



## Responding to Bereavement Policy

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“Learning together, to be the best we can be”

## 1. Scope

- 1.1. This policy relates to all schools and settings of Nexus Multi Academy Trust.
- 1.2. This policy outlines the procedural approach we take as a Trust in response to bereavement. However, we have a range of other policies and procedures which will be utilised in tandem with this policy to ensure our staff and volunteers are well supported. This includes, but isn't limited to, our sickness absence and wellbeing policy and our leave policies.

## 2. Rationale

- 2.1. At Nexus MAT, we understand that bereavement is faced by members of our community at different times and that when the loss is of a member of a school community – such as a child or staff member - it can be particularly difficult.
- 2.2. Pupils and staff also need to be supported when they experience family bereavements and other significant losses in the course of their lives.
- 2.3. This policy provides guidelines to be followed in the event of bereavement. The aim is to be supportive to both pupils and adults, and for staff to have greater confidence and be better equipped to cope when bereavement happens. Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different and this policy has been constructed to guide us on how to deal professionally, sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.
- 2.4. The Trust also has a Bereavement Leave Policy for employees to help support them after a loss, and leaders work within the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership protocols around all child deaths.
- 2.5. Nexus MAT is committed to the emotional health and well-being of all our staff and pupils. We are dedicated to the continual development of 'healthy schools'. We wish to work towards this in all aspects of the way we do business, and to provide an ethos, environment and offer that supports and prepares children for coping with separation or loss of a loved one, either through death or divorce.

## 3. Our approach to bereavement

3.1. We believe that children and adults alike have the right to:

- Be given space and time to grieve;
- Be given support from whichever source is deemed the most appropriate – if possible, of their own choice;
- Encounter a caring environment in which they feel safe to demonstrate grief without fear of judgement.

3.2. We recognise that:

- Grief may not always be apparent to the onlooker, but its invisibility makes it no less real;
- Differing religions/cultures view death and bereavement from different perspectives and all viewpoints should be taken into consideration and given equal value in the school environment;
- The death of a child has huge repercussions beyond the immediate teaching/care team of that child and every effort should be taken to inform and deal sensitively with the far reaching contacts.

## 4. The Management of Bereavement in a school or setting

4.1. The purpose of this policy is to give all staff confidence in recognising and adopting a particular procedure. It should be noted that a universally accepted procedure outline will, in itself, not enable everyone to feel comfortable in dealing with the practicalities of death and bereavement.

4.2. One of our main concerns must inevitably be the immediate family of the deceased and, when talking to families, in we should state our commitment to meet any need they have it, be it practical, emotional or ongoing support. A school or setting may be notified in a number of ways. Upon notification of the death of a pupil:

4.2.1. Past experience has shown that if death occurs during school hours' parents/ carers usually let the school know directly and the person

answering the phone will put them through to the most senior member of staff on site.

4.2.2. Where death occurs in the holidays or at weekends the parents will contact whoever they can – they may have the phone number of a member of staff who cares for the child at home for example. In that instance, the member of staff who takes the call must immediately contact the most senior member of the school team possible and that person will then assume responsibility for the dissemination of the information, drawing on support from the Trust executive.

4.3. At all times, Nexus MAT academies will comply with the child death response procedures as published by the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership. Where a child death is as a result of suicide or self-harm, academies will follow any additional multi agency guidance and consider if it is appropriate to use the Suicide and Self-Harm Community Response planning protocol.

## 5. Dissemination

5.1. It is important to agree, with the parent/ carer if the school can take/should on the role of informing concerned parties. In many instances, parents prefer the school to play a clearly defined role in communicating news of the child death and helping to coordinate a response from the school and wider community (usually through the Headteacher or other trusted school employee).

5.2. There can be no definitive list of people to contact and, therefore, it will be different for each child. The school should ensure that all people who are close to the child are told in a sensitive and supportive manner rather than risk them hearing it 'on the grapevine'.

5.3. Bereavement is very difficult and the school needs to ensure it does not add to this by leaving people feeling marginalised. If school is in session, the Headteacher will inform the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and admin staff as they are likely to be the people most involved in the next part of the process.

