

AURORA ACADEMIES TRUST

Policy Title:	Bereavement in Children Policy
Policy Reference:	AAT BinC - Exp May 2018
Function:	<u>For Information and Guidance</u> /Statutory
Audience:	Prospective Parents, Trustees, Governors, Executive Headteachers, Head, Teachers, Support Staff, as necessary
Ownership/ Implementation:	The Trustees/LAB Governing Body (as required) have overall responsibility for ensuring that this policy is implemented
Version:	001
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Next Date for Review:	February 2018



‘Grief is an emotion that draws us toward something that is missing – it is the gap between the world that we anticipated and the world that we have.’

This trust recognises the importance of having staff trained in recognising children suffering trauma through bereavement. As such we, the trust, will train our staff in dealing with these issues.

Things to consider:

- Children find it hard to distinguish between sick (minor) and sick (life threatening).
- What is the significance of the loss to the child?
- When talking about the death of someone, use the term ‘dead’.
- Ensure that children are aware that dead means that person does not need food, dressing etc. and cannot be hurt anymore.
- Children cannot sustain grief – there may be quick mood changes.
- Children aged 3-5 years will need things repeating for several weeks, e.g. they may ask where the dead person is several times.
- Children (and adults) regress under stress.
- The child may have ‘magical thinking’ such as ‘If only I had....’
- Children often don’t see their loss as happening for others, e.g. other children in the class may have lost parents but they don’t see that and feel it is only happening to them.
- More often than not it is ‘good’ for a child to attend the funeral.
- Try to ‘normalise it’.

Facts:

- Boys whose father commits suicide are 50% more likely to commit suicide themselves.
- After the death of a loved one the child’s work could be affected for up to three years.

‘Most children do not need hours of therapy – simply moments of real understanding’.

Ideas for Circle Time

(These could be used if a child/children in the class is/are struggling with their feelings after a death. These ideas should be discussed with the parent beforehand. These could be used with the whole class or just the individual child.)

- Draw around a child on big paper e.g. wallpaper.
- Have a pile of ‘feelings’ that the children can pick up to describe how they feel e.g. alone, angry, happy, excited, etc. Make sure each one is a different colour.



- Ask the children to place the feelings on the body where they feel that feeling e.g. 'I feel excited in my tummy because it feels like I have butterflies' or 'I feel angry in my throat because it aches'.
- Don't expect younger children to give the 'because' as they may not be able to explain why they 'hurt' in that place.
- Talk about how you can turn the negative feelings into positive feelings e.g. talking them through with a friend/adult, playing with friends or family, watching funny programmes on TV etc.
- Normalise negative feelings but ensure that children are given strategies to deal with them.
- To initiate discussion about the 'dead' person you could ask the child to list the important people in their lives, and ask them to talk about why they are important.
- The child could draw faces on paper plates – a negative face on one side, a positive face on the other side. Ask the child which face they have on, how do they feel, what could they do to change to the more positive face?

BEREAVEMENT

When a child in your school is bereaved: practical suggestions for the classroom.

- Take cues from their behaviour about how they feel.
- All children react differently – aggressiveness, anger, guilt, fear, regression, withdrawal are all signs of grief – take this into account.
- Grieving affects concentration and attainment – help children with this.
- Children may deny grief and grieving may be delayed – this needs to be recognised.
- Bereaved children need to re-establish a self-identity.
- Perceptions of death vary with age – help children understand death is final.
- If a student seeks you out – be available and listen with your ears, eyes and heart – don't be afraid to touch.
- Face your own feelings about death – it's ok to cry, be sad, angry, smile. (Not in front of the children).
- Be open and honest with feelings and encourage that in others.
- Ensure that teachers and pupils know of a bereavement and know how to help.
- Provide a quiet place.
- Do not isolate or insulate children from death or grief.
- Try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges.
- Help the pupil's friends to be helpful.
- Have material on death available (Winston's Wish).



- Ensure good contact with the family – and don't underestimate how you can help through this open and supportive approach. **Have 1 person assigned to be the point of contact with the family.**
- **Have 1 person assigned to be the point of contact for the media (Usually HoS/Chair of LAB)** This is particularly important in high profile cases and seek advice before talking with any media. Advice available from CEO or Executive Headteachers.
- Acknowledge the death in the school community – make a scrapbook, hold an assembly, plant a tree, have a memorial service, etc. – don't forget that teachers need help too in coping with death – help your school to address this need.
- If a child dies do not 'clear everything away'. Take time.

