

Notes for school staff on supporting a child/family who has lost a loved one during Covid-19

This document is supplementary to Harrow Educational Psychology Service's 'Critical Incident, Loss, and Bereavement' booklet and leaflets found on the Local Offer:
<https://www.harrowlocaloffer.co.uk/services/education/educational-psychology-service>

A loss in circumstances such as this presents may particular challenges for families and for schools:

- For families it may not be possible to grieve together with other family members in the same way, including funeral arrangements. Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Advice is usually to avoid isolating yourself, but we are in a situation where contact with others is significantly reduced. There may also be increased feelings of anger and blame, guilt or fear.
- School communities themselves may well feel less connected, even though huge efforts are being made to stay in regular contact with children and young people. The usually supportive factors for children and young people – like school routines, and connections with peers and key members of staff – may well be reduced. If children are not in school, it may be harder to monitor how children are coping in the weeks ahead.

In the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, discussions may include a particular focus on promoting connectedness, while still being apart.

Some principles of support

Each Critical Incident is unique. Responses however follow a recognised pattern, and the following may be helpful for any staff member who may be liaising with the family to be aware of:

- With time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional counselling. We do not advise an immediate offer of counselling to bereaved families.
- Grief is a normal process and those who are grieving may need to be reassured that whatever emotions they are feeling, it is perfectly normal, and there is no one process of grieving for all.
- Help and support are best provided by a trusted, familiar adult as and when it is needed.
- It is usually only when feelings remain overwhelming over a period of weeks when counselling support may become a more appropriate offer. Some families with less community support may wish to seek professional support earlier, in particular while we remain in 'lock-down'.

Some considerations

Headteachers may wish to have a telephone conversation with their school's allocated Educational Psychologist to be able to think together about how best to approach the unique circumstance. Headteachers / staff may wish to consider some of the following:

- Clarifying the facts – what is known, what are perceived or potential narratives in the community, including social media.
- Communication with the family – language, messaging, listening and asking questions.
- What is the family's views on what can be shared / what they want to be shared.
- How to communicate the information to children and staff – to whom, and when.
- Sharing information with school staff to talk about typical responses to critical incidents and how to manage them.
- Reducing anxiety and de-escalating responses – families, children and staff
- Support and signposting for pupils, and staff, regarding their own wellbeing. Remembering too that loss and bereavement may raise feelings for staff if they have lost loved ones themselves.

Best support

It is never easy having conversations with family members who have lost loved ones. Here are a few guidelines to consider:

- There is no 'best way'. The most useful guideline is to try and communicate that you care. It is probably better that you don't have preconceived ideas about what is the best way to help as different people will appreciate different approaches and acts.
- What to say? In the initial stages you may need to say very little. Take your cues from the mourner. You can be very supportive by providing quiet company, and listening.
- For staff liaising with the family, particularly at first, it can feel awkward or uncomfortable trying to help or express your concern to people who have had a devastating personal experience. Possibly the best way over this is to concentrate on the other person (rather than yourself) at the time.
- Don't probe for details about the effect of the situation or trauma but be a good willing listener if the person wants to talk about it. Just being available and sympathetic is often enough.
- Caring and being there are sometimes more important than 'doing'. Acknowledge how strange and difficult this situation is, rather than trying to make it better.
- Having conversations with people who have suffered losses can be exhausting and overwhelming at times. Be mindful of taking care of yourself too.

Specific information about Covid-19; some considerations

- A global health pandemic is not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children (and other family members) may feel confused, upset, and anxious. Parents, teachers, and caring adults can help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent, and supportive manner.
- It is possible that family members of the person who has died may have particularly strong emotions around feelings of guilt as well as feelings of loss. Are any family members feeling in any way responsible? Are they dwelling on what they might have done differently, for example to protect the person who has died from infection? Should they be doing anything differently now to protect other members of the family?
- Whilst all children and young people will be experiencing worry throughout these changing times, those who have experienced the death of someone close may have different, more severe anxiety and heightened emotions. They may feel increasingly scared that those closest to them will also become ill or die from the virus.
- Family members may have been socially isolated from the person who has died, and not had recent or usual levels of contact.
- The key focus with families is to listen to their concerns and worries. Relatively small-sounding or illogical issues may be overwhelming. Families may need reassurance that their response is 'normal' and that we can manage to hear them speak about painful issues.
- Most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they can and do get through difficult times and go on with their lives. By creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, parents can help them cope and reduce the possibility of emotional difficulties.
- Due to the circumstances there may need to be further consideration around how children and family members connect with, and access support from, important people in their lives.
- There may need to be further consideration around establishing or maintaining a predictable routine and schedule. Children and young people are reassured by structure and familiarity.
- There may need to be further consideration around how a child or young person maintains physical activity, which often takes on added importance during stressful times.
- It may be helpful to signpost towards general guidance around mental health and wellbeing during 'lockdown'. For example via the 'Support for children and young people' section of www.harrow.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/support-residents,
- Those staff in direct contact with bereaved families will need support around them to debrief and process their own feelings. In particular, Headteachers will be holding and containing levels of anxiety from across different parts of the school community, and will need to think about where they get their own emotional support.