- 5.4. The Headteacher should inform the child's class team as soon as possible. Where necessary, a member of the SLT should support the class team in order to allow them to come out and be told together.
- 5.5. Class staff may need to be given time to process the news and start to grieve. A physical space should be made available to support this. The Headteacher will begin the process of informing other classes. However, as it is possible that these two functions may overlap, it may be more appropriate to call a teacher out of a class and ask her to let the other class staff know – for example, where the child is less known to the class this may be appropriate.
- 5.6. The next step will be informing people not at school. Again there can be no definitive list but these could include:
- Current school staff not in school that day – including therapy staff;
  - Previous school staff who worked closely with the child;
  - Nexus MAT Chief Executive Officer;
  - Social Work team;
  - Local Authority SEND team;
  - Medical team – the school nurse will communicate to them;
  - Taxi driver and escort;
  - Chair of LGB;
  - Respite centres;
  - Other professionals who work with the child e.g. Ed Psych;
  - Parents/ carers – if children have been informed it is appropriate to put out a note to parents informing them of the loss they may need to support or comfort their children. Some parents/ carers may need to be telephoned if their relationship is closer but may not have been informed by the family.
- 5.7. The process for telling the other pupils will be decided by the Headteacher following consultation with the family and teaching staff. With different aged pupils or pupils at different cognition levels than age-related, there will be different decisions made and the class teacher of the class with the loss may be the best person to tell the rest of the children in that class.
- 5.8. It is important that schools avoid adding worry to a child's experience – for example, if the child died in hospital we do not want to give children a fear of hospitals. Although the finality of death cannot be diminished, if there are

mitigating circumstances that may help - such as that the child was in pain and now is free of pain - this can be used to help alleviate sorrow. Children must be told that, while they may feel sad, they do not have to feel guilty if they go on to have fun and pleasure in their day ahead. They must not feel obliged to assume a burden of grief. Children must be allowed to ask questions at this time or at any point in the following days or weeks. Staff must answer honestly and to the best of their knowledge. This is not a time to propound one's own religious beliefs. Guidance for staff is provided at the end of this policy within Appendix C.

## 6. The Funeral

- 6.1. If invited, the Headteacher – and/or the Deputy Head - will make arrangements for the school to be represented at the funeral – either by attending themselves, or by enabling another member of staff to attend. It is likely that the school cannot run safely if every member of staff known to the child were granted leave of absence to attend the funeral.
- 6.2. Consequently, difficult decisions will have to be made concerning attendance in conjunction with the Trust's Business Continuity Plan. If the parents wish to visit the school at any time after the funeral, this will be agreed with the Headteacher.

## 7. Memory Assemblies

- 7.1. It may be appropriate to hold a memory or celebration assembly for the child following discussion and clarification of the family's wishes.

## 8. If A Child Dies in School

- 8.1. If any member of staff has concerns regarding a child's health they will contact their responsible senior leader and/or the Headteacher/Deputy. In most cases of serious concern, the school will call for an ambulance as specified in relevant policies, risk assessments and Care Plans.
- 8.2. Emergency services will advise the school on the protocol for responding to a death on the school site, in terms of the approach required by the Police. If there are issues of concern, then multi agency safeguarding procedures will

be applied and the Headteacher will be a key member of any strategy discussion.

- 8.3. The Government has also published national statutory guidance to be used during a child death review, which can be viewed [here](#). Of note: on occasions a senior police officer and Consultant Paediatrician may need to visit the place of death. This is in line with national guidance.
- 8.4. The Headteacher must notify the CEO of the Trust if there is a death in school at the earliest opportunity.

## 9. If a Child Dies on a School Trip

- 9.1. If a crisis situation occurs whilst a child is out on an educational trip, then the adult with the child - or the teacher in charge - should telephone for an ambulance first and then contact the school to inform the Headteacher.
- 9.2. The school will then take the responsibility of contacting the parents/ carers. Once the ambulance team reaches the child, the child becomes the responsibility of the ambulance team and they will direct any subsequent actions.
- 9.3. The off sites visit protocols give guidance for such situations and should be followed.
- 9.4. The Headteacher must notify the CEO at the earliest opportunity if there is a death out of school. The CEO will then ensure that Trustees and/or governors are informed as a matter of urgency.

## 10. Responding to the media

- 10.1. Some deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, attract media attention. All members of staff should not respond to journalists and to refer all enquiries to the Headteacher, who will make a considered response in partnership with the CEO.
- 10.2. Any discussion between a staff member and an external party could be a breach of the data protection act and would be dealt with as such.

## 11. On-Going Support

11.1. The support required for the school community should be determined by the circumstances of each child death with no instances being the same. The support should be commensurate with the need of staff and children within reasonable expectations on the school to provide. However, the following examples have been included to help prompt the planning process.

11.2. For staff:

- Educational Psychology services often offer counselling support;
- The Trust HR service can provide access to counselling or other services if this is deemed by the Headteacher to be helpful and appropriate;
- Any member of staff who requires external support will have their request considered by the school.

