

Grief can begin even before someone has died and can have a big impact in a student's academic and personal life leading to social isolation, bullying, school withdrawal and lower academic attainment.

Grief is unique to every child and young person and so the support they are offered needs to be too. The easiest way to determine what is best for a young person is simply to ask them and the Ask Me: Education Bereavement Plan, written by young people, for young people, is designed to help you to do just that. This guide will offer some advice on how to facilitate conversations with young people to enable them to complete their own bereavement plan with you.....and remember if you have any questions, **just ask!**

Before you start:

The bereavement plan can be used before a death (when someone is expected to die soon) or after a death. It is designed to be completed with a parent or carer for each child in the family, regardless of a child's age. The child booklet can be used directly with the child themselves. Further information about how you can have conversations with children and young people about death and dying at different ages and stages can be found **here**.

You can complete the plan at any point before or after a death and you can be led by the family on when might feel right. Ideally it would happen as soon as possible to allow for a support system to be in place for the young person but if this doesn't feel right then it can be delayed or completed in stages to accommodate different needs. It's designed to be a flexible document that is regularly reviewed and amended as your observations and conversations offer more insight into the young person's grief experience.

Find a place that the parent, carer or child feels comfortable in, this could be at home or school. It's important that this space is private to ensure confidentiality, with as few interruptions as possible. The parent or carer might want to have someone else with them for support or they might prefer to be alone. The plan and child booklet can be completed at the family's pace over several sessions if needed using creative tools or your own observations over the days and weeks that follow.

Key things to remember:

- Grief can often make young people feel isolated and anxious so the more that they are offered choices to involve them in some decisions the more in control they will feel, which encourages a sense of safety in their lives.

Although the Bereavement Plan may look like a form, the aim is to use it as a basis for an empathetic conversation based on the information that the young person has about the death e.g. if they think it's an accidental death even though you believe it was suicide then work with their narrative.

It's better to say something than nothing at all. Grief is difficult to talk about and evokes difficult feelings but not talking about it often makes young people feel worse. You don't have to have all the answers, just listening and showing them that you care can often be enough. Take care of yourself as well. Supporting someone in their grief is hard and could trigger some of your own experiences with loss so in order to take care of them, it's also important to look after yourself.

Bereavement Plan

The Bereavement Plan can be found **here** with a different version for children in Early Years and Key Stage 1 to allow the conversations to include a parent/carer as well.

The Bereavement Plan for Key Stage 2 onwards is designed to be used with the young person directly although this might vary depending on their developmental stage and any additional needs.

The plan can be used and adapted in any way to best suit the needs of the family, so feel free to work at their pace using creative resources as needed – this can be messy as they like!

The Bereavement Plan can be completed in several sessions and it can also be used as a space to collect observations and additional information that might come informally at a later date.

You can also record any activities or important events that have occurred that might be relevant to their loss e.g. making a Father's Day card, creating a game with dolls about death and dying, experiencing some difficult feelings during a particular topic in class.

Who has died or who is dying?

Talking about the person who died is going to be difficult for the family and might bring some difficult feelings with it. If you are using the child booklet to ask the child directly, it might be helpful to use some feelings faces, creative tools or play characters to help the young person to name or indicate how they are feeling.

You might start with what you know already and check that the information that you have is correct and makes sense to them. Parents might be in a position of having more detail or a different narrative about a person's prognosis or death and it is worth checking with them what the young person has been told and what they seem to understand about what has happened. When you are with the child, if you are unsure about what they have been told just work with what they share with you in that moment, even if it's different from what you have been told already.

Use the language that they use to describe an illness or a death or the person who has died, it will help them to feel heard and understood.

Some parents might choose to share a lot of detail about a person's illness or death, whereas others may choose to give a brief overview of the main points. Feel free to ask simple questions to clarify what they have told you but they may not yet be ready to offer lots of detail.

When completing the child booklet, the young person might choose to draw a simple picture or just write a few words, it doesn't have to be a lengthy explanation and you can always add more detail at a later date. If a young person has written or drawn something about the person who has died during another session, this can simply be added to the booklet, alongside any other observations you have made, rather than asking them about that person again.

Starting these discussions is always hard and you will have your own way of engaging with the parent or young person depending on your relationship with them but here's a few suggestions to get you started:

With a parent/carer: "I'm so sorry to hear that Jacob's dad died recently. I understand that this followed a long illness but I was wondering whether you could tell me a little more about it"

With a young child: "I was really sad when I heard your grandad died"

"For me it's always been important to talk about my dad and say his name. When I was in school I would talk about my dad and my friends would know who Andy Horton was."

Grace, bereaved at 8.

Home life

This question can offer some insight into the support network that the young person already has available to them and the relationships with the people at home.

