



SCOTTISH SECONDARY TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

HANDLING BEREAVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Guidelines for Head Teacher members

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Responding to the sudden death of a member of the school community

1. INTRODUCTION

The death of a pupil or member of staff, whether foreseen, as the result of an illness whose outcome was expected and able to be prepared for, or suddenly, as the result of an accident or unexpected illness, can be traumatic for staff and pupils alike.

For pupils, such an event can be their first real contact with the death of someone known to them. For teachers, while they may previously have experienced bereavement on a personal level, it can be the first time they need to respond professionally to the shock and sadness experienced by those in their care.

Head Teachers, for their part, carry the additional burden of being the focus of the school's response, while having the responsibility for ensuring that the life and work of the school goes on as nearly normally as possible in tragic circumstances.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide advice on handling bereavement in schools. It does not attempt to provide an infallible checklist. The approach taken in any particular situation will depend on local and often highly individual circumstances. But, by drawing on the experience of members who have been in such situations, it attempts to provide some guidance on the broad principles which members might wish to take into account.

Much of this advice may be useful in dealing with other traumatic or tragic situations.

2. SHORT TERM RESPONSES

The period immediately following a sudden death

2.1 Checking the information

In the event of a sudden death, it will be very important to check, first of all, that it has, in fact, occurred. This needs to be tackled sensitively, and a source of accurate information chosen carefully. Depending on the reported circumstances, Police or health service personnel may be the most appropriate first contacts. A minister or priest, if the family of the deceased is known to have a church connection, may also be approached.

As well as confirmation of the death, information needs to be obtained about the circumstances in which it occurred. This will provide background to guide the initial approach to the bereaved family. It will also help determine the nature of the information passed on to the members of the school community and the manner in which this is done.

2.2 The Education Authority

The education authority may or may not have its own guidelines for being informed about the death of pupils or teachers. In either case it would be wise to inform the Director of Education/Service Manager or area education officer at the earliest opportunity.

2.3 Informing the school about the death

The wishes of the family should be considered wherever possible before proceeding to pass information to the school. In most cases, by the time the Head Teacher is in a position to pass accurate information to the school community, rumour and speculation will undoubtedly already be rife and a degree of hysteria may be building up around the real or imagined circumstances in which the death took place. Sensitively informing the school of the true facts, without unnecessary detail, serves the purposes of reducing speculation and hysteria and of beginning to shape the response which the school will make to the death.

Care must be taken to be prepared for dealing with spontaneous expressions of grief.

2.4 Staff

A first step will be to inform as many staff as possible, preferably before classes begin. If necessary, a very short delay in starting the school day may enable the organisation of a staff meeting for this purpose, but any delay should be as short as possible to avoid the build up of public grief and hysteria among pupils.

As well as giving the staff the facts of the death, the Head Teacher should emphasise the importance of adhering as closely as possible to the school's normal routine and provide an outline of the special arrangements being made for the care and support of students who are too upset to continue with it. Staff should be asked to provide feedback in the course of the day (and subsequent days) about the reaction of pupils to the death, including how and to whom such feedback should be given, particularly in respect of pupils causing concern.

Staff should be reassured about their own reactions, and told of any arrangements made for them, both in the immediate period and in the longer term. It goes without saying that staff, both teaching and non-teaching, are as likely to be affected by the death of a pupil as the pupils themselves, possibly more so, and that it is just as important to make suitable arrangements for them as for pupils.

Guidance staff may bear the heaviest load in relation to the care and support of pupils who are overcome by grief at the start or in the course of the day. They are likely to require a further and more detailed briefing about their particular role, any additional facilities to be placed at their disposal and any external support which may be provided. Taking Guidance staff out of their normal timetabled commitments for the day or days immediately following the news of a death may be both appropriate and desirable.

Staff should also be reminded of the need for sensitivity with respect to the curriculum e.g. in the choice of texts or topics.

2.5 The class of the deceased

Pupils in the same class or classes as the deceased should be told first, probably by the Head Teacher or Year Head, and possibly in the company of their Guidance teacher or a Chaplain. The teacher involved should know and be known to the pupils.

