

# Barnsley Educational Child and Community Psychology Service

## Responding to Critical Incidents in School

### Resource Pack



**BARNSELY**  
Metropolitan Borough Council

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## INFORMING PARENTS OF A SUDDEN DEATH LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parent

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you of the sudden death of \_\_\_\_\_

use caution if naming a pupil (a pupil in Year \_\_\_\_\_/a Year \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher). The pupils were told this morning by their Principal/class/form teacher.

\_\_\_\_\_ died of (an asthma attack, meningitis etc) and the pupils have been reassured this is something that does not happen very often. Your child may or may not want to talk about it but it is likely that he/she will need extra love and support from you in the days ahead. This does not mean that anything is wrong with him/her. It only means that this traumatic event has been too powerful for him/her to deal with on his/her own. He/she may be feeling anxious. Take time to listen to your child and try to provide a predictable routine for him/her at home. Avoid too many absences to start with.

We have enclosed an information leaflet for you which may be useful at this time. Staff from the LA Critical Incident Response Team are helping to support us through this difficult time.

We are deeply saddened by this great loss but are trying, for the pupils' sake, to keep the school environment as normal as possible. Our thoughts are with \_\_\_\_\_'s family at this tragic time and the school community sends them sincerest sympathy and support.

\_\_\_\_\_ 's funeral is on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ am/pm at \_\_\_\_\_.

We are in touch with the family regarding their wishes for the school's representation at the service.

If you require further clarification or have any concerns please do not hesitate to contact me.

## Understanding your child's reactions and how you can help

### Information for parents

When a child or young person experiences a traumatic incident it can be very upsetting for them and for you. Even though the event is over, your child may still be experiencing reactions to it. It is normal for children and young people to be upset after such a happening. It is unlikely that they have experienced such an event before and so their reaction may be challenging for you.

Their reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or longer. Reassurance, understanding and support from you, along with their teachers and their friends can help them to cope.

Here are some common reactions to a traumatic incident. You might have noticed some of these.

THINKING	FEELINGS
Confused Nightmares/bad dreams Poor concentration Restless Not interested in what is going on Spending a lot of time thinking about what happened Thinking that they cannot cope	Worried Guilty Anxious Fearful Easily upset Cross Panicky Overwhelmed
BEHAVIOURS	PHYSICAL COMPLAINTS
Loss of appetite Being very quiet Nervous Being quarrelsome/arguing	Feeling tired all the time Unable to rest or settle Feeling sick/knot in tummy Cold and shivery

#### REMEMBER

These are normal reactions.

The reactions should lessen in time, normally over the next few weeks.

If you continue to have concerns that some more specialist help may be needed, please talk to us.

## Helping your child

It is important that you are strong enough to bear whatever your child wants to talk about and to answer their questions.

DO	DO NOT
Take time to listen and answer questions.	Try to hide your own sadness or grief but try not to overwhelm them with such.
Be honest in your explanations and in showing your own sadness or grief.	Tell your child not to worry or be sad. They cannot control their feelings.
Let them know their feelings are important.	Feel like you have to have all the answers or get it right all the time.
Give plenty of reassurance and affection.	Be surprised at your child's ability to set grief aside and alternate between sadness and happiness. Time with friends and playmates enables them to release anxiety about incidents over which they have no control.
Let them know you love them and will be there for them.	
Keep to routines and patterns as much as possible.	
Be aware that changes such as clinging or aggressive behaviour or physical problems may be an expression of grief.	
Take things one day at a time.	

## The media

Managing press relations is an important part of any emergency response. It must be remembered that the media have a dual role both as a public information service and as a news service. Consequently it is very important that the media are handled effectively.

Advice should be sought from LA Communications and Press Officers and Service Directors of Education and Social Care on 01226 773443 or [communications@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:communications@barnsley.gov.uk)

Schools should have a 'one spokesperson' practice usually the Head or Chair of Governors. The spokesperson should be well briefed on the details and expectations of the interviewer. Briefing should include the most likely questions that may be asked. Negative lines of questioning and difficult questions should be anticipated and appropriate responses prepared. If media deadlines cannot be met it is essential to say so and to keep to new deadlines if agreed.

