



SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN AND STAFF AT A DISTANCE

Supporting bereaved children (or those facing bereavement) from a distance

While schools are closed, or partially closed, and practising social distancing, it is important to keep in touch with pupils and listen to any concerns they may have, especially when a child in your care is facing or has experienced the death of someone close. Although usual school bereavement strategies cannot be put into place, there are, however, some things that schools can do to show pupils that they are remembered and supported at a distance. Many of these are simply what you would normally do, taken into a virtual context.

Your initial response (to be adapted for your situation)

1. Head teacher (or tutor/class teacher or head of year) makes contact with the family to:

- acknowledge what has happened
- express support
- discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community
- check if family want their contact information shared

2. Head teacher shares the information with rest of staff and, where possible, follows family choice on how this news is shared more widely with a) the child's peers and b) the rest of the school. (There are a few exceptions, for example, when the death is known about and already widely discussed within the school community).

3. Head teacher shares information with the governors.

4. Head teacher (or tutor/class teacher or head of year) makes contact with the young person through a written card or letter to the child/young person to acknowledge what has happened and express support.

5. One (or two) contacts are agreed with the family to liaise with them and the child. This may be the head teacher and class teacher, or a less obvious supporter requested by the child.

6. The information is shared with the school community, as agreed with the family.

7. Check in on staff response. Any death affecting a student can trigger other remembered griefs and, at this time of crisis, a sense of helplessness in not being able to respond as wished.



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Further support

1. Keep the support-at-a-distance coming through the chosen contact/s.
2. Consider compiling condolences for the child from their peers. This could include collected messages and compiling an electronic book of condolence to email to the family. Other people might choose to send photos or drawings to remember them. Once school is open again, you could offer a memorial of these drawings to display in school and then give to the family afterwards.
3. Obtain, if possible, resources for the family. (SEE list of books and resources)

Supporting grieving staff from a distance

You may not be able to put your normal school bereavement strategy into action right now, but you can do very similar things to what you would do under normal circumstances, but in a virtual space.

Talking to staff about loss

You know how to respond to grief when it is in the same room with you: sit with the person, hold their hand, listen, and just be present.

However, doing the same over the phone or through a video chat, where you are confronting grief from a distance and have nothing to offer but words will be a different experience. You might be tempted to fill the space with words but, before that happens, take a moment to reflect:

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- DO**
- Be caring and compassionate
 - Offer your condolence
 - Let them know that work comes second at this time

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- DON'T**
- Ignore the situation
 - Assume you know how the bereaved person feels
 - Say anything that minimises the loss, such as 'we all have to go sometime' or 'she had some good innings'
 - Make light of the bereavement, such as 'time heals all wounds' or 'you have to be strong now'

Recognise that grieving is different right now

Throughout the world death is marked by communities coming together to observe funeral rites, and that process is severely disrupted right now. It is possible that someone's inability to see a body or attend a funeral can lead to a sense of disbelief that the death has actually occurred. This can delay grief, so someone can appear unaffected for some time until reality hits. On a practical level, this means you should:

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- **Check in with bereaved staff regularly**, even if they say that they are fine – let them know you are there to listen and let them lead the conversation
- **Ask if they need time off**, but do not push it – if funerals and memorial services are deferred, staff may prefer to carry on with working for now and take time off later. In addition, grief itself may be delayed and it might take some time for reality to hit. Let them know that you'll be flexible about when they can take bereavement leave
- **Signpost to any support that is available to them** through your school's bereavement team, your local authority's or trust's HR department

Provide a virtual space for staff to come together in grief

Grief is communal, and sharing grief is a necessary part of recovery. Attendance at funerals is limited to immediate family right now, so rituals can take on even more significance when we cannot come together to mourn.

- **Hold a virtual memorial service**
- **Create a memorial page** – you can do this on your school website, or set up a page with e.g. Google Site or WordPress (make sure this is only accessible to your school community)

As grieving is a process rather than an event, ongoing support is vital.

And remember to take care of yourself

Supporting others through bereavement can take a toll on you emotionally. Even bereavement professionals have regular debriefs to help them talk through what they are experiencing and monitor their mental health. You are no different.

If you do not take the time to slow things down and process what has happened, you are not going to get the time later. The greatest responsibility you have as a leader is to stay well.

- **Set boundaries** – set working hours and stick to them. Let staff and parents know that you will not be available outside of those hours. Model for the staff what self-care looks like.
- **Delegate** – do not consider this as fobbing off your own work on someone else. Use this time to develop a staff member by entrusting them with greater responsibility
- **Ask for help** – do not suffer in silence. Talk to friends, family, call a helpline, or talk regularly with your chair of governors
- **Encourage staff to check in with each other** – it is not all down to you to monitor and support the staff. Supporting one another builds community, which in turn builds resilience. See report from the British Psychological Society about [teacher resilience during school closures](#)

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