Loss and Change: Classroom strategies

Sometimes parents do not think to inform the school of changes within the family situation. Understandably this is often due to personal distress or not wanting everyone to know about broken relationships, or other problems. It is important therefore that a teacher can recognise the warning signs of a child in difficulty. These may be:-

- Unusual disruptions
- Change in normal behaviour
- Unusually withdrawn or distracted behaviour
- Tearfulness at the least provocation.

If these types of behaviour are observed a one-to-one conversation may reveal the source of the difficulty. It is important that a quiet place is available, and that time is given for this type of intervention.

These openings may be useful:

- 'I wonder whether you might have something on your mind'
- 'You seem rather sad to me at the moment'
- 'I feel quite worried by the change in you'.

There is no need to give advice. What is needed is empathy and LISTENING.



Welcoming back a bereaved child

The teacher might visit the family, prior to the child returning to school to talk about what would help on the first day. This also shows the child and parent(s) that there is someone who understands the situation and can be a point of reference. The child can be told that the class is aware of what has happened and that they will help when they can. The child should also be aware that it is quite normal to find oneself overwhelmed by sad feelings and it is quite all right to leave the room if this feels appropriate. Agree a place they can retreat to. Make certain, particularly on the first day, that there is someone special who is caring for and looking after the child. This may be an adult or a pupil, depending on the age of the child. Provide for a one-to-one conversation as soon as possible. Allow time weekly for talking about the loss: This will almost certainly involve tears.

Preparing a class to welcome back a bereaved child

For primary aged pupils: explore the fears the class might have. Ask how they think the absent member is feeling. For 5-7 year olds, gather the children around informally **before the bereaved child returns to school** and explain to them that the child's parent (or whoever) has died, and won't be coming back, that if they lost their mummy/daddy they would need to be treated specially when they came back to school. Then ask how they think they could help. The teacher can then offer his/her help by saying that he/she will try to make the child feel special. In order to help the children understand what loss means the teacher can use the medium of story where loss plays some part in the theme.

Helping the class/school to mourn a member who has died

It is often helpful to ask class members to write message to the person who has died and put those on a wall specially prepared for them.

The content of the messages might be:

- How am I feeling?
- How is the class feeling?
- A good time that you shared with them
- A positive statement.



THE TASKS OF MOURNING

1. ACCEPTING THE REALITY OF THE LOSS

- This is an emotional acceptance so it is helpful for children to be given repeated information about what has happened in language which is appropriate for their stage of development. We should use clear communication and avoid euphemisms and metaphors.
- Help the child to understand what dead means, i.e. not moving, not breathing, not feeding etc.
- Enable the child to attend the funeral if possible.
- Visit the grave or crematorium.

2. WORKING THROUGH THE PAIN OF GRIEF

- Help the child talk about feelings.
- Allow time for and time out of grief.
- Maintain familiar routines.
- Ensure compassion from carers.
- Talk about how feelings change.

3. ADAPT TO LIFE WITHOUT THE DECEASED

- Give opportunities to keep memories alive.
- Allow time to grieve and adjust.
- Allow children whenever possible to take some control in their lives.
- Use mementos and symbols.
- Continue to mark important anniversaries.
- Give opportunities to develop new interests.

4. INVESTING IN NEW RELATIONSHIPS

- Ensure the child has time for reminiscence about past times.
- Give permission to be happy, enjoy life and make new attachments.

UNDERSTANDING A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE OF DEATH

The child's comprehension of death plays an important part in the process of mourning and is a major component of the adults' understanding of childhood bereavement. As the child develops, so their understanding of the different strands that make up the concept of death affect their bereavement. Those components include finality, irreversibility, causality and universality. Understanding these abstractions is related to the number of factors, most importantly the child's cognitive development.

Infants and Toddlers

In infants, the primary drive is for survival. Separation from the primary care giver is perceived as a threat to survival, and causes fear. 'Out of sight' is equivalent to 'dead'. Therefore, there is no cognitive understanding of death. Eventually, they learn to trust the care giver to return. This marks the stage when babies can 'miss' significant people.

Pre-school age children

Children of this age recognise 'dead' as a state. They will have seen dead animals etc. However, they have no concept of permanence, and this affects their response to the separation and grief. They may know the word 'forever', but if pressed, would expect to see the dead person again one day. Nagy (1959) described this as Stage 1 – death is a departure with the deceased living elsewhere.

Age 5-9

This is the age of magical thinking and the egocentric stage of development. Children see all that happens in the world as somehow relating to them, therefore responsibility and guilt can be issues. Expression of feelings is more subtle and complex. Interest develops about what has happened to the deceased.

