

A GUIDE TO SUPPORTING GRIEVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the most difficult subjects to address in school. It is inevitable though, that at some point in every teacher's career, the school community will be affected by a death in some way or another.

This is most likely to be following the death of a student's family member, carer or friend. But, it might be the death of a student, the death of a staff member, or the death of a key member in the school community such as a governor or popular visitor to the school.

In the modern world, news travels fast to children and young people, often via social media. We know from our own work that tragic national events like the Grenfell Tower fire and the terror attacks in London and Manchester bring questions about death and dying to the fore. Children may look to their teachers and schools as well as their parents and communities to help them understand what they have seen or been told about even if it does not affect them directly.

This pack draws on many years' experience of practitioners at Winston's Wish working with schools and with school staff across the country. We know how important the support of teachers is to grieving children, and how much our teachers want to help. These materials are designed to give you confidence and plenty of ideas for how to deal with the subject in lessons, tutorials and assemblies, as well as on an individual basis.

In responding to a death and helping others it is important to acknowledge your own feelings and those of other staff members. As well as powerful feelings that relate to this death it may trigger memories and reactions from past losses.

You are never alone, our Helpline is only a call away and our highly trained Helpline practitioners talk to thousands of teachers every year who are supporting bereaved children and young people, or who are dealing with serious incidents in schools. You can call as many times as you need to. For more help, advice or ideas please ring the Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) on 08088 020 021 and speak to our experienced practitioners. You can also connect with us via our Live Chat service and our ASK email service (ask@winstonswish.org). We also offer a range of study days and bespoke training. Details on how to access this support is at: www.winstonswish.org.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Just do what you can when you can. Any attempt to offer your support or help will be appreciated by a grieving child or young person
- As you read this guidance it is important to remember that your own knowledge and instincts are key in how to put this into practice in your setting
- Focus your support around the real needs of the child and family. Put them in the driving seat, be guided by them, and make sure they feel as though the support they are getting feels right to them
- There is more than one way to help. Choose the things you feel most comfortable with and get help with the things you don't
- Talk about the person who died
- Accept that some things can't be made 'better' in a short space of time – be patient, be consistent, be available and be aware that children are likely to revisit their grief as they grow and develop
- Talk to children in words that they can understand and ask questions to check their understanding
- Give information a bit at a time if children are younger. Pieces of the 'jigsaw puzzle' can be put together over time to make a complete picture
- Encourage children to ask questions and keep trying to answer them – be honest if there is no answer or you just don't know. Always answer honestly and simply
- Be willing and open to making a referral to an outside agency or signpost a family to specialist support if that will help
- Look after yourself – talking about death and supporting distressed children can be very emotionally demanding. Always reach out to your school's support systems or to organisations who can provide you with support to process some of these feelings and experiences. Winston's Wish Helpline may be able to signpost you to such organisations in your area.

TALKING ABOUT DEATH AND DYING WITH STUDENTS IN SCHOOL

"My mum died and my life changed forever, it was the biggest thing that ever happened to me. My teacher never mentioned it."

Sometimes our natural reaction to death is not to talk about it. We assume that the bereaved person will not want to, that they will view us as nosey, and we fear that by mentioning it we will upset them.

But, as we often say, the worst thing that could happen...already has. You are unlikely to make it worse and, in fact, acknowledging and validating the experience that a child or young person is going through is likely to be helpful and positive to them.

Most bereaved children will at some point be very glad to have the chance to talk about what has happened, and will appreciate that a teacher cares enough to ask about them and their feelings. Although the teacher mentioned in the quote above had almost certainly acted with the best intentions, and had not wanted to upset their student, what the student perceived from their actions was that the teacher did not care. This only added to their sense of isolation and hurt.

Here are some of the most common pieces of advice we give to those people supporting a bereaved child or family:

Be honest

Death is not an easy subject for anyone. If you are upset too – do not be afraid to admit it. Model the fact that difficult feelings are ok, and totally normal, many children and young people tell us that they really appreciate and respect adults who are honest about their experiences and feelings.

