



PRACTICAL AND IMMEDIATE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

For a bereavement in the school community

INFORMING STAFF AND GOVERNORS OF A DEATH WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

A death can affect the school community in different ways and depends on:

- The role that the deceased person had in school.
- How well known they were in the local community.
- Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide, or other violent or sudden deaths.

The experience of working with many schools affected by death has taught Winston's Wish that adults and children benefit from being kept informed of a death. Rumour and gossip can be very damaging and can lead to both young and old developing the attitude that the death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity and if they are not informed of the circumstances, or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be affected.



The following guidelines may help when informing staff and governors:

- Arrange a staff meeting as soon as practicable. Identify absent staff.
- If a death has occurred in a holiday period make sure that all staff are informed. Some schools have a 'snow' or other urgent communication system in place that could be used.
- Tell the story of what happened leading up to the death.
- Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred.
- Be prepared for obvious upset and feelings of anger/guilt. People may connect the incident to their own personal experience of bereavement, so feelings about past bereavements may need to be discussed. This is perfectly natural.
- To enable absent staff to feel part of a caring team, arrangements should be made to inform them over the telephone if a personal visit is impractical. Consider the relationship between the absent colleague and the deceased.
- For a death that may attract media coverage (e.g. if the member of staff was a well-known personality or died tragically), identify a nominated spokesperson (e.g. Head Teacher, Chair of Governors) to provide a 'news statement' at an agreed time, as a way of dealing with media intrusion. Liaison with the individual's family is essential, prior to reporting information to the media, in order to respect their privacy and wishes.
- Establish good lines of communication with all relevant parties, this will always include family and staff, in other cases it may involve communication with emergency services, health, the Educational Psychology service, Social Care, and other support services.



- Provide details of someone who can be available to talk things through with a member of staff, parent or child if they are finding the situation particularly hard. This person could advise the family of support services available if required.
- Nominate staff to prepare a letter to parents and carers, example letters are in the 'informing parents' section at the end of this document.
- Provide staff with a script about what has happened so that consistent information is given to all of the pupils. Include where possible some answers to difficult questions that staff may be asked by the children, to prevent them needing to think of appropriate responses on the spot.
- Encourage everyone to consider how to meet their own support needs and take care of themselves, this may be from friends, family, support services and/or buddying up with other members of staff. Provide contact details for support in your local area.
- We recognise that speed and chaos may be a major factor on a day when a critical incident has happened – the speed and chaos meaning that constantly referring to plans and lists is not possible. DONT WORRY! Be confident enough to go with your gut instinct. Remember that keeping people as informed as possible is always helpful, and don't bear all the responsibility yourself, share it around.



**THEY ASKED ME IF
I WAS OKAY. THEY
ASKED ME HOW I
WAS FEELING. AND
THAT MADE ALL
THE DIFFERENCE.
— ELLA —**



BREAKING THE NEWS AFTER A DEATH IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY TO STUDENTS

Telling students when a death has occurred in the school community needs time and planning amongst teaching staff and can be delivered in a number of different ways.

An assembly can be used for breaking the news about the death of a student or a member of staff. The benefit is that the entire school receives the same news at the same time, which helps prevent speculation and rumours around the school. If you decide to tell the whole school at once, it is essential that you have planned for a space to provide more information and support for students following the assembly and that they do not go straight back to normal lessons.

An alternative way is to plan for teachers to tell students in individual classes at the same time (i.e. first thing in the morning) so that every class hears the news simultaneously. This allows a safe, contained space for students' reactions to be supported and for them to express any thoughts and feelings about the news they have just received. Having a practical activity such as writing cards can help the transition into break time.

Using simple, honest age-appropriate language, explain that the person has died. Talk a little about how they died, whether by an accident (i.e. "he was knocked down by a car and taken to hospital, but sadly he was too badly hurt and he died") or through an illness (i.e. "Mr Smith was very ill on Saturday – his heart stopped working properly. We need our hearts to make the blood go around our bodies. Although the doctors tried very hard to make Mr Smith's heart work again, it didn't work and Mr Smith died because his heart stopped working. This is called a 'heart attack' or a 'cardiac arrest'").

