

# St Patrick's Primary School, Mullinahoe

## Bereavement & Loss Policy



Approved by BOG: 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022

## **Pastoral Care**

The policy aims to outline the basic principles and procedures that underpin our approach to supporting members of the school community experiencing bereavement and loss. Bereavement affects everybody at some time, and as a close community, our school aims to provide the best support for its members.

*'Death neither obeys the school timetable nor appears on it...  
it enters the classroom without knocking' Winston's Wish*

We recognise that each bereavement is unique, and that any guidelines we have developed must take account of individual circumstances and the wishes of those most closely involved. We have suitably trained staff in school who understand the complexities surrounding bereavement and can help support families at times of bereavement to ensure the school does what it can to best meet the needs of the bereaved. This policy has been constructed to guide us on how to deal professionally, sensitively, and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.

It is important that children are helped to understand bereavement in clear and unambiguous ways and given opportunities to experience the full range of emotions that may accompany bereavement within a safe and supportive atmosphere. As a school, we recognise the importance of long-term support for those who are bereaved and will endeavor to provide opportunities for remembrance where appropriate.

Our school is well-placed to help children and young people to 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 support their peers.

Our school is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils. 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 separation or loss of a loved one, either through death or separation/divorce.

Through providing a curriculum that acknowledges and addresses loss, death, bereavement, and grief we can improve the skills of children and young people to deal with and emerge positively from them. This policy is for all staff, pupils, parents/carers, governors, visitors and partner agencies working within our school. It has been developed to compliment our Critical Incident Management strategy. All aspects of Safeguarding will be embedded into the life of our school and the responsibility of all staff.

## **Teaching and Learning**

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

Teaching methods adopted in the classroom include:

- A range of teaching and learning styles including, individual and group discussions, role play and drama;
- Introducing supporting resources - photographs, mementos, music;
- Giving clear, truthful, and accurate information, not trying to soften the blow with ambiguous language which does not tell the truth.
- Practising the collaborative 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 develop and their needs and understanding change;
- Considering the attitudes and values of pupils.

## **Policy Aims**

Our school will endeavor:

- To support all those affected by loss and death in a caring and nurturing environment in which everyone can respond appropriately to individual circumstances.
- To offer understanding of the impact of loss and grief on children and young people's emotional health.
- To gain insight into children/young people's/staff reactions to loss and grief and how our school responds to meet the needs of grieving pupils, parents, and staff.
- To give pastoral support to pupils, parents, and staff.

This policy outlines practical measures to be taken when people are in shock, or upset, especially with multiple or sudden deaths or traumatic circumstances.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

The Principal, Mr. Canavan, will have overall responsibility for support and liaison in event of a death or traumatic loss. In the event that the principal is absent then the Vice Principal/Designated Teacher, Mrs. Mulholland, will take responsibility.

The responsibilities are:

- Implementation of the policy and reflecting of its effectiveness in practice;
- Using the expertise within our school and sharing the responsibilities;
- Co-ordinating the planned action to manage school-related incidents;
- Deciding who will be responsible for communicating with the family directly involved;
- Deciding who gives news to the school community and if necessary who will communicate with the press;
- Establishing and coordinating links with external agencies;
- Liaison with the school;
- Accessing and coordinating training and support for staff.

The person responsible will take into consideration the following short-term support:

- Who should break the news about the death;
- What exactly the children will be told;
- How they will be told (whole school assembly,class,individual);
- When they will be told;
- How the information will be communicated to parents and staff;
- What questions might be asked of pupils, parents and staff;
- What links will be made with the family;
- Consider what will be appropriate in holding some form of remembrance activity.

## **Procedures**

Our school will:

- Speak to the family, if possible, offer them condolences and support before ascertaining what they would like to happen;
- Give them a direct telephone number for someone they can contact in our school;
- Obtain factual information to avoid unnecessary speculation;
- Inform staff as soon as possible;
- Decide where pupils will be told, if this is necessary.
- Identify the most vulnerable pupils and give them the support they might need;
- A familiar adult/teacher will tell the pupils as soon as possible in small groups;
- Give guidance to parents on supporting bereaved children.