Use clear language

Trying to avoid the death by using phrases such as "your loss" and "gone to a better place" can frustrate older children and confuse younger ones. A six-year-old who hears that her Dad has been lost may try to find him, because that is what you do when someone is lost.

Simply use language which is real and clear; "I was really sorry to hear that your Dad died last week, how are you feeling?"

Expect questions, but don't feel pressured to provide immediate answers

Death often throws up many questions for us all. Some of these may seem straightforward and obvious under the circumstances, such as 'How does smoking cause cancer?' to the more complex 'Why do some people die so young without warning?' If there are questions that you are unable to answer, feel able to say so, and promise to look into providing an answer at a later point.

Recognise that every death and every reaction to it is unique

The way in which a child reacts to a death is dependent on their relationship with the person who died, the time of death in that child's development, the nature of the death (was it expected after a long fight against an illness or was it sudden?), the child's understanding of death, their support network and many other factors.

Don't assume anything

Ask the student how they feel, rather than projecting feelings that you might expect them to have. Be mindful that other children may be affected by a death, for instance, because of a close friendship, because this is their first encounter with death, or because they have experienced other bereavements.

Allow time and space for students to digest the news, find out the facts and discover exactly how they feel

For many, this will be their first experience of someone they know dying and it will have a huge impact on them.

Be prepared for children to move in and out of grief

Children may be distraught one moment and then the next, need to ask what is for lunch, or express annoyance that it is raining outside. Although this may catch us off guard, this is completely normal, so try not to worry about it or second guess them on it. It is helpful to be accepting and encouraging of the dual, and apparently opposed needs, that most children have. On the one hand they need to be able to engage in 'normal' activities and be treated the same as everyone else, on the other they need to know their grief is acknowledged and accepted and allowance is made for things that may have changed or be difficult for them. Even when children appear to be getting on with things as they did before and outwardly appear to be unaffected, this does not mean they don't need access to ongoing support. In particular, it is important to acknowledge their loss, for instance at anniversaries or other significant dates, and let them know that the door is always open for them to talk about their loss and how it affects them.

Act early to prevent rumours from spreading, or gossip being spread around the school

Our response to death is often something that we mask when in public. Some people mask it with humour. Among children this humour can be less tempered by social graces and so can be very hurtful, as can rumours about a death or an individual. Try to prevent these at all times, but remember that unkind words are sometimes born out of fear. This does not, and should not excuse them, but may help us deal better with the students concerned.

Try to normalise the feelings that a bereaved young person shares with you

They are probably very worried that they are the only person who has ever felt this way. Assure them that feelings of anger, fatigue, fear, worry, stress, sadness, exhaustion, guilt, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, lack of focus etc. are all a normal reaction to grief.

HOW AGE AND STAGE CAN AFFECT UNDERSTANDING AND GRIEF

Children's experience of a death can differ from adults'. The following provides a guide to a developmental perspective of how a child may understand bereavement. For a child with SEND, his or her functional level of understanding (rather than actual chronological age) will be the biggest factor in how the child reacts to a death and what he or she will be able to understand. The reactions and issues described at each stage often apply equally to children at other stages of development too.

Children under 3 years old

Very young children and babies are not able to understand death but experience the loss as a separation from someone they have an attachment to. Children at this age have little language to express their loss and will react to it by crying inconsolably or become withdrawn. They will be affected by the emotional state of their care givers. They may repeatedly search for the deceased person or have an unspoken expectation that they will 'return'. They also benefit from the same type of consistent and repeated explanations as detailed below for ages 3 to 5 and the maintenance of routine.

Early Years Education – aged 3 to 5 – Preschool and Reception

When a child this young experiences the death of someone important, it is important they are helped to know about the person as an integral part of their history. Young children often ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to understand their loss. They are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that our explanations aren't good enough. Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss.

At this age, they may not understand that death is permanent or that it happens to every living thing. A 4-year-old may be able to tell others confidently that 'my daddy's dead' and may even be able to explain how 'he was hit by a car and he died'. However, the next sentence may be: 'I hope he'll be back before my birthday' or 'He's picking me up tonight'. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat breathe and keep warm. It is important to give them simple, factual information and tell them that once someone has died, their body stops working so they don't feel pain anymore and they don't feel hot or cold and they don't need to eat or drink anything.

