



Bereavement and Loss Policy

Policy Date: March 2024

Introduction

Milltown Primary School is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils. We work towards this in all aspects of school life, seeking to provide an ethos, environment and curriculum that support members of the school community in coping with loss of a loved one through separation or death. Bereavement and loss affect everybody at some time and, as a close community, our school aims to provide the best support for its members during such times.

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

This policy gives guidance on how to deal professionally, sensitively, and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances. It outlines the basic principles and procedures that underpin our approach. Staff training has provided an understanding of the complexities surrounding bereavement and loss thus enabling the school to do what it can to best meet the needs of the bereaved.

It is recognised that each experience of bereavement and loss, and the circumstances in which it occurs, is unique. Therefore, the guidelines developed must take account of individual circumstances and the wishes of those most closely involved.

'Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.' William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

This policy outlines practical measures to be taken when people are in shock, or upset, especially with sudden or multiple deaths or traumatic 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 it within a safe and supportive atmosphere. As a school, we recognise the importance of long term support for those who are bereaved, and will endeavour to provide opportunities for remembrance where appropriate.

Our school is well placed to help pupils 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 pupils to support their peers, decreasing the sense of isolation that can be part of it.

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.

The policy is for all members of the school community, including partner agencies working within our school. It has been developed to complement our Critical Incident Management Strategy. All aspects of Safeguarding are embedded into the life of our school and are the responsibility of all staff.

Aims

We aim to:

- Support all those affected by loss and death in a supportive and caring environment in which everyone can respond appropriately to individual circumstances;
- Offer understanding of the impact of loss and grief on children and young people's physical and emotional health;
- Gain insight into children's /staff reactions to loss and grief and how our school responds to meet the needs of grieving pupils, parents, and staff;
- Provide pastoral support for pupils, parents and staff.

Roles and Responsibilities

Principal

The Principal 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 most senior teacher will take responsibility.

These responsibilities are:

- Implementation of the policy and reflecting on its effectiveness in practice;
- Using the expertise within the 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 media;
- Establishing and co-ordinating links with external agencies;
- Liaison within the school;
- Accessing and co-ordinating training and support for staff.

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

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

Teachers

- To be familiar with and guided by the policy
- To educate pupils to know about loss and bereavement;
- To support pupils in school who have experienced loss and bereavement;
- To liaise with the Principal / and parents;
- To seek support for themselves, if needed.

Curriculum

Through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) activities, children are educated to know about loss, what feelings they might experience and how they might cope with personal loss and respond to the loss of others. Our teaching is based on an understanding of the principles stated above and a variety of approaches are used to meet the needs of our pupils, showing sensitivity to their age and experience.

Teaching methods adopted in the classroom will include:

- A range of teaching and learning styles including individual and group discussions, Circle Time, role play and drama;
- Use of supporting resources such as stories, photographs, mementoes and 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

PROCEDURES

Procedures on learning of the death of a pupil

Our school will:

- Speak to the family, if possible, to offer condolences and support before ascertaining what they would like to happen;
- Give the family a named contact that they can contact in school;
- Obtain factual information to avoid unnecessary speculation;
- Inform staff/governors as soon as possible;
- Decide where pupils will be told if this is necessary.
- Identify the most vulnerable pupils and give the support they might need;
- Tell the pupils as soon as possible, in familiar groups, by someone they know;
- Send a letter to families as soon as possible;
- Give guidance to parents on supporting bereaved children.

The Funeral

Our school will:

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

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/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 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 to understand their own 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 concern and support 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
- Anxiety
- 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
- Anger
- Fear
- Withdrawal
- Panic
- Crying
- 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 or 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 Leaflets, for staff, pupils, and parents)

SECONDARY EFFECTS

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

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

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

Staff should be alert to:

- Changes in behaviour
- psychosomatic symptoms - headaches, stomach aches etc.
- insecurity, feeling unwanted, friendship difficulties
- Mood swings
- 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 giving 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-judgemental
- Give information to them including the 'normalisation' of their reactions (i.e. their reactions are normal reactions)
- Encourage pupils to talk, share their feelings and seek help as appropriate
- Maintain a routine in school (flexible, caring and containing)
- Offer sensitivity, care, and empathy

Our school will offer:

- A routine, which can have a stabilising effect
- Some space, away from an emotional intense atmosphere;
- Neutral space and people to share their feelings without the worry 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 correspondence 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 place in school for pupils who need some space if too upset to stay in the classroom and people to whom they can go for support. - TIME OUT Card may be used.

Support for staff

Our school will:

- Support bereaved staff and acknowledge they may be struggling with their own reactions and emotions while 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;
- Send a letter/card of condolence;
- Give out information to appropriate people depending on the family's wishes;
- Give parents and family the opportunity to collect any personal belongings of the person who has died;
- Send a representative to the funeral if appropriate;
- Hold a collection/flowers to be sent as 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 assembly / other commemorative activity 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 opportunities to talk within a group about their experiences.

Procedures on learning of the death of a member of staff

- Provide information to Governors, Staff, Pupils and Parents.
- Provide information to absent staff.
- Principal makes news statement if necessary.
- Arrange for staff/pupil condolences.
- Teacher in Charge of Pastoral Care arranges for support for individual/group members of staff.
- Contact Pupil Personal Development Services Tel: 028 3751 2515
- Principal makes arrangements, as appropriate, for
 - Expression of feelings
 - Death notice in local newspaper
 - Commemoration
 - Personal belongings
 - Services
 - Card / wreath
 - Funeral

Procedures on learning of the death of a parent

- Convey information to staff, pupils.
- Make arrangements for expression of sympathy.
 - Personal Visit
 - Sympathy Card
 - Attend Funeral

Procedures on supporting a child returning to school

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

What Are the Needs of a Bereaved Child?

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

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 children have to express and understand their feelings, the easier this 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.
2. Acknowledge the pupil's loss privately and assure them of your support and availability.
3. Inform the necessary staff in a confidential manner
4. Make arrangements to ensure both parents are kept up to date with their child's progress, if possible.
5. Address issues of loss through PDMU/circle time

Confidentiality

Although it is important to maintain confidentiality throughout 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 disclosed 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 after-school club leaders.

Inclusion and equality

Our school recognises that there is 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 and 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 to 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, to take account of any developments or changes in Statutory Guidance and also after an event. Any changes made will be shared with the staff and Governors.

Links to other policies:

Managing Critical Incidents, Religious Education, Pastoral Care, Anti-bullying, Safeguarding/Child Protection, Positive Behaviour Policy, School Attendance, Health and Safety.

Seeking Support

- Family Doctor
- Cruse Bereavement Care (NI) www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk
Cruse Bereavement Line 028 9079 2419 www.rd4u.org.uk
- Barnardos 028 9069 4000 Helpline 028 9064 5899
www.barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice
- NOVA Trauma Support 028 4062 5118
- The Family Trauma Centre 028 9020 4700
- Wave Trauma Centre www.wavetc.clara.nrt 028 3751 1599
- www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk
- www.winstonswish.org.uk
- Lifeline Number 0808 808 8000

- Aoife Darragh Welfare Officer EA Southern Region 028 3751 2575

- Carecall 24/7 confidential telephone counselling service 0808 800 0002