

*WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL RC  
PRIMARY SCHOOL*



**BEREAVEMENT POLICY**

June 2019

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**Personnel responsible for the policy:** Senior management and governors.

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## Rationale:

*UK Statistics (From Child Bereavement UK website, 2019)*

- A parent of children under 18 dies every 22 minutes in the UK; around 23,600 a year. This equates to around 111 children being bereaved of a parent every day.

Many more are bereaved of a grandparent, sibling, friend or other significant person, and sadly, around 12,000 children die in the UK each year.

We understand that bereavement is faced by members of our school community at different times and that when the loss is of a member of our school community – such as a child or staff member, it can be particularly difficult. Pupils need to be supported when they experience family bereavements and other significant losses in the course of their lives while they are at school.

## Objectives:

Westminster Cathedral Primary is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils. We are dedicated to the continual development of a 'healthy school'. We wish to work towards this in all aspects of school life, and to provide an ethos, environment and curriculum that supports and prepares pupils for coping with separation or loss of a loved one through death.

The core intentions of this policy are:

- To support pupil/family/staff before (where applicable), during and after bereavement.
- To enhance effective communication and have a clear pathway of support between school, family and community.
- To identify key staff within school that will provide a pathway of support.

## Procedures

1. The school might be notified in a number of ways. If informed through a telephone call, the person answering the phone should put them through to the most senior member of staff on site.
2. The wishes of communicating the information should be respected. Contact with the deceased's family should be made by the headteacher or someone delegated by her. Factual information is essential to avoid rumour and confusion, whilst being sensitive to cultural and religious beliefs.
3. Staff should be informed before pupils. This is not just teaching staff, but any member of the school. The school should ensure that those who are close to

the child/staff/family are told in a sensitive and supportive manner. Hearing the news may raise previous grief experiences and so on-going support should be offered.

#### *Online support*

- <https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/blogs/admin/supporting-school-support-staff> - Support for those working in education.
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/> - They have a school's section with useful documents and advice.
- <http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/> - They have a school's section with useful documents and advice.

#### *Phone support*

- Child Bereavement UK helpline: 0800 02 888 40.
- Educational support partnership: 0800 05 625 61.
- Mind helpline: 0300 123 3393
- Winston's wish: 0845 203 0405

#### *Other support available for staff:*

- Canon Pat Browne (Parish priest)
  - Saint Vincent's family service
  - Westminster's Educational Psychologist
  - Diocese
4. The head teacher will decide on how best to inform pupils. The pupils who are affected should be informed, preferably in small groups, by someone known to them. The class that will be most affected should be told first. Children must be allowed to ask questions at this time or at any point in the following days or weeks.
5. The school should be aware that the school timetable may need a degree of flexibility to accommodate the needs and wellbeing of children affected by the situation. Support may include:
- Children should be made aware of an adult in the school that is available for emotional support.
  - PSHE co-ordinator will ensure that school have suitable books and other materials to help children discuss death and come to terms with loss (see appendix: 1 for list of books).
  - The educational psychologist for the school can offer support to pupils who may need more help.

All the above can be offered to ensure that are supported; however, minimal disruption to the timetable can also offer a sense of security and familiarity.

6. A letter to all school families affected should be composed at the earliest opportunity (see appendix: 2 for example of such letter).
7. The school community to be given the opportunity to express their condolences and respect through a book of remembrance.

### Responding to the media

Some deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, attract media attention. All members of staff are advised not to respond to journalists and to refer all enquiries to the Headteacher, who will make a considered response after seeking assistance from the Local Authority and Westminster Diocese Press Office.

### Suicide

Suicide is a traumatic, sometimes violent, event in our society. It can also be a very public event and school communities tend to have active grapevines. In consultation with the family, it is important that the school communicates to staff and pupils through simple facts of events, as quickly as possible. With suicide, there are many questions but few answers. Those left behind are often desperate to try to make some sense of the events. Lack of answers can complicate the grief process. Guilt, relief and anger are common reactions in bereaved children but are likely to be felt more intensely or go on for longer periods of time with a suicide than with other causes of death. Children and young people who witnessed any part of the suicide, or found the body, may experience recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event. This will have a major impact on their ability to concentrate and school work is likely to suffer. Children and young people bereaved by suicide, or any traumatic or violent death, are more likely to need professional help.