It is often best to begin by confirming what most will already know, and to continue by outlining factually, but without unnecessary detail, the circumstances of the death. Pupils might be told that their friend's sudden death is bound to be an event with which everyone in the school – staff and students alike – will find it difficult to come to terms. It should be emphasised that the normal routines of the school will be maintained so far as possible, but that special arrangements are being made, on that day and subsequently, for those who wish support in coping with the news. What those arrangements are should be outlined briefly.

Arrangements for the funeral should be given, if known. If not, the class should be assured that they will be given them as soon as the information is available. Time should be spent giving the class the opportunity to ask questions or react in other ways to the news.

When the Head Teacher leaves, the Guidance teacher and possibly also the Chaplain should remain with the class until the normal pattern of the day resumes.

2.6 The rest of the school

After speaking to the class of the deceased, the Head Teacher, should give consideration to which other sections of the school community need to be informed and how. However this is done, it should be as early in the day as possible, for the reasons previously stated. Account should be taken of the possibility of there being relatives of the deceased in any particular group.

The approach taken and the information conveyed should be broadly similar to that used with the bereaved class, outlining the routine for that and subsequent days and the special arrangements put in place for their care and support. The Chaplain, if present, may lead the assembly in prayers for the deceased and the bereaved family, and for the members of the school community.

2.7 Parents

The school will wish to consider carefully whether it is appropriate to inform parents of the death and/or funeral arrangements. Parents of pupils who are upset by the death should be informed.

2.8 Arrangements for supporting pupils

In the immediate aftermath of the news of a pupil's death, pupils who were close to the deceased are likely to be deeply affected to the extent that they may require to be taken home to be cared for by a parent. Others less close will also be affected and will exhibit signs of distress immediately. Still more are likely to be affected, as much by the prevailing atmosphere of communal shock and grief as by any personal sense of loss, but will also exhibit the same signs of distress, though perhaps less immediately.

An area, or areas, of the school should be set aside so that pupils exhibiting signs of distress can go or be taken there until they are able to return to classes or be taken home.

This area should be staffed by members of the school's Guidance team, perhaps augmented by members of the Chaplaincy team. Some schools have found the assistance of the school nurse or others from the community very helpful. Their function should at this stage be one of listening, calmly supporting, and providing "a shoulder to cry on".

2.9 Visiting the family

As soon as possible after informing the school of the death and putting into place the measures required to support pupils and staff in their reaction to it, the Head Teacher should give careful consideration to whether (s)he or an appropriate teacher should visit the family of the deceased. This will not be an easy thing to do, but the family may attach great importance to it. The family will appreciate the sympathy and support of the school, and are likely to welcome and respond positively to offers of practical support and assistance in relation to the funeral and any associated church services.

This early contact will be a two-way process: it will also provide guidance for the school which will help it shape its own approach to the funeral. Further contact with the family is likely to be necessary in the run-up to the funeral, and again in the period afterwards if there are siblings whose return to school has to be prepared for and managed effectively. This contact need not be directly with the parents, but may be with another relative, friend or clergyman.

Bear in mind also that, in an era in which not every family is nuclear, more than one visit may be required.

No matter how large or small the school, the Head Teacher may not know every pupil equally well. Before visiting the family, therefore, the Head Teacher should take time to be briefed fully about the student, his or her strengths and interests and other characteristics, and any other background details, so that the impression is not given to the family that the deceased was not really known very well. The pupil's guidance teacher will be the first source of such information, and time should also be taken to look at the pupil's file.

2.10 Continuing support

Arrangements made to support pupils will require to remain in place for the days leading up to the funeral, though it is likely that they can be scaled down after the day on which the news is broken to the school.

During this period regular contact should be kept with Guidance staff to monitor the situation within the school. Pupils particularly deeply affected may be identified, and the school will want to begin thinking about longer-term support for them.

The same is true of staff. Contact should be made with the staff welfare services of the local authority, if these exist, and staff should be informed sensitively of the support available to them.