They are more able to consider causality, but tend to be concrete. Nagy described this Stage 2 with death as an external factor, personified as a monster, bogey man, etc.

Age 9-12

Children's understanding of all the strands of the concept of death matures, and death is seen as the end of life, part of a process. They recognise the inevitability of death, of others and themselves. This is Nagy's Stage 3, and can cause anxiety and fear.

These age groupings are only a guide, as other factors such as life experience, communication in the family and social factors all play a part. Some children, e.g. those with serious illness develop their understanding of death at a much earlier age. Bereaved children may also regress, interfering with their developmental processes. It is important to remember that children require clear explanations about death in simple appropriate language. Euphemisms can confuse children: there are 92 ways to say DEAD in our language - that is 91 ways to confuse children! Because of their progressing development, children need their understanding to be updated as they mature. They will need to have more information in accordance with their increased understanding.



THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD'S CONCEPT OF DEATH

Children develop their understanding of death gradually, it is not a unitary concept, but includes a number of components. Most research agrees on the following strands:

- **Realisation:** The awareness of death as a state or an event – children know the word 'dead' from an early age
- **Separation:** The child's idea of where a dead person is
- **Irrevocability:** The idea of death as temporary and reversible, or permanent and irreversible
- **Universality:** The understanding that all living things die – the child's concept of immortality
- **Causality:** Children's ideas of what brings the death about, external causes such as guns and bombs or internal causes like heart attacks
- **Immobility:** The dead may be thought of as wholly or partially inactive
- **Dysfunctionality:** Ideas about bodily functions continuing or ending
- **Insensitivity:** Notions that the dead may be totally or partially insensitive
- **Appearance:** The recognition that the dead look and feel different to when alive
- **Personification:** The notion of death as a concretised person or thing.

GRIEF RESPONSES IN CHILDREN

- Searching for the person who has died
- Crying/expressing anxiety at being separated from primary caregiver
- Refusing to go to school
- Role playing the dead person
- Denial of grief, usually to protect adults
- Anger and guilt
- Sadness, withdrawal, depression
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Psychosomatic symptoms (tummy ache, etc.)
- Phobias about doctors or hospitals
- Sleep disorders
- Questioning their own identity
- Inability to concentrate
- Regression affecting work and communication.



HOW THE LOSS OF A PARENT THROUGH DIVORCE/BREAKDOWN IS DIFFERENT FROM DEATH

- **Fantasies of reunion:** It is difficult for children to believe in the permanence of the situation. Fantasies of reunion are very common. Children believe if only they are good enough, the parent will return. When the various strategies a child tries all fail, a sense of low self-esteem and failure can ensue.
- **Difficulties in mourning:** Children may feel a need to hide their mourning. They may be alone in missing the absent parent and they may be unsupported in their grief. They may not be able to feel the loss as real – hopes for reuniting the family may keep mourning at bay.
- **Pre-loss conflict:** Divorce/Breakdown usually follows long periods of conflict and maybe several separations and reconciliation. This fuels hope of reunion and interrupts mourning.
- **Loyalty conflicts:** Children are often exposed to the marital conflict, even violence. Each parent may darken the name and memory of the other leading to loyalty conflicts and confusion, especially in the concrete phase of development. Children may feel they have to take sides.
- **The ongoing but changed relationships:** The quality of parent-child relationships have a powerful impact on childhood adjustment following divorce and death. After death, children are often drawn closer, after divorce they may be pushed out. If the relationship is poor, children are more likely to externalise their conflicts leading to acting out behaviour.
- **The effect of choice:** Divorce/Breakdown is more a matter of choice. Children can feel abandoned and rejected, leading to feelings of anger or suicide.
- **Responsibility for the break up:** This is common, self-blame is stronger when the children get caught up in the struggle. Magical thinking can lead to feelings of guilt and culpability.
- **Community support:** This is less available than after a death. Labelling i.e. 'No wonder she's badly behaved, she's from a broken home' is common, whereas bad behaviour is often excused after a death. Loss from divorce is less acknowledged in schools etc.
- **Fears for the future:** Children can grow up assuming they will divorce, too. Self-fulfilling prophecy?
- **Family restructuring:** Research shows that divorced parents 'date' earlier which can distress children, and conflict with their fantasies of reunion. Tasks 3 and 4 are more difficult.
- **Longer term effects:** These include poor academic achievement, difficulties in adjustment in pre-adolescents and increases in conflicts globally. Also, higher incidences of depression, anxiety and withdrawal.

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