## **The funeral**

Our school will:

- Find out the family's wishes and how they wish the school to be involved;
- Consider the cultural and religious implications, if appropriate;
- Send flowers/cards if acceptable
- Identify which staff/pupils may want to attend and the practicalities of issues such as staff cover and transport. Enable the person(s) who had the closest relationship with the child to attend the funeral - this would usually be the child's current class teacher but may be a staff member who had previously worked closely with the child or in a previous class, and be able to have absence to attend.

## **Support for bereaved children**

Not all children and young people will need the support of specialist practitioners; they most often need familiar people who care. Pupils will react to bereavement and loss in a variety of ways; no two reactions are the same. Personality, family support and life experiences will all impact on children's responses.

Adults often wish to shield children from pain and distress. Experience and research have shown, however, that children are best supported by having the incident acknowledged in an appropriate way rather than having it ignored.

It is important to be available and receptive to pupils, to listen to them, to empathise with them and to normalise their emotions, thus enabling the development of healthy coping strategies.

It is normal for adults to be upset and it can be appropriate for children and young people to be aware of this because it can help them understand their emotions. Staff working directly with pupils can show that they are upset, but not out of control. It is important to maintain a safe, secure, and predictable environment for the pupils in their care.

Staff should remember that they are modelling a response for children and young people and helping them to develop coping skills.

The positive effect that support and concern from a caring, familiar adult can have on a pupil should never be underestimated.

## **Primary effects**

First reactions to bereavement or loss may be:

- Disbelief
- Anger
- Panic
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Crying
- Talking: Repeating what they have experienced/heard
- Inability to process information well (and so they may not hear/take in what has happened or what has been said to them)
- Regression: we all regress when we hear bad news. We want to be looked after and protected.
- Sadness and withdrawal.
- Aggression

Grieving tasks (Worden) include the following:

- Shock, disbelief, numbness - Life has lost its meaning. Shock can take the form of physical pain or numbness, but more often consists of complete apathy and withdrawal or abnormal calm, in some cases with anger.
- Denial - this generally occurs within the first 14 days and can last minutes, hours, weeks. No loss is acknowledged.
- Growing awareness - waves of savage feelings, over which there is temporarily no control - tears, anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, depression (feelings of redundancy, lack of self-worth).
- Acceptance - relearning the world and situations.

(More information is available from the EA's Critical Incident Team's leaflets, for staff, pupils and parents)

## **Additional Reading**

## **Secondary affects**

Associated with the above Primary effects are Secondary effects which teachers should be aware of:

- Change in behaviour
- Change in peer groups
- Loss of motivation
- Lack of achievement
- Poor hygiene
- Change in family role
- Effects on relationships

Staff are aware that grief may be delayed or re-emerge years later. Feelings and needs of bereaved children may vary. Some children may see school as a haven of peace and normality in contrast to the trauma at home. Conversely other children may find school is a place to express their feelings.

Staff should be alert to:

- Changes in behaviour
- Mood swings
- Psychosomatic symptoms - headaches, stomach aches etc.
- Insecurity, feeling unwanted, friendship difficulties
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Isolation and withdrawal.

## **Useful responses from staff**

- Acknowledge the event to pupils, in a confidential way, letting them know that you are available to help and support them
- Be willing to listen and give them time
- Be willing to answer questions (it is not important that staff answer all questions but that they listen to pupils' fears and worries and take their queries seriously)
- Be genuine and professional
- Be non-judgmental
- Give information to them, including the normalisation of their reactions (e.g. their reactions are normal reactions)
- Encourage pupils to talk, share their feelings and seek help as appropriate
- Maintain a routine in school (flexible, caring, containing)
- Offer sensitivity, care, and empathy

## **Our school will offer**

- A routine, which can have a stabilising effect
- Some space, away from emotional, intense atmosphere;
- Neutral space and people to share their feelings without the fear of upsetting a loved one;
- Time for the pupils to be themselves without feeling guilty (being with friends, time to play in a safe space outside the home environment)
- Regular communication with home, providing reassurance about behaviour and general well-being, ensuring the child or young person is managing their grief;
- Access to appropriate resources via class teacher
- Preparation time for children and young people to discuss what to say and how to behave when the bereaved child or young person returns to school;
- 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 suitable space in school for children to go to if they need some time out and if they are too upset to stay in the classroom, and people to whom they can go to for support.

