

Stratford-sub-Castle Church of England VC Primary School

Life in all its fullness

Bereavement Policy # 6

The *Bereavement Policy* was reviewed during the Summer Term 2023
This document is the result of that review.

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TO BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH:	<i>Aims of the School Attendance Policy Behaviour for Life and Learning Policy Critical Incident Plan Leave of Absence Management Policy. Safeguarding Policy</i>

Stratford-sub-Castle Church of England VC Primary School

Bereavement Policy # 6

'Life in all its fullness' (John 10:10)

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to fulfil the aims of the school through a consistent approach to managing bereavement.

Statement of Aims

We aim:

- to ensure that everyone within the school community understands the issues and procedures for managing bereavement
- to provide equilibrium between an individual's environment and their perception of the world as a safe and predictable place
- to be a school where the issues of death and loss are not taboo. Where opportunities to talk naturally about aspects of death in class/collective worship etc. are embraced. Where responses to news stories touching on death e.g.: terrorist attacks etc. and more personal situations are handled with prayerful openness and sensitivity.

Statement of Principles

We believe;

- no matter how prepared we think we are, death is often traumatic and unexpected
- a considered, planned and organised response to bereavement is much more effective than acting on impulse
- intervention is essential in managing and minimising any disruption

As a Church School we believe our parish connection is a positive resource in handling situations of bereavement and would seek to draw on the resources of the parish as appropriate. Our commitment to be a praying school will offer strength at such times.

Implementation

The Governing Body, together with the Headteacher, has overall responsibility for the implementation of this *Bereavement Policy*.

The unpredictability of a sudden death can severely unbalance a school whose normal working environment is one based on routine. Death, therefore, is regarded as a potentially dis-unifying force that exists in an unpredictable world. Conversely, however, it can also be unifying, bringing people together in their grief.

We consider it vital that our school maintains a shared course of action. To achieve this, Stratford School has an **Intervention Team** who work collaboratively in any situation that threatens to disrupt the school's normal working environment. In all bereavement instances the Intervention Team is assembled.

The **Intervention Team** consists of;

- *The Headteacher* – the first point of contact and responsible for liaising with all parties concerned and affected. The Headteacher gathers facts and details, and determines the likely impact of the event on the school.
- *The Senior Mental Health Lead Teacher*
- *The Vicar of the Parish*

- *The School Nurse* – who offers support to staff and pupils
- *A School Governor* – to keep parents informed
- *A Bereavement Counsellor* – offering support, consultation and guidance to the team and the bereaved

The Intervention Team will notify the Diocesan Board of Education critical incident team where appropriate and draw on their significant resources and expertise.

Stratford-sub-Castle CE Primary School are committed to training for key staff members/Governors in handling bereavement situations, especially tragic incidents involving the school community.

Managing the First Day

We understand that whilst every situation that surrounds a death is unique, there are similar implications and outcomes to most.

- Upon hearing news of a death, in the first instance the Headteacher is informed. If a parent, relative, or close friend of a child has died, the Headteacher (after speaking to the child's next-of-kin) will decide who should approach the child.
- A parent or relative coming into school to break the news, with support from a member of staff, is the best and usual approach. If no parents, relatives or guardians are able to attend, then the Headteacher will talk to the child.

The Headteacher gathers details surrounding any death. *It is vital to have all the facts.* If the death / s have been particularly traumatic, the media and / or police may be involved. The correct information is disseminated to all staff.

Death of a Member of Staff

Children generally believe that teachers and ancillary staff leave their positions for other posts or simply retire. For many, it is quite inconceivable that they might die while still being employed by the school. 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. In our opinion such an event warrants an occasion when the whole class or school should become involved in the grieving process. The input of the Parish Priest would be sought in any such response or memorial service as appropriate.

It is important to plan such an event. To avoid rumours the news should be broken as soon as possible. The staff is told before the rest of the school.

Such news is best broken in a special assembly, in a place where everyone can be told simultaneously. A child's way of coping with such events is sometimes observed in emotional outbursts. Some may express feelings of anger, panic or relief. It is important to remember that this is a time when everyone is hurting.

Points to consider;

- to keep classes informed of changes in daily routine
- the Headteacher will decide how long the school may need for a settling down period. This is flexible, as it may need to be revised
- to have support available for staff and students
- to be aware of children who react strongly

School life has to continue and appear to be normal, to keep it the safe haven it should be. Momentarily this may be shaken, but bringing things gently back to normality will increase the feeling of safety within the school for everyone.

