

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 the young person, although for very young children or those with additional needs, it might be necessary to include a family member in the discussions as well. 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 young person 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 young person 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 young person might want to have someone else with them for support or they might prefer to be alone. The plan can be completed at the young person'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/carers as well. The Bereavement Plan for Key Stage 2 onwards is designed to use 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 young person, 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

Talking about the person who died is going to be difficult for the family and might bring some difficult feelings with it.

You might start with what you know already and check that the information that you have is correct and makes sense to them. It might not be clear what a young person has been told about the prognosis or death and their information could be limited or confused. In these situations it is best to 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 young people 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.

Some young people might prefer to work creatively and may 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 young person depending on your relationship with them but here's a few suggestions to get you started:

With an older young person: "I'm so sorry to hear that your dad is very ill, it must be a really difficult time for you. If it feels ok, 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, can you tell me about him?"

"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 young person'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.

The impact of a prolonged illness or death of a parent or carer could mean that the young person has needed to take on the role of young carer themselves which brings with it additional complications and stresses. The mental health of their parents or carers might also play a factor on their role within the family as well. There might be a need for additional support within the family home.

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 young person's home life. This in turn can help you to give more effective, appropriate support for each individual child.

Open ended, non-judgemental questions can offer young people the space to feel safe, respected and heard.

With an older young person: "Can you tell me a little about home – who lives with you and what is that like?"

"I wonder whether you and your family have any particular beliefs about death and dying?"

With a young child: "Can you tell me who lives in your house with you?"

"Do you and your family have any special beliefs about death?"

"So my dad died on a Thursday. And religiously you have to try and get the funeral done as quickly as possible. And my only thought was, I need to get into school and I have to plan this funeral."

Zunera bereaved aged 17.

Who supports you outside of school?

Young people 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 young person from the previous question but this space allows you a chance to ask them about the wider community around them. This might include friends, clubs they attend or other professionals as well. It's helpful to get a sense of how these people offer support and what the young person's relationship with these people are like e.g. are they someone the child would feel comfortable going to for help if they needed to? If necessary, it might be useful to get consent to speak with any other professionals involved as well.

For young people who might prefer creative conversations, you could use an **activity such as a blob tree or a button tree**. These activities offer a way for the young person to visualise and show you who the important people in their life are, who helps them, who looks after them sometimes, and how they feel about those people. They could also simply draw a picture for this.

It can help children to feel safe if they know there are trusted people around them who can help. It is also reassuring for you as a member of staff to know what their wider support network looks like.

With an older young person: "Is there someone at home or in your life who makes you feel supported or safe?"

With a young child: "Who do you talk to when things feel difficult?"

What helps me?

It can be difficult to identify things that help during such an emotional time and for young people, it could be simple, everyday things that help them to feel safe e.g. quiet time, playing or listening to music. It's also helpful to have some examples that might be more specific to your setting such a particular space, a friend or staff member that could help them if they are struggling with their grief.

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 upset or worried?" or "What makes things feel a bit better for you?" Give them time to think and respond in their own way, and be open to both small and big things they mention—whether it's a person, an activity, or a comforting object.

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 young person. Some young people 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.

When exploring what is not helpful for a child, it's important to ask gently and without judgment. You could say something like, "Is there anything that makes things feel harder or doesn't help when you're upset?" or "Has anyone ever tried to help in a way that didn't really work for you?" This gives the child permission to express their feelings honestly and reflect on unhelpful experiences, whether it's certain responses from adults, being pressured to talk, or not feeling listened to.

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

Key person:

It can help the young person 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 young person is given choice as to who that person may be. Who is the person that they are most comfortable with? It could be that they have never met the pastoral lead of a college but they are close to their form tutor instead. They might choose several different people so that if their first choice isn't available they can still find someone else who is familiar with their story and can help them with their grief. It's helpful to know where they can find these people and whether there are particular times of day that they are available.

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

Young 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 them. Some young people 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 organisation but it might be worth exploring this again in case their wishes have changed.

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

Occasionally you might find yourself in a position of having been asked by the parent or carer to not share certain information (e.g. how someone has died or that a prognosis is terminal) 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 young person 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 other might prefer to use an e-mail or letter to reach a wider audience. You can find some suggestions and templates on our website. These could be written or designed by the young person and then sent out on their behalf.

With an older young person: "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?"

"I was starting in a new year group of the people below me that just knew me as the girl with the dead dad."

Nina, bereaved aged 17.

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 young person 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 young person might be able to anticipate dates or times of year that they could find more difficult and then you can work with them to offer more support as needed. Some young people may want to mark these days whereas others may prefer not to acknowledge them but might need some help with their feelings. What is most important is offering them a choice of how they might choose to acknowledge these times or not.

If a young person is unable to say what dates or times they might find challenging then they could always revisit their plan at a later date and add this information based on their experiences.

'Around the time of my sisters birthday I'm a little bit wary and sub-consciously not myself'

Abigail, bereaved aged 13.

Triggers

Much like dates and times of year, specific triggers can ignite feelings of grief for young people and sometimes catch them off guard. It might be hard to recognise those feelings or know what these triggers could be. 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 Mother's Day card. Again, choice and flexibility is important and some young people might want to be involved in these activities whereas others may prefer to be excused. You may want to explore with the young person what could be helpful if their grief is unexpectedly triggered as well.

With an older young person: "Can you think of anything that might trigger your grief?"

With a young child: "Can you think of anything that would make your feelings worse or make it harder?"

'We happened to be doing a play at the time which was entirely set around a funeral, and they were very aware of the fact that I still wanted to be involved in this and didn't try and say, no, this isn't going to be appropriate for you. They said, it's up to you. You can be as much involved or as little involved as you want.'

Ben, bereaved aged 13.

Being at school

Some young people find it hard leaving their family members 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.

Young people may be able to offer some insights about how they feel before and after coming to school or college – is it something that makes them anxious, do they dread it or perhaps even look forward to it? You might have noticed some different behaviours or see that the young person is worried about it and they may also be able to think with you about ways to make this process easier.

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 college and participating in classes and activities.

How will we know when things are difficult?

For many young people, coming to school or college will feel ok and even offer comfort and security with the predictability of the rhythms and routines that these settings provide. 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. The young person themselves may be able to share what to look out for when they are feeling upset at home e.g. "I might find it hard to focus or forget to do things that I would usually do" Even if a young person 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 young person 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 young people could benefit from a check in from staff – "how are you today?". Don't forget that you might need to rely on your own observations and experiences with the young person initially, which you can add to the plan over time.

Anything else you'd like to add to your plan

This final question offers the young person the 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 their needs.

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