Children's thoughts are concrete and characterised by "magical thinking". They may struggle to understand abstract concepts (such as heaven) or roundabout ways of explaining death (e.g. 'gone to sleep'). Children may believe it was something they said or did that caused the death or they may believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the person back. They need to be reassured that the death was not their fault and gently reminded that the person will not come back. By using concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and giving specific explanations about why the person died can help.

It is important to maintain a routine as normal as possible for the child. It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to younger behaviours such as separation anxiety, incontinence, and use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Being tolerant and managing the separation will be helpful for the child and the family. In time, it is most likely these earlier behaviour patterns will disappear once 'new normal' family routines are established.

Key Stage 1 – Ages 5 to 7 – Years 1 and 2

Children of this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent; however, some confusion may still stand. When first told of the death, younger children may be mainly concerned with the 'when' and 'where' of the death. They may express concerns about their own future such as: 'What will happen to me? Who will meet me after school? Will I still go to Cubs?' Giving reassurance about everyday activities and arrangements continuing as normal, or clear explanations about alternative arrangements, will be helpful for the child.

Children may become clingy or more reluctant to see parents and carers leave. There may be a need to stick close to their parent to protect them from the mysterious occurrence that made their dad disappear or at least to be with them if it happens again. Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal, but it is important that routines are maintained while gently acknowledging when someone important dies we feel things like sadness and worry in our bodies too.

They can also feel that in some way they were responsible for the death, e.g. 'I was angry with him and shouted at him when he left for work because he wouldn't fix my bike. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's my fault.' It can be worth saying something like: 'You do know, don't you, that nothing you said or did made this happen?'

Key Stage 2 – Ages 7 to 11 – Years 3, 4, 5 and 6

As children begin to understand more about death and dying, a death in the family may make them anxious about the health and safety of surviving members of the family. They may feel very responsible for their parent(s) and younger siblings and feel the need to keep a close eye on their safety.

Children this age can find it difficult to talk about their bereavement and express their feelings behaviourally, such as withdrawing from others or showing increased aggression. They may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers, particularly as the death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else. It is important to avoid clichés like "You're being so brave" as children can interpret this as they should not share their feelings. They may need a safe space or quiet area away from peers to calm down or express their emotions with an adult.

Children of this age also show curiosity about issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear, factual explanations. Children can also think of death as something spooky, like a zombie, or a spirit that comes to get you. Normalising feelings, talking about or drawing specific worries and sharing bad dreams can be reassuring, giving children skills and confidence to feel more in charge of them.

By the age of 10, children will usually have all of the bits of the jigsaw puzzle of understanding. They will even understand that they are able to cause their own death. They will appreciate clear and detailed information – beyond 'when', 'where' and 'how' the death happened, they will be interested in 'why'.

Key Stage 3 – Ages 11 to 14 – Years 7, 8, and 9

In this age range young people are much more aware of the finality of death and the impact the death has on them. They are able to understand death as both concrete and abstract. They begin to move away from dependence on the family and they start to form important relationships with other young people, however the death of someone important can easily destabilise them, leaving them feeling unsafe and more dependent on the family. Some older children and teenagers may feel internal conflict as a result of feeling a pull towards being with their peers at the same time as their own need or an expectation that they spend time with their family.

Their ability to manage their feelings may be disrupted and lead to mood swings or more definite up's and down's in their feelings. Big emotional releases (such as anger or distress) are not uncommon but can be scary for children at this stage. They will benefit from your willingness to listen and your assurances that the feelings are normal. It is important to find ways to build their self-esteem.

Young people at this age are beginning to think of the longer term consequences of the loss of the relationship. They are aware of the loss they feel in the present, but also of the losses they will experience in the coming months and years when they encounter certain important milestones, or occasions and realise that they won't be able to share these with the person who has died. Talking through these future events and exploring ways of including the person can be helpful.