Death of a Pupil

The death of a fellow pupil is probably the most demanding situation a child could be forced to face while at school. Comprehending and coming to terms with such an event is going to be equally difficult and requires great emotional support from school staff.

If faced with a sudden death, the Headteacher will inform the deceased's next-of-kin as soon as possible thus enabling compliance with any of their wishes. The deceased's immediate class friends and siblings should be gathered and the news, if not already known, be broken before an announcement is made to the rest of the school, thus allowing private grief.

In the event of a child becoming terminally ill their wishes and those of their parents / guardians are always respected. Should the child wish to attend school, the class teacher may need to inform the class of the child's condition. Occasionally the child may wish to talk to their fellow classmates about their predicament themselves. We feel that honesty about death and dying is the best approach. Sometimes there is just no other way.

Multiple Deaths / Death in School

In the case of multiple deaths, additional support and resources may well be required. Additional teaching staff may also be needed.

In the case of the death of a child, the Headteacher, after first consulting with the deceased's family or relatives, will then inform close friends and acquaintances. A general staff meeting is then called to allow private grief before announcing the news to the rest of the school.

Confidentiality is paramount. To avoid rumours, we will be open and honest and not make any assumptions about the cause of death unless:

- the deceased's next-of-kin has given consent
- there has been an official determination.

All staff and pupils who are acquainted with the deceased are informed as soon as possible. An announcement that is clear, to the point and which cannot be misinterpreted is then made to the school in a special assembly.

Such devastating news is often greeted with disbelief, panic and fear. Anger is not an unusual reaction among staff and older pupils. Statements such as *"Who is going to help me with my homework now?"* are not uncommon. Some pupils, surprisingly, may even express relief; relief that perhaps some difficult situation has now been averted (*i.e.; the pupil might be behind with his / her coursework or had an ongoing problem with the deceased*). Teachers are prepared, therefore, for different emotions, feelings and outbursts.

After assembly, in the confines of the classroom and in small groups, teachers allow pupils to express their emotions, allowing them to show their feelings and thoughts in a safe environment with a member of staff with whom they feel at ease.

The Bereavement Counsellor may be required to attend and support staff.

We believe it to be essential for children to articulate their thoughts and feelings, to support them and to not let them feel in any way inhibited. Sharing grief in a supportive environment can help facilitate the grieving process. We understand that pupils react to such news in very different ways, some children may not want to share their feelings straight away. Sensitivity is always shown, respecting the pupil's choice as to when they are ready to explore their feelings about what has happened.

Other Considerations

The advent of a death brings with it unforeseeable situations and circumstances that the team will consider and address. Once identified, a specified member of staff will assume responsibility and will deal with them.

In the event of multiple deaths it is likely that there will be considerable (if unwanted) media interest. The Headteacher will decide what information should be released. Information that might upset, confuse or exacerbate the situation will be withheld.

It may be necessary to retrieve the personal belongings of the deceased for their return to the next-of-kin. Information on the school's database, including references and addresses will be amended and updated. The school

may write letters to parents allowing them to explain to their children the meaning and implications of an event. It is important for the school and parents to maintain a consistency in account and to deal with the effects of the situation similarly.

The team has to tread a difficult path between achieving the desired objective of returning the school to a state of normality but, in so doing, make decisions that to some, might appear insensitive.

Funerals, Memorial Services / Pupil Participation

Before the bereaved pupil or member of staff returns to school there is likely to be a funeral. It is probable that pupils and staff will express a wish to attend, or take part in the service, but they should *only* do so with the agreement of the deceased's family or relatives, as well as the agreement of their own family / carers. The Headteacher, who is in contact with the family / relatives, will discuss funeral arrangements.

If the bereaved family wishes pupils and staff to attend, the team will be available to offer support before and after the service. If they do not wish the school to attend, their wishes will be respected and the school may consider arranging an alternative.

This is a period when the bereaved, both family and close friends, try to come to terms with the situation. They may feel helpless yet wish in some way to express their sorrow. Planning a Memorial Service, reading lessons, poems, or choosing hymns can all assist in the grieving process.

The class most affected may like to write down their thoughts and feelings; these may then be given to the bereaved family. After either service, staff and pupils will be encouraged to meet and express their thoughts and feelings. This is important in initiating the grieving process.

Grief, Mourning and Cultural Differences

When discussing differing cultural and religious beliefs, it is helpful to distinguish the terms as grief and mourning, as they are often used interchangeably and can cause confusion. **Grief** describes the emotional and psychological response to loss and is experienced by people of all cultures, whereas **mourning** denotes the actions and manner of portraying such grief and its expression is found to vary between cultures and religions.