Before making a media statement the school's spokesperson should:

- Liaise with the Chair of the Board of Governors and relevant LA officer and/or LA service directors
- Prepare a brief written statement which can be read and handed out to reporters
- Write down key messages before the interview and refine for accuracy, clarity, simplicity and impact
- Keep spoken comments simple, factual and short so that key points such as what has been done so far, are not edited out
- Be aware that interviews, if not live, may be edited and comments taken out of context
- Take time to respond to questions and seek clarification if necessary
- Be aware of legal issues, particularly the language/terminology used
- Avoid making comments which imply blame or fault for any part of the incident, as there could be significant legal implications
- Remember that official enquiries are likely to follow serious incidents - media comments on the public record may have a bearing on such proceedings
- Avoid 'off the record' comments at all times
- Express concern, express sympathy for the bereaved family, and the school's grief, restricting answers to facts and accentuating the positive developments following the event

## Children and young people's understanding of death

### Information for staff

Children and young people's understanding of death will depend on their cognitive and developmental stage. They will revisit the loss as they mature, reach significant milestones and become more able to talk about their experiences and questions in relation to death. Children and young people with learning difficulties will progress through the developmental stages at a slower pace or indeed may remain at an early stage in their understanding of death.

Children and young people do experience similar feelings to adults following a death but often express their feelings differently depending on their development age.

Age	Concept of Death	Possible Reactions
2 to 5 years	<p>Death seen as reversible</p> <p>May feel they have caused the death</p> <p>Magical thinking - make up fantasies to fill gaps in knowledge</p>	<p>Fears abandonment and separation</p> <p>Loud protest</p> <p>Despair</p> <p>Indignant at changes in patterns or routine</p> <p>Sleep problems</p>
5 to 11 years	<p>More exposure to death and understanding of death as permanent</p>	<p>Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression</p> <p>Anger, guilt, temper tantrums, nightmares</p> <p>Behaviour, learning or school problems</p> <p>Perfect child, brave and in control</p> <p>May become preoccupied with death</p>
Over 11 years	<p>Death permanent</p> <p>Denial - it can't happen</p>	<p>Withdrawal, sadness, depression, loneliness</p> <p>Anger, rejection, guilt</p> <p>Joking, sarcasm</p> <p>Dependence or regressing to younger age</p> <p>Insecurity, low self-esteem</p>

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is important to allow children and young people to grieve in their own way and their own time. They may seesaw in and out of grief, needing time to play and have fun as well as to cry.

## **Announcements to pupils**

### **Advice for teachers**

Remember announcements should be simple, straightforward and sincere. The following examples provide a suggested structure and are not intended to be adhered to rigidly.

After the announcement pupils should be assured that they will have the opportunity to talk about the critical incident.

### **Fatality after a road traffic accident**

We are taking this time to think about \_\_\_\_\_, a Year 10 pupil who died last night in a road traffic accident. \_\_\_\_\_ was travelling with her family to \_\_\_\_\_ when the accident occurred. We do not know any further details about the accident at this time except that the rest of the family is safe.

\_\_\_\_\_ 's funeral is being held at \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_. A funeral is a special time to remember a person who has died. The school will let your families know about the funeral arrangements in a letter which will be sent home tomorrow.

Let's take a moment of silence to think of \_\_\_\_\_, to remember all the good things about him/her and to say goodbye. In our silence we will express our loving thoughts.

### **After a sudden death**

Sadly a tragedy has happened in our school community. \_\_\_\_\_, a Year \_\_\_\_\_ pupil has died suddenly. We want to respect the family's need for privacy at this time but you will be given information about funeral arrangements as soon as possible.

This kind of tragic news is hard to accept. You may experience many feelings within the next few days. Everyone deals with loss differently and it is important to respect the way others grieve. We want to listen to your feelings and concerns so support staff are available in \_\_\_\_\_. Feel free to arrange to go there and talk to someone.

## Breaking the news to pupils

### Advice for teachers

**Never underestimate the positive effect that concern and support from a caring, familiar adult can have on a pupil. Remember that PARENTS, FRIENDS, PEERS and STAFF are the key supporting people for pupils. Make use of all of them.**

Your experience, competence and skills as a teacher and as an expert in dealing with children and young people are invaluable. Most importantly, the students know you. Experience shows that people grieve best with someone they know. Pupils' needs a safe environment in which to grieve and that security is often provided by the familiar face of the teacher in the first instance.