Key Stage 4 and Sixth Form – Ages 14 to 18 – Years 10, 11, 12 and 13

Friends and peers are increasingly important as young people develop their ideas of who they are and what is important to them. They want to be accepted by other important people in their lives. Their bodies are changing; they are aware of all sorts of possibilities for themselves and their future. Young people may struggle to make longer term plans as the death of someone important causes them to reflect on "the meaning of life" and ponder on the question "what's the point?" Or you may find that they are so busy with different activities they don't stop to reflect. This can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they are worried about losing control of their emotions.

It is quite common for risk-taking behaviour to increase during adolescence as young people test the boundaries. Although an adolescent's thought process is most like an adult's, they are still going through important emotional development at this age and are not ready to manage adult responsibilities even if at times they think they are adult. They need to be reassured of your care and support and to know that the limits you set are still enforced.

As always, if you have any concerns about a young person's safety it is vital you take a pro-active approach and apply your safeguarding policies and procedures.

WHAT GRIEVING CHILDREN FEEL AND HOW THEY MIGHT BEHAVE IN SCHOOL

Although research suggests that the death of a parent is one of the hardest losses a child has to face, every bereavement comes with its own difficult factors. For example, the death of an older sibling will mean the child processing how it feels to reach and pass their sibling's age.

The death of someone important may cause a child or young person to feel some or all of the following:

- **Deep sadness, that may or may not be expressed in conventional ways such as crying**
- **A hollow, achy pain inside that is hard to put into words and may be described as hunger or boredom or fear**
- **A sense of numbness which makes it hard for them to describe or connect to any feelings**
- **Loneliness and a sense of having been abandoned**
- **Anxiety about the safety and well-being of the rest of the family, especially parent/s**
- **That they may have to become more responsible for instance, to be the 'man of the house' or to mother younger siblings or generally to be 'no trouble and be very good'**
- **Hopeless - that there's no point in anything anymore, including school work**
- **Anger and even rage at what has happened**
- **Blame, or guilt, or shame, for things said or unsaid, done or undone**
- **Relief – if the family situation, dynamics, illness, addiction, or behaviour had been difficult, often accompanied by guilt**
- **Physical symptoms (for example, headaches, stomach aches or perhaps symptoms which reflect their worries they have the same illness)**
- **Sadness with parents' emotional exhaustion and absorption in their own grief – "Mummy doesn't play anymore"**

Challenging behaviours

Following the death of someone close to them, a student's behaviour may well be intermittently affected by their grief. They can sometimes sense a lack of control over their emotions, and may react in some situations in a way that you might not expect. If a bereaved student displays disruptive behaviour it is right that this is sensitively addressed and explored taking into account their loss.

It is important to be aware of anniversaries and days which might make this time more difficult for the student. For example, it would not be appropriate to give a detention for missing deadlines in the week of the funeral, but dangerous and aggressive behaviour would need to be addressed as per your school policy. It is important to maintain consistent boundaries and at the same time recognise that very powerful difficult feelings may underlie behaviour. Avoid phrases such as "What would your Dad say? Is this the way in which he would want you to behave?" as these add unnecessary pressure and could add to false guilt and shame.

Different causes of death

No means or cause of death is better or worse than another for a grieving child. There is no hierarchy of death - they are all overwhelming. However, young people's responses to the death of someone important will vary according to:

- **Their age**
- **Their relationship with the person**
- **Previous experience of death or trauma within the family**
- **Their own resilience and the support and care they receive**
- **The cause and nature of the death (for example, whether sudden or expected, whether by suicide or violence)**

If a death is expected (for example, through cancer or other illness), the family may have had time to prepare for the loss, to begin to adjust to the future without the person, to make sure that photographs have been taken, letters to open in the future have been written, goodbyes said. It is very likely that the family will have received help – and will continue to receive help – from a hospice-based service or other support service (such as Macmillan nurses). The family may have experienced a prolonged period of stress and anxiety where 'normal' day to day activities were occupied with caring for the person who was dying. It can be hard to adjust this balance even after someone has died as this has been a way of coping for so long. Even if a long-term illness has meant that the death was expected, no amount of preparation can make someone numb to the experience, nor should it.