Useful book for suicide: 'Beyond the rough work' by Winston's wish.

Please note: Where a pupil dies by suicide, Samaritans provide a Step-by-Step programme to support schools and can be contacted on 0808 168 2528.

Please note: Papyrus provide confidential support and advice to young people struggling with thoughts of suicide, and anyone worried about a young person.

Website: <https://papyrus-uk.org/>

Helpline: 0800 068 41 41

## The funeral

It is essential to carry out the family's wishes. The family may well welcome involvement of members of the school community and school but equally, may wish to keep things private.

If applicable, the head teacher/deputy head teacher will make arrangements for the school to be represented at the funeral. Staff should be given the option to attend. Head teacher/deputy head teacher should also arrange practicality issues such as staff cover and transport. For some circumstances it is appropriate to close the school, for others it may not be. If the head teacher thinks closing the school is deemed appropriate, they should seek permission from the Chair of Governors. Parents to be notified as soon as possible.

Things to consider prior to the funeral include whether a collection will be made and whether flowers will be sent. Staff and pupils should be involved in this decision.

## Memorial assemblies / masses

It may be appropriate to hold a memory assembly for the pupil/family/staff. It might be best to do this just before break/lunch so children have some time to process/reflect before carrying on with the normal school timetable.

### *Why hold a special assembly/mass?*

- To bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened
- To reflect on, and remember, the life of the person who has died
- To normalise and share grief
- To give the message that it is OK to be sad but equally OK to not be affected
- To inform pupils and staff of any support that is available.
- To pray or celebrate a mass for the deceased, in accordance with our faith and the beliefs and ethos of the school.

### *How to structure a special assembly*

Have a clear beginning, middle and an end. Start by explaining the purpose of the assembly. Follow with a brief reminder of the circumstances surrounding the death and when it happened.

The middle section could include:

- Lighting a special remembrance candle.
- Favourite music / songs / hymns or poems of the person who has died / bereaved family.
- Pupils or staff taking it in turns to recount stories or memories.
- Photographs of the person or child who has died to give a visual reminder, but remember a large image can be too much for any grieving family attending.

- Placing objects associated with the person who has died into a special memory box. This can then be given to the family.
- A story can be read (see appendix: for book ideas)

The end needs some thought and is better if it can leave everyone with a sense of looking forward. Some suggestions include:

- Giving a memory book to the family.
- Giving the remembrance candle as a symbol of hope to the deceased family.
- Asking pupils to bring a farewell message to the person who has died to put into a special box as they leave. This can help pupils to personalise a goodbye.
- Playing reflective but uplifting music can help to create the right atmosphere.
- Remind pupils of what support is available to them.
- Praying with children/bereaved family.

Staff should be reassured that they can be visibly upset in front of the children. It reassures them that it is perfectly normal. A memorial assembly allows the deceased person to be remembered and allows prayers and hymns to bring everyone together. Parents/family should be given the option to attend any events held by the school.

#### Supporting the child once they return to school

Coming back to school after someone important has died in your life can be overwhelming. It is important that the child is told what happened while they were gone. For example: who has been told and what they have been told.

It is very easy to make assumptions on what a grieving child needs but this can differ from what the child actually wants and what works for them. Therefore, it is important that the child is asked what would help them during the settling back period and have a say on what things are put in place. Children who are unsure or more reluctant to share their thoughts should be encouraged by adults and should use the recommended suggestions below.

Some ideas include:

- Giving them the option to sit next to a friend for the first few days.
- A 'time out' system to enable the child to have some space away from the hustle and bustle of the classroom/school day.
- Identifying one adult in the school that they trust.
- Specifically naming an adult to the child that will regularly keep a look out for them.
- Some flexibility around deadlines for handing in work.
- Pocket comforter - A pupil can discretely carry in their pocket a soft piece of fabric/ a pebble/ stone. Holding onto something solid can help a pupil to remain grounded and in control if upset. Equally, touching a piece of garment that belonged to the person who has died can provide a comfort.

- Rosary/ crucifix/ medal or cross can again be used to provide comfort.
- Diary - A way to communicate with a bereaved child who finds it difficult to verbalise feelings.