When a parent dies

- A representative from the school should discuss with the family (and if appropriate the child) what and how information should be given to classmates and other school pupils.
- Then use the opportunity to talk about grief and reactions. The way in which children and young people respond to a death is related to their age and developmental stage. It is also important to be mindful of differing religious and/or cultural perspectives in relation to loss and bereavement. See our [Critical Incident, Loss and Bereavement](#) guidance document for further details.
- Consider whether information about the funeral should be communicated (depending on family wishes). Families may consider funeral arrangements such that friends and family who cannot be present may participate in the service.
- Where possible, the provision of some contact and support from teaching staff can be hugely helpful to children and young people who have experienced the death of a loved one. Keep in touch, perhaps offering scheduled points of contact with you during the week, using social media, apps, and phone calls.
- Let the child or young person decide how much s/he wants to talk about what happened, but let them know you are willing to listen if s/he contacts you.
- Be as clear as possible what help is available, both from school pastoral staff and externally within the wider community.
- After the bereavement there may be a long period when the child will have a reduced capacity to work.
- Maintain contact with the home about the child's progress.

What can help?

Whilst every person will respond differently, there are things which family members can do to help children and young people to understand what has happened, process their own emotions and, in time, move through the grieving process.

- Be honest and open; explain why the person died in an age-appropriate level. Answer questions as truthfully as you can in a way the child can understand. It's okay not to have all the answers and to say that you don't know.
- Use clear language such as 'dead' and 'death' rather than what we may perceive as more comforting language such as 'gone to sleep' or 'loss'. These phrases can be confusing for children and may cause them to believe that if someone is lost then they can be found, for example.
- Talk about the person who has died and share happy memories about them.
- Don't be afraid to express your own emotions and explain to your child that this is a normal part of the process when someone dies. However, don't expect them to look after you as much as you look after them.

- Don't force your child to talk about what has happened, but create an atmosphere where they can talk about their experience of the death and that you will listen to what they have to say. Reassure them if they blame themselves in any way, which can be common.
- Reassure your child that it is okay for them to be upset too and help them find ways of expressing difficult feelings which are not disruptive or destructive.
- Reassure your child that it is still okay to laugh and have fun.
- Continue with established routines as much as possible, encouraging children to engage with their usual activities and interests so that there is a sense of familiarity.
- Help your child say goodbye; include them in discussions about the funeral and allow them to make some choices about how they would like to take part. At the moment, when funerals are likely to be much more restricted, find alternative ways to help them say goodbye such as gathering photos, making a memory box, or planting some seeds.
- Allow yourself time to grieve so that you are best able to support your child.
- On a child's return to school, share information with their teacher so that they are aware of what they have experienced and how they have dealt with it. Returning to a different situation may trigger some feelings and emotions which you felt they had dealt with.

Educational Psychologist support and follow up

- If staff would like to discuss with an Educational Psychologist, they can support you remotely (by phone or video call), and follow up with you over the next few days to help support with any issues.
- If after a period of time, there are signs of continued distress the Educational Psychologist will discuss this and signpost to further support. We do not advise an immediate offer of counselling to bereaved children/young people: grief is a normal process and there is no one process for everyone who grieves. Children/young people may, however, need reassurance that whatever emotions they are feeling are normal. It is only when feelings remain overwhelming over a period of weeks and interfere with the activities of daily living that counselling support may be a more appropriate offer.
- Some families with less community support may wish to seek professional support earlier, particularly during the phase of acute social distancing.

Organisations offering bereavement support include the following

Bereavement Care www.bereavementcareandsupport.co.uk 0208 427 5720

Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org 0800 028 8840

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus 0808 802 0021



INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE

Educational Psychology Service, Civic 5 & 6, Harrow Civic Centre, Station Road,
Harrow. HA1 2XY
tel 020 8051 8380 fax 020 8051 8369 web www.harrow.gov.uk

The following websites offer specific content around Coronavirus

www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/

www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief

www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/children-and-young-people

www.griefencounter.org.uk/serviceupdate/

For further information, please contact:
Hugh Watson, Principal Educational Psychologist
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020 8051 8380, 07704 541252

Note: as the situation and sources of information are developing, the above guidance may be updated (v2; dated 14.04.20)

Harrow Educational Psychology Service

For more information about Harrow services for young people with special educational needs and disabilities, please visit: <http://harrowlocaloffer.co.uk/>

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