

COVID-19 Crisis Support Bereavement awareness guidance for schools

INTRODUCTION

We are all facing major changes as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Families, communities, schools and other workplaces are all adapting to limits on how we live our lives, to new ways of interacting, and to a constantly shifting world.

Raised levels of anxiety, the impact of isolation and social distancing, and the experience of hearing frightening or traumatic stories on the news or through social media, together present a challenge to the resilience of schools, leading to a reduced capacity to cope with adversity.

With the virus itself increasing the likelihood of bereavements within the school community, it is more vital than ever that we take a proactive approach, planning in advance how support will be made available to cope with what would otherwise be overwhelming events. However, we also know that such challenges often bring out the best in people:

Generally people deal with adversity in a sensible way. People don't usually panic. People cope. People are tougher than we sometimes give them credit for. People show great courage, resourcefulness, adaptability, resiliency, hopefulness and humanitarianism (Wessely, 2005)

CRISIS SUPPORT

The Tower Hamlets Crisis Support Service provided by the EPS continues to run remotely, during the lockdown period and beyond, aiming to support and develop the existing capacity of schools to meet the needs of their communities in this unique time. Crisis support from the EPS focuses on providing emotional containment, helping the school community make sense of what is happening, through developing a sense of:

- **Safety and calm** – re-establish familiar routines, counter scaremongering, normalise emotional reactions.
- **Self and community efficacy** – help children and young people regain a sense of control in their lives.
- **Connectedness** – enhance social support through existing groups and group events.
- **Hope** – encourage a focus on the future and on positive goals.

With time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional counselling, research tells us that help and support is best given by trusted, familiar adults as and when it is needed.

That said, school staff may feel unprepared for certain roles or tasks they may face during a pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that we are not asking staff to act as untrained grief counsellors, rather that the best care for a bereaved child comes through their everyday nurturing relationships with the adults who know them best.

An EP providing Crisis Support, during lockdown and beyond, will therefore work with senior staff to develop a response based on the needs of the organisation. This typically involves one or more of the four areas below:

- **Planning** – helping senior staff to clarify the facts of the situation, and plan how to maintain connectedness, communicate with the school community, mobilise the school’s resources and support the staff.
- **Information & advice** – providing information and advice to management and staff to reduce anxiety and help individuals come to terms with what is happening.
- **Support** – direct support to school staff who are in contact with bereaved families and/or working with bereaved children and young children, for example through remote consultation or debriefing.
- **Screening** – working with welfare or SEND staff to identify children and families who are most in need of support, reviewing their needs and supporting onward referral for specialist grief counselling where necessary.

CHILDREN’S GRIEF REACTIONS

Children and young people grieve just as much as adults but they may show it in different ways. They often have a limited ability to verbalise their feelings and thoughts, and so show their emotions through behaviours rather than words. Children learn how to react to grief from the responses of the people around them, giving adults a vital role in providing children with the support they need.

Reactions will vary greatly as children absorb and process information in different ways at different ages. The following reactions are common, and are likely to settle down over time with reassurance, acknowledging both what has happened and their feelings, giving them clear and age-appropriate information, and maintaining a sense of routine:

- Curiosity, asking questions, exploring the nature of death.
- Strong feelings of guilt as well as feelings of loss.
- Anxiety or insecurity, with small-sounding issues becoming overwhelming.
- Moving on quickly to apparently normal behaviour, then returning to their grief later on.
- Dwelling on what they might have done differently, to protect, or to stay in touch with, the person who has died.
- Anger and frustration, perhaps directed at themselves or outwardly at the world.

- Picking up on tension, distress or anxiety in adults, and mirroring this in their own behaviour.
- A disturbed sleep pattern, changes in appetite or energy level.
- Behaving and/or seeking comfort like a much younger child.

It is also important to remember that children and young people who have already been bereaved are likely to show a stronger reaction to frightening events in the media, and to news of the death of people they know less well.

A more detailed picture of how grief reactions vary across the age range can be found in Appendix 1.

GRIEVING AND ISOLATION

The experience of social isolation can make feelings of loneliness and sadness more intense and harder to bear. With people unable to travel to visit family members who have fallen ill, the lack of opportunity to connect with loved ones pre-bereavement, perhaps to say goodbye in person, can complicate and deepen the emotions of grief.

Lockdown also presents practical challenges to the collective rituals of death, including funerals, religious ceremonies and informal social support. While people across the country are already showing impressive initiative and creativity, coming up with ways to engage in collective rituals remotely, there are a number of things which remain the same when supporting bereaved children.

Firstly, when sharing bad news with children and young people, it is important to consider the following steps:

- **EXPLAIN** what has happened at an appropriate level, being clear about what is known and what is not yet known.
- **ANSWER QUESTIONS** honestly and clearly, without hiding the facts or using euphemisms.
- **LISTEN** to what children and young people say they need.
- **ACCEPT** children and young people's reactions and allow them to respond in their own way.
- **REASSURE** children and young people that their reaction is normal.
- **RETURN** to normal activities and routines, with additional support offered for those who may need it.