It may be that the person who has died (or is dying) was a significant part of their home life and that this means there have been big changes in the child's life. For example, a main caregiver's death (e.g. mum or dad) will likely have resulted in big changes in their routine, which can be very unsettling and confusing. The death of a sibling may mean that they no longer have other children to play with at home, or they may now be an only child.

It's also important to explore cultural background, spiritual or religious practices, and how these influence family dynamics and sources of emotional or practical support. Asking general, open questions to explore may also help you to understand more about how death and dying is discussed and addressed within the child's home life. This in turn can help you to give more effective, appropriate support for each individual child.

With a parent / carer: "Can you tell me a little bit about who lives with you and the child at home and anyone else who plays an important part in your child's life?"

With a parent / carer: "Do you as a family have any important beliefs about death and dying? What does your child believe?"

"In my culture and home, feelings and grief aren't talked about or seen. I lost my mother when I was four, and when I was younger, I had anger issues and would burst disproportionately at small things, but it was really the grief and pain I held inside. Even friends who cared couldn't see what was happening. You learn to hide the pain so well it becomes invisible, but it's still there, a burden you carry alone. Children growing up like this go unseen and an important part of them disappears from the world."

Meher, bereaved aged 4.

Who supports you outside of school?

Children have so many people involved in their lives who all have different roles to play. You might have already gathered some information about family members who support the child from the previous question but this space allows you a chance to ask the parent about the wider support network that the child has. This might include family friends, neighbours or other professionals as well. It's helpful to get a sense of how these people offer support and what the child's relationships with these people are like. If necessary, it might be useful to get consent to speak with any other professionals involved as well.

What helps me?

It can be difficult for children to identify things that help during such an emotional time and for younger children, it could be simple, everyday things that help them to feel safe. Parents and carers will have some suggestions about what helps at home, some of which might also be useful for school or nursery e.g. quiet time or playing but it's also helpful to have some examples that might be more specific to your setting. You can discuss with the parent or carer whether there might be a particular staff member, friend or activity that might help them if they are struggling with their feelings.

When asking a child what helps them, it's important to use simple, clear language and a calm, friendly tone. You might ask, "What do you do when you're feeling sad?" or "What makes things feel better when you're sad?" They might choose to draw or even go and find some things that make them feel happy

These ideas can be added to or changed over time, as feelings change and time passes.

What isn't helpful?

It can sometimes be difficult to know, particularly if the news is recent, what might not be helpful for the child. Some children might find questions or direct references about the person who is ill or the person who has died to be difficult but others might welcome it. Some children might benefit from appropriate physical contact such a hug or a touch on the shoulder whereas others might be adverse to that kind of contact. This can always be added to as you notice things that haven't been helpful for the young person's grief.

When exploring what is not helpful with a child (or what they don't like), it's important to ask gently and without judgment and if possible offer some examples to give them some ideas. You could say something like, "Is there anything that makes you feel worse?" or "What things don't you like?". They might choose to use creative resources such as play or art to show you what they mean.

Understanding what doesn't help is just as important as knowing what does and can guide more supportive and effective responses in the future.

"I straight away felt like an outsider, and like there was something wrong with me because no one spoke to me"

Henri, bereaved aged 10.

Key person:

It can help the child to feel safe within school if they know they have a key person or 'safe person' who they can go to for help if needed, and so that they don't need to talk about their feelings to lots of different people if they don't want to. It is important that the child is given choice as to who that person may be. Who is the person that they are most comfortable with? For example, it may be that they have just started Year 2, but that they currently have a stronger connection with their Year 1 teacher or TA. You will need to consider the accessibility of that person and talk to the child about this – can they talk to them whenever they like, or are there particular times of the day when they would be able to do so?

It is also helpful for parents/carers to have a designated person to communicate with to make it easier to share new information as and when they need to without needing to repeat themselves. Consider what the most effective method of communication is for parents or carers – email, phone message, checking in in-person at the start or end of the school day?

Always bear in mind that this may be different for each family.

"Some days could be so overwhelming, especially in the first few weeks going back, and just knowing I had that person to go to was so so so important"

Olivia, bereaved at 12.

Sharing with others

People will have different views on how much information they want to share and with whom but having a sense of control over this will be important for parents, carers and the rest of the family. Some families will be keen for news of a death or a diagnosis to be shared whereas others may want to limit this information to just the essential people. Conversations about information sharing might have taken place already when the news was first shared with your setting but it might be worth exploring this again in case the families' wishes have changed.

You can start with who already knows the news and what they have been told. This will be particularly important for the children in the family who may only have a simplified version of the information or perhaps a different narrative.