## **Support for staff**

Our school will:

- Support bereaved staff and acknowledge they may be struggling with their own reactions and emotions whilst supporting pupils;
- Plan for informal mutual support to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions;
- Give people time to attend the funeral, if appropriate;
- Offer general training for all staff;
- Be aware of all supporting information and resources available.

## **Support for parents**

Our school will:

- Communicate with the family straight away and offer support;
- Give out information to appropriate people depending on the families wishes;
- Give parents and family the opportunity to collect any personal belongings of the person
- Send a representative to the funeral if appropriate;
- Hold a collection/flowers to be sent if appropriate;
- Invite parents/carers to any commemorative events held by the school.



## **Acknowledgements**

Our school will give the following opportunities to commemorate loss for parents/carers, staff and pupils:

- Hold celebration assemblies and other commemorative activities as per the wishes of the family
- Offer support to individuals who wish to talk about their experiences;
- Offer support to pupils who need to explore and learn to understand their emotions;
- Give pupils an opportunity to talk within a group about their experiences.

## **Procedures on learning of the death of a parent/sibling/caregiver**

1. Convey information to staff, pupils.
2. Make arrangements for expression of sympathy.
  - Personal Visit/Attend Funeral/Guard of Honour (if/as appropriate)

## **Procedures on a child returning to school**

Refer to iMatter: Promoting emotional health and well-being - A Guide to Managing Critical Incidents in Schools

## **What are the needs of a bereaved child?**

- Friendship and support
- Understanding
- To talk and be listened to
- Reassurance
- Increase in self-esteem
- An alleviation of isolation
- Routine
- Time to express feelings if they wish to
- Space

## **Long term illness**

We will:

- Designate one person to make contact with the child/staff family to find out their wishes about staff visiting.
- Ensure they keep abreast of any developments without causing stress to the family;
- Advise staff of the family's wishes;
- Support the school community with accurate information and support.

## **Procedures on learning of a child affected by their parents' separation/divorce/Temporary Absence (Prison)**

It takes a long time for children to adjust to their parents' separation/divorce and it is not usually a smooth road, but the more opportunities parents have to express their feelings, the easier the transition will be. However, some pupils may not wish to talk, and this must be respected too.

Remember: "Family breakdown is not an event but a process. The process may take years to settle down." (An Eye to their Future, resource pack, for working with the impact of family breakdown)

1. Be sensitive towards the child and his/her parents. Acknowledge the pupil's loss privately and assure them of your support and availability.
2. Inform the necessary staff in a confidential manner.
3. Make arrangements to ensure both parents are kept up to date with their child's progress, if possible.
4. Address issues of loss through PDMU/Circle time/PD

### **Confidentiality**

Although it is important to maintain confidentiality through the handling of any incident or disclosure, pupils will be made aware that complete confidentiality in some circumstances cannot be totally guaranteed. This will help in retaining the trust of pupils and parents/carers and will ensure that the sharing of appropriate information is kept to a minimum. Sensitive information is only enclosed internally or externally with careful attention to the rights and needs of individuals. When the child/young person returns to school it is important to discuss with them whether they want certain people with whom they come into contact to be informed, such as extended school club leaders.

### **Inclusion and equality**

Our school recognises that there are a range of cultural and religious customs and procedures concerning death and that there may be different expectations of the bereaved child and family. We will try to present a balance of different approaches to death and loss. Pupils and staff will be made aware that there are a range of different responses to bereavement that we need to value and respect each one of these.

### **Responding to the media**

Some incidents and deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, may attract media attention. All members of staff will be advised not to respond to journalists and refer all enquiries to the Principal, who will make a considered response after seeking assistance from the Education Authority Communications Office. Pupils will be given advice.

### **Staff support and training**

It is important that all staff feel confident in delivering support for pupils and mutual support for each other. Bereavement awareness training will be provided for all staff. We will ensure members of staff update their skills and knowledge as required.

### **Monitoring and evaluation**

This policy will be reviewed annually by the safeguarding team to consider any developments or Statutory Guidance. Any changes made will be shared with the staff and governors.

### **Links to other policies:**

Managing Critical Incidents, Religious Education, Pastoral Care, Anti-Bullying, Safe Guarding and Child Protection, Positive Behaviour Policy, School Attendance, Health and Safety.