of life. All living things – plants, animals and people, are special parts of the natural world. Nature usually gives us long, healthy lives, but not always. Like all other living things though, people grow old and reach the end of their life. This is called death or dying.

### **How we can help children/students with death and grief:**

Death of an immediate family member: Being realistic and honest is the best any teacher or adult can do for a child/student. No child/student is taken in by pretend cheerfulness. Be aware of and respect the wishes and beliefs of the family. Encourage children/students to express their feelings. Do not tell a child/student how to feel. Help children/students use up their feelings in a positive way. Children/students learn to mourn by observing others. They need to be warned about different adult reactions and receiving mixed messages. Emotional pain is catching – be prepared. Try not to single out a grieving child/student for special attention. They need to feel part of the class and it helps if you expect them to continue to perform, though obviously at a different level.

Death of a pupil/student: Whilst the issues raised will all apply, the following points should also be noted: Where a pupil/student has died, the effected class will grieve far longer than the rest of the school. Those who had a close relationship with the deceased will need extra care. We should allow grief to continue in the hearts and minds of the children/students. The deceased made a contribution to the class and continues to be part of it because of his/her death.

Death of a member of staff: Children/students generally believe that teachers / support staff leave the school for other posts or to retire. For most, it is quite inconceivable that they might die whilst still being employed by the school. We as adults have an inbuilt resistance to accepting death, especially if it is someone of our own age or younger. When such an event occurs it is usually extremely traumatic, especially for members of staff forced to deal with their own grief as well as comforting the children/students. Planning how we as a school would manage such an event is very important.

Multiple loss in the school: Where several children/students and/or staff die in one accident, staff, pupils, parents, governors, outside agencies and the press, all become entwined. Areas of responsibility need to be very clear. It is essential to gather together all of the facts and details of the accident, and then determine the likely impact on the whole school. This then has to be dealt with appropriately. In the case of multiple deaths, additional support and resources may well be required. Additional staff may also be needed. In such instances, effective communication channels are essential. Preparing for a pupil/student to return to school: For the bereaved child/student or member of staff, returning to school will be traumatic. It is essential to pave the way for their return. It is important that everyone in school is aware of what has happened. If everybody knows, and the bereaved person is aware of this, then it should make the situation more bearable. It is also important for everyone to be aware so they can appreciate and make allowances for uncharacteristic behaviour. If staff find a pupil/student in a distressed state, they will at least be prepared in their own minds as how best to deal with it.

School as a safe haven: Whilst it is only natural to show compassion and allow expression to those suffering grief, it is important not to forget that for the bereaved, school, with its routines and

rituals, can provide a respite. Death brings unpredictability, fear and uncertainty. For the bereaved, family life at this traumatic time, can be particularly distressing, routines upset, relationships strained, and the future uncertain.

**Ongoing Remembrance:** It is important to remember that anniversaries often spark a revival of feelings associated with the initial bereavement. The family and close friends will remember the deceased person's birthday, as they will the anniversary of the death. Siblings in school will be particularly vulnerable at these difficult times. Staff will be made aware of such dates in order that they may react with the necessary sensitivity and respect.

**Children's/student's Understanding and Reactions to Bereavement:** One of the most painful stresses with which a child/student has to cope is the loss of a parent, a close family member or a friend. Children/students grieve, they experience pain and sadness but they eventually need to detach their feelings from the deceased just as adults do. Research shows that children do understand death from an early age. This develops from a belief in the reversibility of death in the pre-school years, to a gradual understanding of death's finality and irreversibility. Children's/student's understanding of death develops alongside their cognitive development; it may occur at different speeds, but the sequence appears to be the same in the majority of children.

Children of junior school age (Key Stage 2) - During this time children begin to understand the permanence and irreversibility of death. They know the person is gone and will not return. These children begin to be aware of other's feelings and can show empathy to those also affected by the loss. Sometimes their concern for a remaining parent can prevent them from showing their own grief and they take on an adult pseudo role, which can prevent them from mourning themselves.