Occasionally a family may not want information to be shared with staff or even the young person themselves. Whilst it's important to respect their opinions, it might also be helpful to offer reasons why it might be important for these people to be informed e.g. if a young person has not been told how someone has died / what their illness is or if ambiguous language has been used to describe a death/illness ("gone", "lost", "poorly") then they might feel worried and confused about what has happened.

This could also be an opportunity to talk with the parent or carer about how this news has been shared or will be shared. Some people might choose to do this in person, individually or in groups whereas others might need to use an e-mail or letter to reach a wider audience. You can find some suggestions and templates on our website.

If you find yourself in a situation where you are unsure who knows what then be led by their narrative and language around what has happened, even if you know differently.

With a parent/carers: "Can you tell me a little about who knows about this death or illness already" "Is there anyone else that it would be important to share this with?"

With a young child: "Who would you like to know about Daddy dying?" "Would it be ok if I told your friends so they can help you if you're sad?"

Significant dates and times of year

Specific dates and times of year might bring difficult feelings with it too. When a person is ill and no longer able to participate in big moments in the same way e.g. birthdays or Christmas then that can remind the child of their sadness and grief. Equally they might notice the absence of someone who has died during moments throughout the year such as a school play or at the end of the school year. The parent or carer might be able to anticipate dates or times of year that the young person might find more difficult and then you can work with them to offer more support as needed. Some children may want to mark these days whereas others may prefer not to acknowledge them but might need some help with their feelings.

"My teacher said to me, Miles, is it okay if we do Father's Day card? And I was like, it's fine, Thank you so much for asking... and that warmed my heart.. and I had an amazing Father's Day card."

Miles aged 11.

Triggers

Much like dates and times of year, specific triggers can ignite feelings of grief for children and sometimes catch them off guard. Young children may not recognise those feelings or know what their triggers could be and even parents might not be able to anticipate them. It could be a particular topic that relates to a death, references to a family member similar to the family member who is dying or an activity such as making a Father's Day card. Again, choice is important and some children might want to be involved in these activities whereas others may prefer to be excused. Parents and carers might be able to offer some suggestions about what could be helpful if a child's grief is unexpectedly triggered as well.

Being at school

Some children find it hard leaving their parents when someone is ill or has already died. This could be for a number of reasons including worries about what might happen to the person who is ill whilst they are away, worries about someone else dying or feeling insecure due to all of the changes going on in their life.

A parent or carer may be able to offer some insights about how the child feels before and after coming to nursery or school. They might have noticed some different behaviours or see that their child is worried about it and they may also be able to think with you about ways to make this process easier for the child.

It might be possible to offer flexibility in when they arrive or leave, it might help them to know what is happening that day so that they have something to look forward to or have a close staff member there to help them with that transition.

It's also important to celebrate times when they are coming into school or nursery and participating in classes and activities.

How will we know when things are difficult?

For many children, coming to school or nursery will feel ok and even offer comfort and security with the predictability of the rhythms and routines that these settings offer. There are however, bound to be times when their feelings of grief might overwhelm them, which they may not be able to fully recognise or express clearly yet, so it's important to consider what cues to look for to indicate that they might be struggling. Parents and carers may be able to share how they know when their child is upset at home e.g. child going quiet or refusing to do things that they would usually do.

Even if a child is able to talk about what has happened or ask for help, it doesn't mean that they will. It is likely that you will need to support them to be able to seek help when they need to and each child will do this in a different way. They might need some creative tools to help them to express themselves e.g. feelings cards or time out cards. Some children could benefit from a check in from staff – "how are you today?".

Some parents and carers might find it hard to know what might work for their children, particularly in the early days so you might rely on your own observations and experiences with the child initially, which you can add to the plan over time.

"I prefer if the teacher would come and talk to be privately without everyone hearing, because then everyone asks and I feel peer pressure"

Sami, bereaved at 2.

Anything else you'd like to add to your child's plan?

This final question offers the parent or carer and opportunity to share anything else with you which feels important or for you to ask any questions to help you get a better understanding of the child's needs. It is also an opportunity to complete or review the child booklet, if the child is present or arrange another time to do this.

You might use this space at a later date to record any observations or conversations you have had with the child which might offer more insight into this grief.

Remember, the Bereavement Plan is a flexible document which you can continue to add to and review as time goes on. It can be passed on with the young person during transitions to different teachers, classes or settings. There is no right or wrong way to complete it and its most important function is to act as a vehicle for you to be able to have conversations with the young person to better understand their needs and how you can best support them. We would recommend that this plan is repeated at least once a year but it can be done more frequently if needed.

If you or someone you care for needs support, we're here (opening times available on our website):



Call our free helpline: 08088 020 021



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