2.11 Dealing with the media

Depending on the nature of the death, there may be interest from the media. Care should be taken over the nature of the responses made to press enquiries. It would be invidious to add to the family's grief by making any injudicious comment. A simple statement expressing the sorrow of the whole school community at the sudden death of one of its members and extending the school's sympathy to the bereaved family is all that is necessary. This statement should be adhered to in all circumstances without any elaboration. It may in some cases be necessary to advise staff and pupils not to speak to the press and to avoid making innocent comments that might be misconstrued. Council press officers can be of assistance. **Care must be taken to conform to Council guidelines regarding dealing with the media. Photographs should never be issued without permission.**

2.12 The funeral

In thinking about the funeral of a pupil, the Head Teacher needs to consider the wishes of the family, the feelings of the school community, and the duty of care which is owed to pupils generally.

If the family has requested particular forms of participation by members of the school these should be acceded to as far as possible. For example, lessons might be read by members of staff or by pupils; it has been known for choirs or bands to be asked to contribute musical items. Care should be taken in selecting and preparing those participating in such ways. The younger members of musical ensembles, for example, might be omitted on such an occasion.

As for attendance, the presence of large numbers of highly emotional young people at a service which is a deeply affecting one in any case is inappropriate and undesirable. There is a potential for mass hysteria and this would be upsetting for the young people themselves but also for the bereaved family. Some schools have found that a letter to parents indicating that only those who will be accompanied by a parent to the funeral service will be granted permission to be absent from school for it. This has the effect of ensuring that the young people who attend have adult support as well as reducing the potential for scenes of hysteria.

It might be helpful to make arrangements similar to those made in the school for the support of those overcome by their emotions, perhaps using a room or hall adjacent to the church, in consultation with the priest or minister.

It is likely that a large number of staff will wish to attend the funeral. If every request were granted, it might give rise to a difficulty in providing adequately for the supervision of those pupils not attending the service. Yet closing the school may not be an option, given the education authority's statutory obligations. It may be necessary to restrict the number of staff who can be released. If so, clear criteria should be agreed for the selection of those permitted to attend.

Arrangements may be made for the purchase of wreaths, to which both staff and pupils can be given the opportunity to contribute. Where, as is likely, such contributions exceed the cost of the wreaths, decisions should be taken on the use of the surplus after consultation with staff and pupils.

3 LONGER TERM RESPONSES

3.1 Examination Results

Where appropriate, schools should inform UCAS, the SQA and any other such organisation of the death. It may be less traumatic for parents e.g. if SQA results are sent to the school in the first instance, but the choice should be theirs.

3.2 An appropriate memorial

Staff and pupils who are not able to attend the funeral services for the deceased are likely to welcome the opportunity for appropriate observance within the school. Special services attended by as many members of the school as possible are often held for this purpose. Held at a suitable distance in time after the traumatic period surrounding the actual death, these can be held in a calmer atmosphere and in some ways can be seen as marking the closure of this period of trauma and the beginning of the community's recovery from it. It is not inappropriate for this service to be quite positive in tone as a celebration of the deceased's life rather than a mourning of his or her death. The bereaved parents and other members of the family may welcome an invitation to attend.

A more tangible memorial may be found in the planting of a tree or the placing of a seat or bench in the school grounds. Any funds remaining from the purchase of the wreaths for the funeral could go towards this, perhaps augmented if necessary by a collection.

In some cases, schools have made a point of gathering together examples of the deceased pupil's work, jotters, etc., and have made these available to the parents, who then have them as keepsakes. It is best to be guided by the parents about this, simply letting them know that the materials in question have been collected and are being held in safe keeping should they wish them. Schools may also consider an entry in the yearbook.

3.3 Counselling and mentoring

The trauma experienced by staff and pupils alike after the death of a pupil can have long-term effects. Counselling may be of help in recognising and dealing with these but may have to be provided from outwith the school, in consultation with the education authority.

A first step is to ensure that staff know common reactions which may be encountered and the steps to be taken if they are concerned either about pupils or about themselves. They then need to know the nature of the support which is available and the means of accessing it. It goes without saying that staff may be unwilling to unburden themselves about any difficulties they are experiencing because those to whom they may do so can also be their line managers. It is important that they have access to confidential advice and support, perhaps by being made aware of such services available through health boards or the voluntary sector, or through the welfare services of the local authority.