If a death is sudden (for example, through a heart attack or road accident) there is no chance for goodbyes and no chance for preparations or adjustment. The last conversations linger in the memory.

If a death is through suicide, there are particular difficulties for the families left behind. It has been estimated that for every suicide, six people will experience intense grief – and many more will be deeply affected. Those bereaved through suicide face especially intense feelings and thoughts, ask themselves more agonising questions and face more public scrutiny.

For those bereaved through homicide, it is a double blow to families – not only do they have to cope with a sudden, unexpected death, they also have to deal with the way their relative has died. A family may feel very alone in their grief but, sadly, more people are bereaved through murder or manslaughter than most of us realise. These are ordinary children in extraordinary circumstances. For both children and adults, it can take a long time to dare to trust others again.

For more information about supporting a child bereaved in any circumstance, please call our Helpline and speak with one of our practitioners who will be able to advise.

HOW TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AFTER A DEATH IN THE FAMILY OR IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Breaking the news after a death in the school community

Telling students when a death has occurred in the school community needs time and planning amongst teaching staff. An assembly can be used for breaking the news about the death of a student or a member of staff. The benefit is that the entire school receives the same news, at the same time, which helps prevent speculation and rumours around the school. If you decide to tell the whole school at once it is essential that you have planned for a space to provide more information and support for students following the assembly and that they do not go straight back to normal lessons. An alternative way is to plan for teachers to tell students in individual classes at the same time (i.e. first thing in the morning) so that every class hears the news simultaneously. This allows a safe, contained space for students' reactions to be supported and for them to express any thoughts and feelings about the news they have just received. Having a practical activity such as writing cards can help the transition into break time.

Using simple, honest age-appropriate language, explain that the person has died. Talk a little about how they died, whether by an accident (i.e. "he was knocked down by a car and taken to hospital, but sadly he was too badly hurt and he died") or through an illness (i.e. "Mr Smith was very ill on Saturday – his heart stopped working properly. We need our hearts to make the blood go around our bodies. Although the doctors tried very hard to make Mr Smith's heart work again, it didn't work and Mr Smith died because his heart stopped working. This is called a 'heart attack' or a 'cardiac arrest'").

Talk about the feelings the students might have and normalise these "some of you may be very shocked at this news, some of you might feel very sad or worried, some of you might not feel anything at all – it's ok to have any of these feelings. If you want to talk about how you feel, or cry, or laugh about your memories of him, then that is ok too and we will be here for you. We will try and answer any questions that you might have".

HELPING A STUDENT RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Following any significant bereavement within the family, the needs of individual students will be carefully considered by teaching staff. These hints, tips, and ideas will help you to engage with an individual student in such an instance. Remember, they may want to do all, some, or none of these. They may want to talk straight away, or not for several months. Knowing that you are available, honest, understanding and trustworthy will be a great comfort to the student concerned.

What should I expect?

Often a student may be off school for a few days after the death. Immediately after the death the prospect of them ever coming back to school again can seem impossible for them to comprehend. Or, it may be the very thing that they want so that they can "experience normality" again and "take their mind off things". It is impossible to know quite how a student of yours may react. A simple phone call home can be a great way of determining this and also letting the family know that you care. No student has ever failed to be impressed by a teacher who went out of their way to make a tough phone call. A visit to the family home can also be especially helpful, and help you to get some idea of the family's frame of mind.

How should I tell the class?

If possible, liaise with the student about their return. Ideally you will consult with them as to how other friends and class mates are told about what has happened. They may like to get straight back into things and be treated almost as if nothing has happened. The chances are that they will have been surrounded by grieving family members for days and all they want is a break from it. Equally they may want to answer questions from their classmates – this can help some children cope. Again, make sure the decision is theirs and that you are available to support them the whole time.

What can I do to make their return to school as easy as possible?