The Educational Psychology team can offer support to pupils who may need more specialised help. Any concerns or referrals should be discussed with the headteacher.

Schools should be aware of the impact of bereavement. It follows a child throughout their school life and so information should be recorded and shared with relevant people, particularly at transition points e.g. moving to a new year group.

### Children with special needs

All children and young people, regardless of their circumstances, have a right to have their grief recognised, hear the truth and to be given opportunities to express their feelings and emotions. Children with learning difficulties are no different but may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings.

Communicating the truth:

- Use real words.
- Use visuals of funerals, coffins etc to aid understanding.
- Acknowledge any death – Do not ignore or deny.
- Pre-grief work is important to help prepare for an expected death.

## Understanding of death – (From Child Bereavement UK website, 2019)

Children and young people mature at different rates and their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age. The age categories given are guidelines only.

### **2-5 Years**

Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality. Some may not appreciate the permanence of death: 'Shall we dig granny up now?' They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep'. Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened. As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death. They are prone to fantasise at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something scarier than reality.

### **5-8 Years**

At about five years of age most children are beginning to realise that dead people are different from those who are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink. At around seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone. This can result in separation anxiety. They are better-able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected. They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust. They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.

### **8-12 Years**

At this age children's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. An important factor is their deepening realisation of the inevitability of death and an increasing awareness of their own mortality. This can result in fear and insecurity. Their need to know details continues, and they will seek answers to very specific questions.

### **Adolescence**

The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving. Death increases anxieties about the future, and they may question the meaning of life and experience depression. Teenagers may find it easier to discuss their feelings with a sympathetic friend or adult than with a close family member. They may be having difficulty coming to terms with their own mortality and that of those close to them; they may cope with this by refusing to contemplate the possibility of death by taking part in risk-taking behaviour. Anger makes up a large part of their grief, often compounded by a sense of injustice.

### Things to do when supporting a child after bereavement

- **Try and make things as normal as possible** –Everyone feels safer when they know what to expect. A frightening event often makes people unsure of what's coming. You can help children and young people feel safer sooner, by sticking to their normal routines as much as possible, and continuing with their normal activities when possible.
- **Help children and young people understand what happened** – Talking through the event can benefit the child. Sometimes adults protect children and young people by avoiding talking about the event, hoping that they will just forget about it. However, talking is usually helpful, but needs to be done carefully and sensitively and at the right time. It allows them to make sense of the upsetting events and reduces some of the unpleasant feelings such as: fear, anger and sadness. Communication with family is important to ensure the designated adult knows what the child has/hasn't been told.
- **Answer questions truthfully** – Encourage children and young people to ask questions. They may need to ask the same question several times, as a way of coming to terms with what has happened. If they ask the questions, they are probably ready to hear the answer. If you are faced with a difficult question, rather than answering straight away, ask the child what they think. See appendix: for support on developmental awareness of death.
- **Use clear language** – Using the word 'died' rather than other alternatives, such as 'gone away' and 'fallen asleep' will avoid confusion.
- **Reactions may vary** - Don't assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care. Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity. Allow them to express emotion and feelings and do not be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness if you have any.
- **Anniversaries, birthdays and other special days** – Special days such as birthdays, anniversaries and mother's/Father's Day can be very hard after someone important has died. It is crucial to get a list of these important dates and to be more vigilant during these times. Please see below for a list of activities that can be done on these special days.

### Activities when supporting a child after bereavement

- **Memory jars** – Each colour in the jar represents a thought/feeling/memory that the child has had with the person who has died.
- **Memory box** – Create/decorate a box that can be used to store things that remind the child of the person who has died.
- **Muddles, puddles and sunshine activity book** – This activity book is designed to help children through the process of grief through various activities.
- **Making a first aid kit** – An activity to recognise all the things that help us through difficult times.