3.4 Common reactions in adults

Adults will respond to trauma in a variety of ways that will depend on the nature of the incident, their degree of involvement with it and their own personality and coping skills. Common reactions include fear and anxiety, feelings of numbness, guilt, shame, or anger, preoccupation with the event, or a sense of longing for everything to be as it was before. This may be manifested, physically or behaviourally by such symptoms as:

- tiredness
- sleep disturbance
- tension
- menstrual irregularity
- difficulty concentrating
- intolerance
- shaking
- tearfulness
- irritability
- loss of appetite
- headaches
- depression
- nausea
- memory difficulties
- increased sensitivity

3.5 Common reactions in children

The feelings of children and young people will be broadly similar to those of adults. They also need support in coming to terms with a traumatic experience but may not be able to recognise or articulate their feelings so easily. These may become evident more through behaviour and other responses than through what they say.

As well as the reactions common in adults listed above, children may also display the following:

- increased misbehaviour and 'acting younger';
- 'pretend' play including acting out of the traumatic incident;
- sleep disturbance including fear of the dark or of being alone;
- 'clinging' behaviour with parents;
- preoccupation with the traumatic event;
- difficulty concentrating in school;
- heightened alertness to danger including sensitivity to loud noises;
- changes in appetite;
- fears for their own safety or for that of family and friends;
- reluctance to talk.

For both children and adults it is their naturally available communities (family, friends, colleagues) who will provide the most appropriate and useful potential sources of help and support. External sources of support should be sensitive to the needs of these natural communities and should seek to augment, validate and reassure these to enhance rather than detract from their effectiveness.

3.6 Reviewing the school's arrangements: developing strategies

The trauma of bereavement can have the effect of throwing a school "in at the deep end". Most meet such situations as they arise, without giving any prior thought to the response that will be needed. It makes sense to take time to put even loose contingency plans into place by reflecting on how the school could or should respond in a tragic situation. In the words of one booklet title, it is possible to be "wise before the event".

After the event, it also makes sense to review what was done at each stage, and to evaluate the actions taken to see what was effective and what could have been more so, and to plan for the future taking these evaluations into account.

Experience can also inform the wider programmes of the school, perhaps in Personal and Social Education, perhaps in Religious and Moral Education. In the English department, texts might be slotted into courses to enable reflection on the concepts of tragedy and bereavement (perhaps already are).

This review of actual response and reflection on future policy should, of course, not be confined to the senior management team and the Guidance staff. It should be a whole-school matter, widened to include Chaplains and parents as appropriate. All have a role to play in such situations, and all have something to contribute in preparing for them.

4. FOOTNOTE

While this booklet has been written around possible responses to the sudden death of a pupil, much of the contents will be of use in other circumstances. The nature of the response will be different in the case of the sudden death of a member of staff, when the focus may be more on support for staff than for pupils. In the same way the death of a pupil or teacher from an illness whose course and outcome were known and able to be prepared for, will require a different response again, with more being required over a longer period to prepare pupils for the eventual outcome. Likewise, a wider tragedy, such as a major accident, will need to be dealt with in other appropriate ways, and may involve more staff. Nevertheless it is hoped that much of what is written may still be of help in such circumstances.

5. SUMMARY OF POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Check accuracy of information.
- Contact staff required to provide support for pupils, including Chaplains etc.
- Arrange accommodation for pupil support.
- Inform education authority, staff, classmates, school community and parents.
- Make arrangements for dealing with the press: brief staff and pupils about their response to press approaches if considered necessary.
- Monitor support for pupils.
- Visit bereaved parents.
- Make arrangements for attendance at funeral and any participation requested.
- Arrange for support of pupils attending funeral.
- Arrange memorial service for school community and other memorial if appropriate.
- Collect and place in safekeeping work, belongings, other materials relevant to the deceased.
- Continue to monitor and provide continuing support for pupils and staff, liaising with external providers as necessary or appropriate.
- Review and evaluate actions taken; develop response strategy.