**Grief Reactions:** Junior school age (Key Stage 2) children may show some of the grief reactions of much younger children. They may suffer with eating or sleeping problems. They can become irritable and show aggression towards other children and adults, or may simply become clingy and show separation anxiety. Some of these behaviours can be aggravated by their fear for the physical safety of the remaining family members. This may result in the child not wanting to leave the family home. It is also common for these children to develop psychosomatic illnesses, headaches, sickness and diarrhoea. These problems can disrupt their school attendance, resulting in a fall in academic learning. Due to peer pressure, children may be less able to express their feelings. It is very important for them to appear the same as the others, signalling the message that they are not grieving and therefore do not require support. Children need both the opportunities to be able to express their grief without fear of being ridiculed by their peers, and the chance to forget at times and get on with their normal daily activities. A teacher should remember that many children/students might have difficulty in being able to verbally express their feelings adequately. It is therefore not uncommon to observe behavioural outbursts, tantrums or hysterical crying. This tends to happen in situations that are less structured and controlled. This needs to be dealt with in a sensitive but firm way, thus providing both the bereaved and the other pupils/students with a sense of security in the fairness, consistency and stability of school discipline. Teachers should also be aware that although instinctively they may wish to give special attention to a bereaved child/student, this can cause resentment among their peers, potentially leaving them more vulnerable.

#### **Self care for those working with the bereaved:**

It is easy to overlook the stresses and anxieties placed on those dealing with the bereaved. In many instances these can be quite exacting and yet because our sympathy and attention naturally rests

with those grieving we can easily forget the emotional weight resting on the shoulders of those offering support. The following points are worth bearing in mind. Anticipate possible reactions you may experience with grief and loss. Each one of us is likely to react differently depending on our age, personality, cultural and religious backgrounds. If you are ever unsure about how you should react to others' grief, honesty is always the best line of approach. Try to accept that you may experience emotional reactions yourself. Such an event might trigger thoughts of your own past grief experiences. You may find yourself doubting your own abilities. It is not unusual to experience existential thoughts and find yourself querying life's injustices, questioning perhaps your own beliefs. Panic attacks and worries about death – your own, or perhaps that of your family – may also become a preoccupation. Try to accept that giving such support can affect you in ways perhaps you had not considered. Normally these reactions will subside after a few days or weeks but if they persist do not be afraid to ask for professional support.

**Key points for working with the bereaved:**

- Offer support, but don't be obtrusive.
- Share grief.
- Allow discussion.
- Allow expression.
- Talk openly but honestly about the person who has died.
- Be aware of other people's beliefs and values.
- Reassure those who feel that they are in some way to blame.
- Be honest with explanations.
- Be compassionate but firm.
- Be prepared to ask for extra help if needed.
- Expect regression.
- Never avoid the bereaved.
- Never pretend life will be the same.
- Never put a time limit on how long you expect the grieving period to last.
- Be honest at all times.

**Procedures:**

Some of these guidelines are only appropriate when the school community as a whole has experienced a death, for example a teacher, a pupil, student or another staff member.

Perhaps a more common experience for teachers and learning support staff is that of a pupil/student experiencing the death of a parent. Whole school or class activities will not normally be appropriate in this situation, but the needs of that individual pupil/student should still be given careful consideration. Publicly talking about a single pupil/student who has experienced the death of a parent or family member may not be the best thing to do. In the event of a death the Head Teacher will take control of the situation and ensure that the following points are remembered.

**The role of the Headteacher** The Head Teacher has overall responsibility for these guidelines and their implementation; for liaison with the Governing Body, parents/carers, the LA and appropriate outside agencies.

The SENCO/Head Teacher are the people in school who have overall responsibility for support and liaison in event of a death or traumatic loss.

**Responsibilities include:**

- Policy development and review
- Implementing the policy and reflecting on its effectiveness in practice.
- Using the expertise within the school and sharing the responsibilities.
- Co-ordinating the planned action to manage school-related incidents in and beyond the school; decide who will be responsible for communicating with the family directly involved, decide who gives news to the school community and if necessary who will communicate with the press.
- Establishing and co-ordinating links with external agencies.
- Cross-phase liaison with other primary or secondary school.
- Accessing and co-ordinating training and support for staff.

**When supporting parents we will;**

- Speak to the family and offer them condolences and support before ascertaining / consulting them regarding what they would like to happen. If a child/student has been bereaved it is important to involve them in decisions about how the school manages issues relating to their loss. Talk to the child/student/family about their preferred way of informing their peers about what has happened and about the support they need. Give them a direct telephone number for someone they can contact in school.
- Obtaining factual information should be made a priority. Think through how this might be done, remembering that contact with those directly involved may be difficult. It is vitally important not to make assumptions or repeat what has been heard through rumour. This will only add to distress. It is essential that all staff are informed straight away, ideally before pupils. Identify ways of doing this sensitively.