- **Making a Christmas Bauble** – Christmas is a difficult time of year for people who have lost someone special. Making a tree decoration that the child can put on the Christmas tree to remember the person who has died, can allow them to remember them.
- **Releasing a balloon** – Releasing a balloon with a special message attached.
- **Lighting a candle.**
- **Praying with the child / children / bereaved family** (1:1, small group, assembly, class/ school mass)

## Appendix 1 : List of books to support bereavement

### *Early years*

- 'I Miss You: a First Look at Death' by: Pat Thomas
- 'I Miss My Sister' by: Sarah Courtauld
- 'Missing Mummy' by: Rebecca Cobb
- 'Goodbye Mousie' by: Robie H Harris
- 'When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death' by: Laurence Krasny Brown and Marc Brown
- 'Granpa' by: John Burningham
- **DEATH OF A BABY** – 'We were gonna have a baby, but we had an angel instead' by: Pat Schwiebert
- **SUDDEN DEATH** – 'Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?' by: Elke Barber and Alex Barber
- **WORKBOOK** - 'Someone I know Has Died' by: Trish Phillips

### *Key stage 1*

- 'I Miss My Sister' by: Sarah Courtauld
- 'Missing Mummy' by: Rebecca Cobb
- 'When your mum or dad has cancer' by: Ann Couldrick
- 'What does dead mean?' by: Caroline Jay and Jenni Thomas
- 'Badger's Parting Gifts' by: Susan Varley
- **PRE BEREAVEMENT** - My Brother and Me' by: Sarah Courtauld
- **WORKBOOK** – 'Remembering' by: Dianne Leutner

### *Key stage 2*

- 'What On Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?' by: Trevor Romain
- 'What does dead mean?' By Caroline Jay and Jenni Thomas.
- 'The Huge Bag of Worries' by: Virginia Ironside
- 'The Invisible String' by: Patrice Karst
- 'Elephants in the custard' by: Samuel Langley-Swain and Jemma Banks
- 'Missing Mummy' by: Rebecca Cobb
- 'The memory tree' by: Britta Teckentrup
- **WORKBOOK** – 'Muddles, puddles and sunshine' by: Diana Crossley
- 'The invisible string' by: Patrice Karst

## Appendix 2 : Example letters

### *Suggested template for letter to parents*

Dear

(name of class teacher) had the sad task today of informing the children of the death of (name).

(Name) died from (cause). As you may be aware, many people who have (cause) get better but sadly (name) had been ill for a long time and died peacefully.

When someone dies, it is normal for their friends and family to experience lots of different feelings like sadness, anger and confusion. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try to answer their questions at school but if there is anything more that you or your child needs to know, please do not hesitate to ring the school office and we would be more than happy to help you.

We will be arranging a memorial service in the school in the next few months as a means of celebrating (name)'s life and praying for the repose of their soul.

Yours sincerely

(name of head teacher)

Suggested template for letter to bereaved parent

Dear

We are so very sorry to hear of (Name)'s death. There are no words to express the sadness of losing a (enter relationship) and we can only begin to imagine the anguish you must be going through.

The school community at Westminster Cathedral Primary School will miss (him/her) very much and we are doing our best to offer comfort and support to everyone affected. (He/She) was a very much part of the school family community and will be greatly missed.

If there is anything that we can do to help with (Name)'s funeral service or any other memorial ceremonies, please do let us know.

Please be assured that you are in our thoughts at this very sad time and please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of support in any way.

With sympathy.

Yours sincerely,

(name of head teacher)

## Suggested template for letter on death of a staff member

Dear Parent

I am very sorry to have to inform you that a much-loved member of staff (name) has sadly died. The children were told today and many have been quite distressed to hear the news. No-one wants to see the children sad, but we are very aware that factual information and emotional support are the best means of helping children deal with bereavement. I am sure that there will be many parents who are also saddened by the news.

Children respond in different ways to bereavement, and may dip in and out of sadness, denial and anger and may wish to ask questions, this is normal and healthy.

You may find that your child has questions to ask which we will answer in an age-appropriate way in school, but if you feel you would like more support and advice yourself, please do not hesitate to contact the school office. You may also find some very useful advice and resources online at [www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk).

We will share details of the funeral as soon as they are known. Children who wish to attend will be welcome to do so. It is likely that the school will be closed on the morning or afternoon of the funeral as staff will, naturally, wish to pay their respects to a very popular colleague. I will let you know in far in advance as possible.

I am sorry to be the bearer of this sad news, and I appreciate an occurrence like this impacts on the whole school community. I am so very grateful for the thriving partnership we have with parents and trust that we, together, will be able to guide and support the children through what may be, for many, a very new experience in their lives.

Yours sincerely,

(name of head teacher)