Whilst the student is off school, you may like to involve them in how you tell the rest of the class about what has happened. It is important that they feel they have a say in this, but it is worth gently challenging them if they suggest that no-one is told. This can be done by pointing out that others may be unknowingly insensitive, for instance, maybe asking if they have been skiving whilst off school. If there is time get the class to write letters or cards to them, assuring them of how sorry they are to hear the news, but also how much they are looking forward to them coming back. This will be a great parcel for you to deliver to the family home, and will make the return to school much easier.

Keep the student informed about what has been going on in their absence. It may be helpful to think through with them about how they can answer difficult questions others might ask them, or what to say if they don't want to talk about things at any time, for example, 'I feel really sad he died, and I don't feel ready to talk about it at the moment'.

Organise their first day back to be not quite normal. Get them to come in at break time, this way they can talk to who they want to rather than be subjected to all kinds of questioning before school. Maybe have some of their best friends meet them and chat together in the staffroom for a bit – make them feel special.

Will their behaviour have changed?

Maybe. This won't be a permanent thing, but immediately after the death they may not seem their 'normal' self. They may:

- **Have less concentration**
- **Be a lot more tired and therefore irritable**
- **Have a heightened sensitivity to comments and remarks**
- **Be so wrapped up in their own feelings that they fail to take the feelings of others into account, which can result in arguments and fights**
- **Could have a lot of un-vented anger and frustration about the death**

It is important that you recognise that some, or all these things may happen, and that you are ready to be patient and understanding. It is also important though that normal rules and expectations of behaviour are maintained. Boundaries and a routine actually helps, and a lack of it may cause more problems within the class and amongst peers.

One resource we recommend is 'I Can...You Can' a unique set of postcards published by the Childhood Bereavement Network that helps a child or young person express what help they might need to the key people in their lives. It also helps remind them of some of their own coping strategies – ncb.org.uk/product/214

GIVING ADVICE

You may find that a pupil and/or family members look to you for advice on a range of death related topics. For instance, about seeing the body or attending the funeral. Although it's the decision of the family, there has been research that found that children value and appreciate being involved in important rituals. It is vital that they are prepared and informed and their needs thought through in advance. You may feel confident to advise in these areas and/or may like to suggest that parents/carers call our Helpline.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND GRIEF

"It's not remembering Mum that hurts; it's forgetting that makes me feel like I'm letting her down"

A death within the school community can have a huge effect on the school as a whole. Speaking with a single child about the death of a parent or sibling needs to be discreet and sensitive to their individual needs, dealing with a death which affects many students has to be far more 'managed' by the school.

The school curriculum provides opportunities for students and their teachers to explore experiences and feelings associated with bereavement. Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) gives students and teachers a forum for discussing relationships, feelings and emotions, and for thinking about how to manage these in relation to family events.

The curriculum is rich in areas in which issues of life and death are regularly covered, including in English Literature, the Sciences, Religious Studies and History.

Thoughtful planning using some of the information in this guide means that curriculum coverage can be sensitively developed and delivered, and that there is meaningful and relevant learning that follows.

Before delivering any lessons or sessions that cover topics of death or bereavement, teachers should take great care to think through how it may affect bereaved children they are teaching. Families and children should be consulted over whether it is appropriate for them to attend lessons, or whether additional support may be needed. It is important that lessons take account of different religious and cultural beliefs. In some cases, it may work well to involve a bereaved pupil in planning a lesson. It will nearly always be helpful for them to at least know summary details of what is to be covered.

The following ideas provide examples of some activities that may help to -

- **support a bereaved child or young person and their family**
- **preserve a continuing link with the person who has died**
- **involve children and young people in the mourning process**
- **help children and young people take steps along their unique bereavement journeys**

Group memory work ideas

The following ideas are specifically designed to be used when a whole school is affected by a death of a student, a staff member or other significant adult. They can be used by teaching staff to help students explore the issue of death and their reactions to it further. Students will benefit greatly from being able to take part in these activities, place their feelings in context and realise that their feelings, although maybe alien to them, are totally normal. They are intended to show that speaking about death can be done in a positive way, and students can be helped to understand what is going on in an open, safe and nurturing environment. This is always better than children suppressing and hiding these feelings and thoughts. The lesson ideas are designed so that a lesson can easily be built from them, and the ideas adapted to best suit your needs.