Talk about the feelings the students might have and normalise these "some of you may be very shocked at this news, some of you might feel very sad or worried, some of you might not feel anything at all – it's ok to have any of these feelings. If you want to talk about how you feel, or cry, or laugh about your memories of him, then that is ok too and we will be here for you. We will try and answer any questions that you might have".



Finally let the students know how they can get support if they are struggling with their feelings of grief: "if any of you feel sad, worried or angry and need some help, you can talk to your teacher or anyone else at the school". If the students are younger then you might need to observe any changes and offer help to them if you think that they might need it. Even older students would benefit from staff checking in with them to see if they are ok.

Going forward, it might be helpful to consider the needs of individual students, particular if it's a fellow pupil who has died or a teacher that they might have known well.

- If there are young people that had a long-term and/or close relationship with person who died, it might be helpful to tell them together as a separate group to be told together as a separate group or check in with them more frequently.
- Take account of pupils with specific needs including: pupils with past history of loss; pupils with a learning disability and pupils who have difficulty managing their emotions or behaviour. They might need additional support.
- Children and young people will appreciate time to express their feelings and fears, verbally or creatively. Allow space for feelings and experiences e.g. "When my pet/my gran died" etc.
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- Answer student's questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like 'passed away', or 'lost' etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children.
- It's okay to be honest about your own feelings and experiences, and talk openly about the relationship that you had with the person.
- Be prepared for young people to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care.



INFORMING PARENTS OF THE DEATH OF A PUPIL

It is vital that parents and carers are provided with information as soon as possible so that they can support their children and help them make sense of what has happened.

On the final two pages of this guide, you will find two examples of a letter to parents. Please feel free to change them according to the needs of the situation.

Most schools have text and email systems for informing parents, so you may want to combine these methods, for instance, texting parents to let them know that they have been sent a letter by email and/or that there is an important letter for them to pick up when they collect their child from school.

If you have any further questions, comments or suggestions, please contact our Freephone National Helpline on 08088 020 021.



INFORMING PARENTS OF A DEATH WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY: EXAMPLE LETTER

Dear Parents,

Your child's class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the tragic death of [NAME], who has been a teacher at this school for years. Our thoughts are with [NAME'S] family at this time.

The children were told that [NAME] died from an asthma attack on [DATE] . A number of pupils have been identified as being asthmatic and [NAME], the School Nurse has today reassured them that it is unusual for a person to die from asthma.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings - sadness, anger, and confusion - which are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

Yours sincerely,

Head teacher



INFORMING PARENTS OF THE DEATH OF A PUPIL: EXAMPLE LETTER

Dear Parents,

Your child's tutor had the sad task of informing the children of the death of [NAME], a pupil in [YEAR].

They were told that died from an illness called cancer. Sometimes people who have cancer can get better, but other times people die from it. [NAME] had been ill with cancer for a long time and died at home [DATE].

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion - these are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

Yours sincerely,

Head teacher



WE ARE HERE TO HELP

If you require assistance with any aspect of this guide or would like more information about supporting bereaved children and young people, please contact us:

On our Freephone National Helpline during office hours: 08088 020 021 or email us at ask@winstonswish.org

Take a look at our website: winstonswish.org to contact us by Live Chat and for more information about our resources and guidance.

Text or WhatsApp us on 07418 341 800 (check website for opening times).

A range of specialist publications are available to buy through the Winston's Wish website shop.winstonswish.org

If you require information about our ASK Me Training package, Rapid Response training sessions, Study Days and Bespoke Training please take a look at the website, contact us by phone on 01242 515157 or email training@winstonswish.org



**WINSTON'S
WISH *WW***

Giving hope to grieving children