Secondly, activities such as looking at photos, sharing personal memories of the person who has died, making a memory book or display, writing letters or messages to the person who has died, listening to stories about loss, and watching films or programmes where characters cope with bereavement, can all help children process and cope with loss.

In the event of a bereavement during school closure, it will be important to consider how to meet the needs of the community remotely, while respecting the wishes of the family of the person who has died. Options could include:

- Recording a video message to go on the school's web page.
- Setting up a virtual book of condolences on the school website so that school community members can leave messages and have the opportunity to share thoughts, wishes, or prayers.
- Providing a carefully moderated virtual space, such as a group video chat, for children to seek contact with others, share memories or reflect together.

The bereavement charity Winston's Wish have produced helpful practical guidance for supporting children and young people bereaved by COVID-19:

[How schools can support children and young people](#)
[How to tell a child or young person that someone has died from coronavirus](#)
[How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible](#)

Children with special educational needs may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings. Carol Gray has made a number of relevant Social Stories available for free from her website:

[Social Stories website](#)

In time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover through the support of family, friends and colleagues. Grief is a normal process and there is no one correct way to experience it. Only when feelings remain overwhelming after two or three months have passed does specialist bereavement counselling become worth considering.

SUPPORTING STAFF DURING LOCKDOWN

When supporting children through bereavement or trauma, school staff often ask themselves, "Am I doing enough?", or, "Am I doing the right things?" To help with this difficult feeling, EPs work with the head and senior team of a school to plan how they will support their staff, and how the staff will support the children and young people.

We call this model "concentric circles of support", enabling senior staff to carry out their role of providing and maintaining a supportive environment for staff, so they in turn can sustain their capacity to help children, young people and families.

Just like the children they are supporting, staff need reassurance that their response is normal, and that it is ok for them to speak about painful issues. Those staff in direct contact with bereaved families may need support to process their own feelings through debrief or consultation with an EP.

Staff also benefit from having clear guidance on how to approach difficult conversations with children or families. EPs can help schools develop a protocol which staff can use in such situations. **A suggested set of steps to follow in the event of a bereavement in the school community are set out in Appendix 2.**

As the leader and figurehead of the school, headteachers have a particularly challenging role, especially when school leaders may be experiencing their own grief from the loss of colleagues, family or friends. EPs can provide debriefing, consultation and emotional support to ensure heads are able to confidently carry out this role.

While there are many clichés around self-care, it remains an important task for school leaders responsible for the wellbeing of others. You can make this easier by:

- **Looking after yourself**, getting rest and exercise where possible.
- **Keeping in contact with others**, especially friends and family outside work.
- **Not feeling guilty if you are struggling**, and reaching out to others who might be finding it difficult too, as you may be able to help each other.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Quick and effective communication is essential in response to a critical incident. It helps to calm the situation and acts to minimise the spread of unhelpful rumours.

1. Find out as much as you can. What are the facts? Who was involved? When did it happen? How did events proceed? What is not yet known?
2. Share information with your senior team. Establish roles and responsibilities.
3. Contact support organisations. Inform your Chair of Governors. Contact the LA, EPS and Social Care for support to develop your plans beyond the first day.
4. Plan how you will communicate with your staff team. Consider who will need additional support.
5. Plan what the children/young people will be told. When? By who? Write a script if a large number of staff will be involved.
6. Plan how you will communicate with parents. The quicker this happens, the more you will be seen to be on top of the incident and the more control you will have over the narrative that develops.

CONTACT US

For further information, or to request support, please contact the Educational Psychology Service using the details below. An EP will be in touch within 24 hours to discuss how best to support you.

Email: admin.eps@towerhamlets.gov.uk

Telephone: **020 7364 4323**

Andrew Sutcliffe – Senior Educational Psychologist

Julie Burns – Senior Educational Psychologist

Daniel Tunbridge – Principal Educational Psychologist

LINKS AND RESOURCES

Some of the most useful organisations are set out in the list below. A more complete list, including books for children and teachers can be found in Appendix 3 and 4.

Education Support <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/>
Support for school staff mental health and wellbeing. Helpline: 08000 562 561

Child Bereavement UK <https://childbereavementuk.org/>
Support for families when a child dies.

Winston's Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/>
Support for children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling.

CRUSE <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>
Support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

Hope Again www.hopeagain.org.uk/
Cruse website for young people.
Freephone helpline 0808 808 1677
Direct, private email support for young people: hopeagain@cruse.org.uk

Young Minds <https://youngminds.org.uk/>
Videos and resources for and by young people to support coping with bereavement.

Muslim Bereavement Support Service <http://mbss.org.uk/>
East London based support for bereaved Muslim families