Mourning practices reinforce societal norms by assisting the bereaved person to assign meaning to their loss, realign their role within society and to gain support from the family and community. Such mourning practices are denoted by the person's culture and are typically related to religious or political beliefs. We believe mourning practices are essential in enabling the bereaved to accept and come to terms with the loss – emotionally, cognitively and physically. These include accepting the reality of the loss, to express grief, to adjust to the environment in which the deceased is no longer present and to re-invest in new relationships.

Differing cultures will determine to a large extent the involvement or otherwise of children in the traditions and rituals which surround death. It is clear that children involved in such ceremonies tend to deal with later life events with much less stress than those who are excluded. It has been observed that even children who have experienced a death of a pet are more prepared and have a better understanding of the physical characteristics of a death, its permanency and the behaviours of grief and mourning than those who have not experienced such events.

Attending funerals or ceremonies of death is therefore encouraged. Allowing children to attend such events gives them the opportunity to express their grief, allowing them to accept the reality of their loss, to say good-bye as well as to allow the grieving process to begin.

Return to School

For the bereaved child or member of staff the return to school will be traumatic.

It is essential to pave the way for their return. In most cases it is advisable that everyone, staff and pupils, is aware of the situation before the person returns, so they can appreciate and make allowances for uncharacteristic behaviour.

While showing compassion and allowing expression to those suffering grief, we recognise 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, with routines upset, relationships strained and the future uncertain.

In the interests of the bereaved, therefore, we endeavour to foster an environment that is compassionate, yet disciplined. Getting the balance right can sometimes be difficult, but we recognise that school might be the only safe haven available.

Ongoing Remembrance

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

Parents and carers often feel that teachers are experts on their children. They may therefore turn to the school for advice and information on matters of bereavement.

At Stratford School, we recognise the need to use sensitivity and our skills in understanding the children's development and emotional needs.

We understand that;

- a death in the family will disrupt the family for many months, in fact the family will never be the same again. Family members are grieving, relationships alter and members may take on new roles. Sometimes there is a change of carer, house or school, all of which add to the disruption and distress experienced by the child. To help the child it is helpful to minimise changes and disruptions in their normal daily routine at school.
- the bereaved family members may emotionally and physically withdraw from the child, to protect themselves from more distress. Some adults will deny the bereaved child is grieving, as it will be too distressing for them to acknowledge the child's pain. This may cause grief reactions of anger, withdrawal or psychosomatic behaviours such as headaches, stomach-ache or sickness.
- the bereaved child may regress in behaviour, becoming clingy, difficult or withdrawn. Schoolwork may suffer. These changes are partly due to grief but also to the disruption and changes within the family, causing the child to feel confused and unsafe. Even the simple withdrawal of attention from the child can lead to problems, causing the child to express resentment, jealousy or guilt towards the dead person or child. The expression of this verbally can cause the remaining family members distress and shock. Parents and carers need to know this is normal and will decrease as the child and family become more stable and settled.
- parents and carers need to be informed of the benefits a child gains in being involved with the ceremonies and rituals that follow death. An explanation as to how mourning practices help children to express their feelings and come to terms with and accept the reality of their loss can be very beneficial.

Supporting bereaved families, while rewarding, can be emotionally draining. Teaching staff may need to turn to others for emotional support, advice and information.

Following a death, the annual *Prayer Spaces* experience (led by St Lawrence Church) may deal with the aftermath of a death, for example setting up a prayer/reflective space for pupils/staff /parents.

Self Care For Those Working With the Bereaved

Coping with bereavement can be stressful and exacting. 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 may be helpful:

- anticipate possible reactions. Each one of us is likely to react differently depending on age, personality, cultural and religious backgrounds.

- accept we may have emotional reactions ourselves. We may doubt our own abilities, question beliefs, experience existential thoughts and query life's injustices.
- panic attacks about death – one's own or that of the family – may become a preoccupation.
- accept that giving such support may affect us in ways in which we had not considered. normally these reactions subside after time, but professional support is available if needed.
- never take on too much. Look to others to offer support – a partner, friend or colleague.
- *it is important to remember we alone cannot carry other peoples' grief.*

Key Points For Counselling The Bereaved

- ❖ Offer support but don't be intrusive
- ❖ Share grief
- ❖ Allow discussion
- ❖ Allow expression
- ❖ Talk openly but honestly about the person who has died
- ❖ Be aware of other peoples' beliefs and values
- ❖ Reassure those who feel they are in some way to blame
- ❖ Be honest with explanations
- ❖ Be compassionate but firm
- ❖ Be prepared to ask for additional 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