**Support for bereaved children:**

- Not all children/students will need the support of specialist practitioners; they need familiar people who care. However, at HHELC will we offer;
- A routine, providing a sense of normality
- Some space, away from an emotional intense atmosphere
- Neutral space and people to share their feelings with
- Time to be themselves without feeling guilty (being with friends, time to be in a safe space outside of the home environment).
- Regular correspondence with home, providing reassurance about behaviours and general well-being, will ensure the child/student is managing their grief.
- Access to appropriate resources
- Preparation time for children/students to discuss what to say and how to behave when the bereaved child/student returns to school. This can help children/students to see death as a common experience for us all at different times and places.
- Time for staff to be aware of changes in behaviour that may be related to the death.
- An individual link person to support the pupils when necessary.
- A place in school for pupils who need some space if too upset to stay in the classroom and people to whom they can go for support.

**When supporting pupils/students generally we will:**

- Identify pupils/students who may be particularly vulnerable.
- Make sure that the help offered from outside agencies is appropriate before accepting.
- Remember/commemorate as appropriate and in agreement with the family.

Additional procedure to be followed in the event of the death of a member of staff - The Headteacher will arrange an immediate staff meeting for all members of staff. It is vital that everyone is present at this meeting. The facts must be made clear and it should be decided at this meeting exactly what the children/students are to be told, and when. Obviously, some members of staff will be more distressed than others. It will be the responsibility of the Headteacher to make any arrangements to allow the staff some time to themselves, should they need it.

Governor responsibilities are: To contribute to generating and updating these guidelines and to review practice. To support the Head Teacher in overseeing the way in which bereavement is managed. To support the Head Teacher in overseeing the way in which bereavement is managed in the curriculum.

#### **Staff support:**

Supporting bereaved pupils will be very stressful for staff who may already be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. It is important that all staff feel confident in delivering support for pupils/students and mutual support for each other and in implementing this policy. We will ensure that members of staff are aware of available resources and training is provided as appropriate to keep up to date with developments.

#### **Curriculum:**

Children/students explore the concept of loss, bereavement and grief as part of the PSHE curriculum. It is also addressed through cross curricular opportunities such as body changes or life cycles, as well as through art, literacy and Religious Education.

Any questions relating to loss or death will be answered in a sensitive and age-appropriate yet honest and factual way.

Children/students are given the opportunities to learn about and discuss cultural and religious issues around death as well as being encouraged to express their own responses and feelings.

#### **Teaching and Learning:**

Our teaching will be based on an understanding of the principles stated above and that a variety of approaches will be used to meet the needs of our pupils and show sensitivity to their age and experience.

Teaching methods adopted in the classroom may include:

- A range of teaching and learning styles including individual and group discussions, role play and drama.
- Introducing supporting resources, photos, mementoes, stories, poetry and music.
- Giving clear, truthful and accurate information, not trying to soften the blow with ambiguous language which does not tell the truth.
- Practising the social skills necessary to help cope with the feelings of loss.
- Giving relevant and appropriate advice and support.
- Providing continuity and progression by visiting and revisiting issues as pupils/students develop and their needs and understanding change.

- Considering the attitudes and values of pupils and a range of other significant groups in their locality.

**Transition:**

We will ensure that if a child/student has experienced bereavement that information is passed on to the relevant persons when they move on.

**Confidentiality:**

Although it is important to maintain confidentiality throughout the handling of any incident or disclosure, pupils/students will be made aware that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. This will help in retaining the trust of pupils/students and parents/carers and will ensure that the sharing of appropriate information is kept to a minimum. Sensitive information is only disclosed internally or externally with careful attention to the rights and needs of individuals.

When the child/student returns to school it is important to discuss with them whether they want certain people with whom they come into contact to be informed.

**Inclusion and Equality:**

We recognise that there is a range of cultural and religious customs and procedures concerning death and that there may be different expectations of the bereaved child and family. Some of these may affect matters of school organisation.

We try to present a balance of different approaches to death and loss. Children/students will be made aware that there are a range of different responses to bereavement and that we need to value and respect each one of these.

**Responding to the media:**

Some deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, attract media attention. All members of staff are advised not to respond to journalists and to refer all enquiries to the head teacher, who will make a considered response after seeking assistance from the Local Authority Press Office.

**Useful Websites:**

- [www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)
- [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)
- [www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)
- [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

This guidance will be reviewed annually by Governors and leadership team and shared with all stakeholders.

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