Memory stones

The concept of memory stones is a very simple one, yet it is a great tool to help students to speak honestly about their feelings and their memories. It can be used in individual sessions or as a group activity. Depending on the size of the group and their closeness to the person who has died, it may be good to let each child have a set of the three stones. This will help them to remember the point and manage their feelings.

First, hold a jagged, rocky pebble up high. Either you or some students should then describe it. It is rough, and has sharp bits. Ask a student to hold it tightly and squeeze it in the palm of their hands – how does it feel? Not nice, it may even hurt a little. Use this pebble to explain that there may be some difficult memories or feelings that some students have right now. For instance, they may be struggling with the way in which the person died, or they may be feeling guilty that they had a difficult relationship with the person or wish that they had said or done something differently the last time they saw them.

Next, hold a normal rounded pebble. Again, you may want to ask students to describe it. You are looking to find words such as "normal" "smooth" "ordinary". State that this stone signifies the ordinary, everyday memories that students may have of the person who died; the fact that they ate prawn cocktail crisps or liked English lessons.

Finally, display a shiny, precious gemstone. The characteristics of this stone are that it is sparkling and precious, it looks great. Use this to explain that we will have some great memories of the person who died. It may be a best holiday or a special trip to the theatre, or an evening spent watching a film curled up together on the sofa or a fun activity enjoyed by the whole class.

All three stones are important and the feelings and memories described by them are all true. The stones can all be held together in one hand, and the memories can all be held in our minds together.

Holding an assembly to say goodbye

After a death, we can often be left with a strong urge to 'do something' which marks the significance of the death and which states its importance to us. For family members this is usually the funeral or a ceremony of some other sort. It is not always either appropriate or possible for school children to attend these occasions though, so facilitating something within the school context can feel important.

Holding a special assembly or remembrance service can be useful as it brings the school together to acknowledge what has happened and as a community, the school can remember the person who has died. Death is so often difficult to talk about – an assembly helps to normalise and share grief, to let students know it is ok to be sad and want to talk and equally it is ok to not feel affected.

The assembly can be for anyone who wishes to be there – staff, students and any family members who feel able to attend. In a large school it may be more appropriate to hold a year group assembly if space does not allow a whole school assembly. Similarly, anyone who wishes to could be involved with planning the assembly, with adult support depending on the child's age and understanding. This can help students to feel involved and give them a sense of doing something positive.

At the start of the assembly, give clear information as to the purpose and length of the assembly by a brief, factual reminder of the person who died and the circumstances. During the assembly, the following provide a few ideas that are easy to do, yet significant.

- **Light a memory candle and reflect for a minute, or,**
- **Listen to some music which was significant to the person who has died**
- **Create a memory box or book. Invite students to write a memory in the book about the person who has died, or place an object that means something to them and that has a story attached to it in the memory box. (Children make mistakes, which especially in sensitive circumstances can upset them. You may want to get them to write on cards which are then stuck into the book, rather than directly into the book itself)**
- **Invite students or staff to take turns recounting stories or memories. Students may wish to write poems, songs or letters about the person who died**
- **Show pictures and talk about memories associated with them**

Ending the assembly requires careful planning as it needs to leave everyone with a sense of looking forward. Some suggestions include:

- **Asking students to bring a farewell message to the person who has died to put into a special box as they leave. This can help students to personalise a goodbye**
- **Giving a memory box or memory book to the family**
- **Blowing out the remembrance candle**
- **Write messages on card (this can be folded over and taped if it is a private message) and attach to a colourful piece of string or wool that is suspended around a tree or other beautiful object**
- **Plant a memorial tree or bulbs to create a special memory garden**
- **Reflective but uplifting music helps to create the right atmosphere**

Arranging the assembly before a break is helpful to give students and staff time to reflect before carrying on with the normal school day. Leaving a memorial assembly for the end of lessons can be hard, as the build up through the day can be difficult and students need time to compose themselves before going home. Be prepared for different responses: some students may be deeply affected, others not at all, or react with out-of-character behaviour. Talk about where to go for support if required. Give parents information, such as the Winston's Wish helpline number, for support outside school.