If the incident involves the disappearance or sudden death of a pupil or member of staff it is important to consider the wishes of "the family" and remember their right to privacy.

Teachers should relay the information, agreed at the staff briefing, to pupils at schools - preferably at the same time. Relaying the information to vulnerable pupils and pupils absent from school also needs to be considered. Any "news" should contain appropriate language and factual information only with clear, concise, "bite size" explanations delivered in a calm manner.

#### REMEMBER

Be patient you may have to repeat the information many times. Be honest, specific and straightforward it is acceptable to say you do not have all the answers. Be available for the pupil. Monitor initial reactions.

Allow time for pupils to discuss their feelings. Provide reassurance and information about the school support which is available. Inform pupils of a designated area should they be unable to stay in class. Monitor ongoing and developing reactions. Refer on for additional support if in doubt.

Share your own feelings, if appropriate; acknowledge the pupil's feelings: if necessary, use pictures and social stories to aid understanding.

Be prepared that a pupil may come back and ask more questions.

Be proactive: if you can, have information ready for possible questions. Assure pupils they will be kept updated.

It is important to try to establish normal routines as soon as possible balanced with allowing students opportunities to discuss the incident and to express their thoughts and feelings.

## How teachers can support students in school

### General considerations

Students should be given opportunities to discuss the incident and express their thoughts or feelings in a secure environment. The teacher needs to be aware of the importance of handling the discussion in a confident but sensitive manner. However, normal routines should be returned to as soon as possible.

Students should be encouraged to resume sports and other extra-curricular activities.

Help students re-establish support systems, identify with them who they go to for different kinds of support.

It is appropriate that the class curriculum is adjusted or adapted. For example, teachers should avoid presenting new learning material for a while following an incident as concentration may be impaired.

Use opportunities which arise within ordinary class work, where coping and support can be reinforced.

Students could be encouraged to discuss how to avoid future crises and lessons learnt from their experiences. There will be opportunities within the school's personal, social and health education programmes for structured discussion.

### Meeting with individual students

Take your cue from the student. When they feel like talking, try to find the time to listen. If the time they choose is not appropriate, explain that you would like to talk with them and name an alternative time and place.

Don't be afraid to mention the incident or the deceased person's name. It is important to acknowledge what has happened for the student.

It is alright to ask the student what he/she needs, what helps or what doesn't help.

Let the students know that it is normal to laugh and cry. Reassure them it is okay to lighten the mood by remembering old times and stories.

Believe what the students say. Feelings must be acknowledged, believed and discussed. Try not to make comments such as “you don’t really mean that” or “it will be okay soon”.

## **A classroom session**

A classroom session is an important intervention following a critical incident that affects large numbers of students. Students need to be with people they know and trust, it has been found that their teachers are the best people to support them in school in times of distress. It is recommended that the classroom teacher take an active role, if possible. Students may feel safe and secure with their classroom teacher rather than being with an adult they do not know. Teachers could lead these sessions with the educational psychologist, senior member of staff or someone from the pastoral team as a co-facilitator. Teachers should have the opportunity to opt out of this work if they wish.

A class session needs to be tailored to the developmental level of the class. The time required will vary depending on the class experience and age.

The process involves:

### **Providing facts and dispelling rumours**

State the facts clearly. Talk in concrete rather than abstract terms. Dispelling rumours helps students understand the reality of the events.

### **Sharing Stories**

Students can tell their story of the event and share common experiences. Helping them verbalise their experiences can help their recovery. For those students who find it difficult to verbalise their experiences or for students with learning difficulties it may be helpful to explore alternatives to facilitate students expressing their feelings and recounting their experiences in other ways. For example using art or story boards.

### **Sharing thoughts and feelings**

Help the students identify what they thought and felt at the time of the incident. It may be helpful to share your own feelings, thoughts and fears that you experienced during the crisis or just after hearing the news.

### **Normalisation of thoughts and feelings**

Explain that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Let the students know that in time, for most people, the reactions or symptoms will go away. Inform the class that if the symptoms don't go away they need to seek help. Distribute hand-outs on reactions to grief to the students, if appropriate.