11.3. For Pupils:

- In many cases, children will have a favoured member of staff to approach. The PSHE co-ordinator will ensure that we have suitable books and other materials to help children discuss death and come to terms with loss. Social Stories may be one way to help pupils to understand loss. The Educational Psychology team can offer support to pupils who may need more help.

11.4. For The Family:

- The Headteacher (or another designated individual) will communicate with the family offer support.
- Any further actions (such as gift giving, communicating with other parents/carers etc.) will be informed by the wishes and feelings of the family, unless social care involvement advises otherwise.
- The school will offer parents and family the opportunity to collect any personal belongings of the person who has died.

11.5. The Headteacher will agree with the family:

- How the school will ensure representation at the funeral, if the family wish this;



- If/How the school will hold commemorative events, both at the time and in subsequent years.

11.5.1. If memorial work has been completed, for example a remembrance wall or book, then this should be returned to the parents at an appropriate time, and pupils informed where it has gone.

11.5.2. If the parents wish to visit the school at any time after the funeral, this will be agreed with the Headteacher.

11.5.3. It will then be for the parents/ carers to decide if they wish to maintain on going links. Each family will be different, with differing needs. Therefore, the school will always be there to act as a source of support and information.

## 12. The Death of a child, employee or volunteer

12.1. All of the principles and procedures listed above apply to the death of an employee or volunteer.

## 13. Responsibilities

13.1. The **designated person** within the school who has overall responsibility for support and liaison in event of a death or traumatic loss is the **Headteacher**. In the event that this person is absent then another Senior Leader will take responsibility. Their responsibilities are:

- Implementing the policy and reflecting on its effectiveness in practice;
- Using the expertise within the school and sharing the responsibilities.
- Establishing and co-ordinating links with external agencies;
- Cross-phase liaison with other primary or secondary schools;
- Accessing and co-ordinating training and support for staff.

13.2. The Chief Executive Officer will take a lead on behalf of Trust governance in responding to a bereavement, and may also involve local governors. The Chief Executive Officer responsibilities are:

- To support the Headteacher in overseeing the way in which bereavement is managed;
- To support the Headteacher in overseeing the way in which bereavement is tackled in the curriculum;
- To review practice.

## List of useful online resources

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk) – a useful website offering practical ideas for helping those bereaved in the family and school community.

[www.bluebellwood.org](http://www.bluebellwood.org) – the website of Bluebell Wood, our local Children’s Hospice. Gives details of its facilities and the support it offers.

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk) - a bereavement support service for children who have suffered a loss.

[www.juliesplace.com](http://www.juliesplace.com) – a support resource for bereaved siblings.

[www.bhf.org.uk/smallcreature](http://www.bhf.org.uk/smallcreature) - British Heart Foundation site to help children come to term with loss using carton creatures. An animated film and we have a printed pack to go with it.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00hq722> - Information on the way bereavement affects children.

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/> - Federation of organisations.

## Books on Bereavement

### GRANPA

John Burningham (Puffin, 1998, ISBN 0099-43408-3)

Designed to stimulate discussion rather than to tell a story, the book has a series of scenes of a little girl and her grandad, with comments from each or both of them. At the end, she is shown staring at his empty chair, without comments. The book allows the adult to direct discussion about not only the good things that the child remembers, but also the not so happy memories.

### WHEN DINOSAURS DIE

L & M Brown (Little, Brown, 1996, hb, ISBN 0-316-10197-7)

Charming busy anthropomorphic pictures of dinosaurs illustrate topics and questions and a range of answers about death: Saying Goodbye; Customs and beliefs about death; Why do people die? What does "dead" mean?. It is also quite acute psychologically, acknowledging that disbelief, anger, fear, and sadness are common feelings when someone dies. Expensive, but attractive and appealing to children.

### REMEMBERING GRANDAD

Sheila and Kate Isherwood (Oxford, ISBN 0-19-272368-5)

A girl's grandfather has died and looking back over the happy times they enjoyed together helps her to cope with the loss. Very specific episodes and illustrations give it a life-like feel. Sensible and sound if a little stereotyped in its pictures of family life, it could help children to think about how to remember someone.

### LIPLAP'S WISH

Jonathan London and Sylvia Long (Chronicle Books, 1994, ISBN 0-8118-0505-0)

Liplap the rabbit's grandma has died, and his mother tells him of the rabbit legend that "long ago, when the first rabbits died, they became stars in the sky. And to this day, they come out at night and watch over us. And they remind us that our loved ones' shine forever in our hearts... When Liplap asks if a star might be his grandma, his mother replies, "I think you could wish it were."