Working individually with a bereaved student

Making a memory box

Bereaved children may benefit from collecting into a special box items that remind them of the person who has died and times shared with them. Examples could be: cards received, perfume or aftershave, shells from a beach holiday, tickets from an outing, an item of clothing or jewellery, flowers from the funeral, photographs, etc. Every time the child turns over the items in the box, they are turning over the memories of the person in their mind and thus keeping fresh their memories. You can find specially designed memory boxes and information sheets in the Winston's Wish online shop.

Making a memory book

This is a paper-based version of a memory box. A scrapbook can contain pictures, drawings, tickets, postcards, letters, and certificates – all important keepsakes connected with the person who has died.

Family record

A family record can help a child or young person gain a sense of where they and the person who has died fits into the family. A family tree can be put together. Family photographs, documents, certificates and mementoes can be included. It can be particularly powerful to include stories about the person's life, which can be contributed by family members and friends; this is often a welcome way for them to be involved. For example, what was the funniest thing the person ever did? What was their best subject at school? What was the bravest thing they ever did? If you are going to include videos or audio recordings of the person who has died – please consider making a copy – just to be on the safe side.

Telling the story

It is important that children and young people gain a clear understanding of what happened to the person who died. Listening to them tell what happened gives a chance gently to correct any misunderstandings, to provide additional information and to answer any questions. Younger children may appreciate using dolls, model figures or puppets to tell the story. Older children may prefer to use paper and pens. It can help them tell what happened if they break the story into five or so pieces: -

- **What was life like before they died? (Some idea of the family before the death)**
- **What happened just before they died? (Earlier in the day, the day before...)**
- **How did they die? What happened?**
- **What happened immediately afterwards?**
- **What is life like now?**

Ideas for supporting a student within lessons

There may be days when pupils are finding it hard to think about anything other than the person who has died, and they have no space in their minds to focus on school work. On these days, pupils may complete less work, and teachers may need to reduce their curriculum demands accordingly.

The following ideas will give the pupil a way of communicating that they are having a difficult day.

Feeling faces

For younger bereaved students it can be helpful to have a sheet of paper/paper plate with two drawings of faces on either side, one happy, one sad. The student shows the side that reflects how they are feeling on a particular day. This gives the teacher an idea of how they are and therefore what approach to use. Older students may wish to use the time out cards (see below).

Time out cards

This allows the student permission to leave class for a short time when they begin to feel out of control or just to get some "personal space" when upset. They carry a card in their pocket and the student may leave the room without having to ask. It is important to let staff know about the procedure to avoid embarrassing scenes for either the student or the teacher. The student must know of a designated place and person to go to in these times, as they will not be allowed to wander the school.

Hand in my pocket

Holding on to something tangible can be a real comfort for bereaved children and young people. Carrying something small in their pocket is a discrete way to feel close to someone important – either someone who has died, or someone from home to help manage separation anxiety. This could be a soft piece of fabric, a small teddy or key ring, a message, or a pebble or stone.

The post box

A way to communicate with students who find it difficult to verbalise feelings can be through writing or drawing. The teacher has a post box where students can leave messages, questions, feelings, worries and the teacher can either respond by a letter or spend some one-to-one time with the child.

WE ARE HERE TO HELP

If you require assistance with any aspect of this guide or would like more information about supporting bereaved children and young people please contact us on our Freephone National Helpline during office hours:

08088 020 021 or email us at **ask@winstonswish.org**

Take a look at our website: **www.winstonswish.org** to contact us by Live Chat and for more information about our resources and guidance.

A range of specialist publications are available to buy through the Winston's Wish website **shop.winstonswish.org**

If you require information about our twilight training sessions, study days and bespoke training please take a look at the website, contact us by phone on **01242 515157** or email **training@winstonswish.org**