## **Empowerment**

Help the students identify strategies that they can use to help manage symptoms. For example, talking to family and friends, getting enough sleep, exercise etc. If appropriate, students can brainstorm ideas that might help prevent a similar situation happening again. Overall, it is important to help the students regain a sense of control.

## **Closure**

End the session by focussing on the future. Depending on the nature of the incident, help the class/group decide what would bring about a sense of closure, for example, organising a memorial, writing cards or letters. Tell students what further supports will be put in place if needed.

## **Pupils returning to school after bereavement**

### **Information for teachers**

Returning to school after bereavement can be difficult for a bereaved pupil. It can also be difficult for peers and staff to know how best to support the pupil. The circumstances of the bereavement and the age and developmental stage of the pupil will determine the approach used by teachers.

#### **The following advice may be helpful in planning a positive return to school:**

Speak to the parents/carers to find out what they want. Speak to the bereaved pupil. Check how he/she feels about coming back to school and what he/she may want to happen. Discuss the support that will be available.

Discuss with class peers how they feel and how they can support the pupil. Discuss normal grief reactions. Encourage them to share their feelings and experiences of bereavement and how they coped. They may have sent cards or messages.

Ask a group of friends to be supportive during the first days following the return to school.

Consider a phased return. Plan for the day of the return of the pupil with a key member of staff taking the lead. When the pupil comes back to school it is important to acknowledge the loss. You may wish to say something like "I am/we are sorry that \_\_\_\_\_ died. I/We know you are sad and I/we want to support you at this time".

Consider giving the pupil age appropriate information on normal bereavement responses and grief reactions.

Allow for possible changes in emotions, behaviours, concentration, and work levels. All teachers need to be made aware.

Allow for "time out" when the pupil wants to be in a quiet place or to talk with a school counsellor, pastoral care teacher or another member of staff.

Carry on normal routines with normal approaches to discipline, with sensitivity.

## **Contacts, useful websites and resources**

The Barnsley Educational Child and Community Psychology Service is part of the council's emergency planning team and responds to critical incidents offering bereavement support/care and resources.

Barnsley Educational Child and Community Psychology Service (BEECPS)

Tel: 01226 773571

Fax: 01226 773599

[benpowell@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:benpowell@barnsley.gov.uk) Service Strategy Manager BEECPS

[joannepatterson@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:joannepatterson@barnsley.gov.uk) Lead Educational Psychologist BEECPS

### **USEFUL WEBSITES**

[www.teachersupport.info](http://www.teachersupport.info)

Bereavement

[www.childbereavementuk.org.uk](http://www.childbereavementuk.org.uk)

[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

Winston's Wish

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

CRUSE

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Young people coping with bereavement

[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

Barnardos

[www.barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice/child\\_bereavement\\_service\\_fags.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice/child_bereavement_service_fags.htm)

Childline

0800 1111

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Rainbows

[www.rainbowsqb.org](http://www.rainbowsqb.org)

The Bereavement Counselling Service

[www.thebcsonline.co.uk](http://www.thebcsonline.co.uk)

## **SUGGESTED RESOURCES**

The day the sea went out and never came back, Margot Sunderland

Badger's Parting Gifts, S Varley

Always and Forever by Alan Durant

Grandpa, J Burningham

Are you sad little bear, Rachel Rivett & Tina Macnoughton

Rabbityness, Jo Epton

The Copper Tree, Hilary Robinson

When Someone very special dies (Drawing out feelings), Marge Heegaard

Muddles Puddles and Sunshine: Early years activity book, Diana Crossley

Huge bag of worries, Virginia Ironside

The Lonely Tree, Nicholas Halliday

William Yule and Anne Gold (1993).

Wise Before the Event. Coping with Crises in Schools.

Pub. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

G. Perkins and L. Morris (1991).

Remembering Mum.

How It Feels When a Parent Dies.

S. Wallbank.

My Father Died and My Mother Died.

Cruse – Bereavement Care .

Judith Bisignano (1991).

## **Acknowledgements**

In the writing of this document the following sources have been referred to and we would like to acknowledge them:

iMatter promoting emotional health and well being

A Guide to managing critical Incidents in School Department of Education for Northern Ireland

[www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

Sheffield Educational Psychology Service. Responding to Critical Incidents. Advice and Information pack for schools

<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/education/information-for-parentscarers/care-support/educational-psychology/support-for-critical-incidents.html>