### FRED

Posy Simmons (Jonathan Cape, 1987, ISBN 0-2240-2448-5)

## Appendix B

When Fred the cat dies his owners, Nick and Sophie, attend his funeral and learn about his secret life as a famous singer. The story raises the idea of celebrating a life in a good-humoured and touching way, with entertaining pictures and not much text.

### GRANDAD, I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU

De Bode and Broere ( Evans / Helping Hands, 1997, ISBN 0237-51755-8)

A picture book about loss and memories, and potentially a good stimulus to talk about bereavement. Beginnings and endings with lifetimes in between – a beautiful way to explain life and death to children

### LIFETIMES

Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (Belitha Press, 1997, ISBN 1-85561-760-9).

Places human life and death firmly in the natural world, and the tone is quietly reflective: "All around us everywhere, beginnings and endings are going on all the time. It may be sad, but it is the way of all things. For plants; for people; and for birds".

### BADGER'S PARTING GIFTS

Susan Varley (Collins Picture Lions, pb, 1992)

An old favourite, a charming illustrated book in which a very old and much loved badger dies. The forest animals gather and reminisce about the important part Badger played in their lives, and as time passes memories of Badger make them smile. These memories were different for each of them, including very recognisable things like a favourite recipe or showing someone how to knot a tie - Badger's "parting gifts.

### WE LOVE THEM

Martin Waddell (Walker Books,1990, ISBN 0-7445-7256-8)

Death is seen very much as part of life in this nicely illustrated story of life in the country, which conveys the idea that life goes on and that old creatures give way to young ones. But it is a bit too matter of fact about loss - barely is the old dog dead than the children have found a new one, is there an implicit message that dead pets (and people?) are easily replaced.

### GRANDMA'S BILL

## Appendix B

Martin Waddell (Macdonald Young Books, pb, ISBN 0- 7500-0307-3)

Bill's grandma is a widow, and he learns about her "other Bill" by looking through her photo album with her. A bit too stereotypically suburban and middle class for general appeal perhaps. Some like its ordinariness, gentleness and factual accuracy, and couldn't fault what it had to say about death and living on in memories and in the family.

### I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU

H Wilhelm (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985)

A touching story of the love between a little boy and his dog, who have grown up together. When the dog dies, the boy says that, although he is very sad, it helps that he used to tell the dog "I'll always love you" every night. An opportunity to discuss the importance of telling how you feel. Aimed at 4 to 7 year olds and delightfully illustrated.

### A BIRTHDAY PRESENT FOR DANIEL

Juliet Rothman (Prometheus Books, ISBN 1-57392-054-1)

This story of a little girl whose brother has died is intended for children aged 8-12. "A difficult subject handled very well and movingly".

# Bereavement Guidelines

Think about the cognitive and receptive levels of understanding for your group.

The research evidence suggests that children have some understanding of death from an early age. Understanding does of course vary with age, experience, developmental or cognitive level, personality and family circumstances. Children's experience of bereavement is as painful as adults, but there may be differences in how they respond. Adults grieve intensely and consistently, whereas children and young people can be distracted from their grief. They tend to experience periods of intense emotion alongside their more usual moods. This does not, however, mean that children's grieving is superficial.

### 0 - 4 years (emergent understanding)

At this age, children are egocentric and the importance of 'me' is paramount. Children at this stage are interested in the immediate rather than in the future or the past. Children's thinking in their early years is at a concrete, literal level. It is especially important at this stage therefore, not to use abstract terms or euphemisms (such as 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away' for example) as these may cause confusion or anxiety. Be prepared to give repeated explanations as the child comes to terms and tries to understand what has happened and to respond to misconceptions a young child might have. Children of this age are unlikely to have developed the concepts detailed above and so will have little idea that death is permanent. A child of this age may be curious about what happens in death, such as how the dead person keeps warm, eats or drinks (not understanding 'finality') and ask questions accordingly. Very young children can appear to take things in their stride. This is not to underestimate, however, the powerful reactions they may have.

### 4 - 8 years (limited understanding)

As children develop and learn more about their world, they begin to understand that death is permanent. It is around the age of 7 years that children are thought to accept the permanence of death and that it can happen to anyone (Child Bereavement Trust, 2005). Children become aware that death has a cause - illness, accident, violence, etc. and that it happens to all living things. Children of this age may be interested in the facts about what has happened, are still likely to be concrete in their thinking and may use 'magical thinking' (i.e. the belief that they can make things happen e.g. bring the dead person back to life). Children's egocentricity diminishes at this age, so that they become more aware of the feelings of others

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and are able to show empathy and compassion. As a result, although they are more able to express their thoughts and feelings, bereaved children may suppress their own grief in consideration of others.

### 8-12 years (mature understanding)

From around 8 to early adolescence, children and young people begin to develop a more mature understanding of the components of death (although 'magical thinking' may still play a role). Children at this age are able to think in more abstract terms and appreciate the longer term implications and consequences of death. With this realisation, however, comes an understanding of their own mortality, which can give rise to fear and anxiety. Children and young people at this stage still require many opportunities to talk and ask questions.

### Adolescence (accurate understanding)

By adolescence, most young people have an accurate understanding of death and dying.

At times, death may seem distant and at other times it may seem frighteningly close. The prospect of their own death becomes more of a reality and a fear of non-existence can pervade.

### The process of grieving

Adults can help children and young people through the process of grieving by providing age appropriate, factually accurate explanations, using clear language about death. As a result, fears or confusions are minimised. Children are less likely to create fantasies which may be worse than the reality and may compound the distress. Explanations may need to be repeated as children and young people can take time to assimilate difficult information.

The grieving process will be different for each individual. Whilst there are no time scales and no fixed ways in which we should grieve, similarities in the way individuals (both adults and children) respond to bereavements have been identified. The elements of grieving are commonly described as:

#### Early grief

At this stage there may be shock, disbelief and denial. The bereaved may continue to behave as if the dead person is still alive.

#### Acute grief



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This may be described as the 'disorganisation' phase. The bereaved may experience guilt, anxiety, despair, depression, anger, grief in relation to the death.

## Subsiding grief

At this stage, the bereaved person gradually begins to accept the death and begins to move on. This does not mean that the feelings of loss or sadness disappear or that the deceased person is forgotten.

## Behavioural responses to death in children and young people

Children, like adults, react to death in individual ways. Some children do not react immediately and it may be that a minor unrelated loss some time later will trigger a grief reaction. Changes may be evidenced in a child or young person's responses in school and other settings. Responses may be emotional, social, behavioural, physical or academic.

## Emotional responses to death in children and young people

Like adults, children experience a range of emotions as a consequence of bereavement. The following are the most likely:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Anger
- Confusion

Helpful approaches when talking with children and young people:

- Listening is important - listen carefully. Set time aside - be available.
- Show warmth and empathy and be respectful.
- Try not to interrupt - allow silences if need be, a pause may mean that the child may want to re-order their thoughts before continuing.
- Take time to clarify if you think you do not understand a point being made.
- If you need to ask a question, try to use open questions. What/Where/Who/When/How? are good words to start with e.g. How are you feeling about this? How did this make you feel? Who would you like to know/tell about this? When would be a good time to share this?
- Paraphrasing helps to establish an understanding of an important point.
- Acknowledge what has been said - respond appropriately to non-verbal cues - the child may not wish to give you eye contact, but may nod or shake their head in response to a question.

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- Encourage the learning of coping strategies so that a young person does not become over dependent.
- Allow the child to cry - reassure them that it is safe to express their emotions.
- Be honest: it is fine to say, "I don't know" if you cannot answer the question.

## Things to avoid

- Platitudes, "Don't get upset, it'll be alright"
- Relating your own losses, "Yes I remember when my mother died, I felt ..."
- Overcompensating, "No, don't ask her to do that, she's been through such a lot, the poor child"
- Changing the subject, "Try not to think about it, now how about if you got on with ..."
- Telling the child what they should feel, "I know you're upset now but you'll soon feel better"
- Euphemisms- Euphemisms about death and dying should be avoided when talking with bereaved children and young people. Sometimes adults, feel it is kinder to use a euphemism, especially when talking with very young children. Examples of euphemisms about death might include; 'gone to sleep', 'gone away', 'been taken', 'passed away' 'gone to the angels'. Euphemisms can lead to mis-understandings and confusion as children do not appreciate the meaning implied in the euphemism. This is especially the case for children and young people who are literal thinkers (e.g. those on the Autism Spectrum) or at a concrete stage in their cognitive development. The use of euphemisms can lead to anxiety which can complicate the grieving process and may encourage young people to build up fantasies and myths around death.

## Tips

- Speak to children first thing in the morning;
- 1:1 or small groups (similar ability) will be best;
- Use a Social Story – outreach team can help with this
- Use pictures / photographs;
- Ask for support if you need it.

## Useful key messages

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- (Name) was our friend at school.
- We loved him/her very much.
- (Name) was very poorly for a long time and went into hospital.
- The doctors couldn't make her better.
- (Name) died.
- (Name) was not in any pain when she died and she was with people who loved her.
- (Name) will not come back to school and we will not see her again.
- We will remember (Name) in our memories.
- It is ok to ask questions.
- It is ok to feel sad or angry.
- It is ok to talk about (Name)