



# Coping with Bereavement in Church Schools

## Introduction

Every year 20,000 children under the age of 16 will be bereaved of a parent and many more will sadly experience the death of someone special in their lives. Sadly school communities may also experience the death of a child or a member of staff. It is therefore inevitable that, at some time or another, schools will have to deal with a death that affects the whole school community. As children spend the vast majority of their time at school, teachers and staff members will be the primary source of care and support during the school day. Bereaved pupils often view school as being a 'safe haven' and look towards trusted staff members for help.

The Portsmouth and Winchester Diocesan Board of Education shares a duty of care for all headteachers, staff, governors and pupils of our church schools. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a basis for coping with bereavement well within the life of the school.



## Receiving sad news

The school may be informed of the sudden death of a parent or close relative of a pupil, the death of a pupil or the death of a member of staff during school time. This information may come into the school by telephone, email or visit by relative, friend, minister or police. Therefore the person receiving the information needs to know what action to take should this occur.

In a school community there are a number of different bereavements that may be experienced by the individual, class group or whole school:

- The sudden death of a parent or close relative of a child.
- The death of a pupil.
- The death of more than one pupil at a time in accidental or tragic circumstances.
- The death of a member of staff or support staff, or someone closely associated with the school.

In all these cases, even when death is expected, it is traumatic and it is crucial to handle the initial reception and transmission of the information with care and consideration.

It would normally be the case that the headteacher would receive the news. In cases where other members of staff receive news then they should pass this onto the headteacher as soon as possible without discussing it with anyone else.

The headteacher should confirm the information, record it and check it. The headteacher should take a moment to reflect on the news and consider the action required. Further clarification may need to be sought from the family. In all cases, it is important that the views and feeling of those most closely affected should be of primary concern. *Care should be taken to consult with those most closely affected and forewarn them of any announcement that is to be made.*

The chair of governors, the vicar and the Diocesan Education Team should be informed. It is particularly important to inform the Diocesan Education Team if the circumstances of the bereavement may attract the attention of the media for any reason. The process for informing the wider governing body should be agreed with the chair. It is very important to seek external support from the diocese and/or the Local Authority in the case of a tragedy involving multiple deaths.

### **Guidelines for breaking news about bereavement to staff:**

- Any announcement should be based solely on first-hand information that has been received, never make assumptions nor repeat what has been learned by rumour.
- Arrange a staff meeting as soon as reasonably possible. Give the news sensitively and empathetically, being aware that people react in different ways.
- Ensure that there is someone responsible for telling people who are unable to attend the staff meeting (it is very important that everyone hears the same message). Consider the best way of imparting information to those absent.
- Identify a member of staff who will liaise with the individual's family (this is likely to be the headteacher but it could be a member of staff

who happens to have a closer relationship with the family; it could also be the vicar).

- Ensure that a newsletter is sent out quickly giving the facts (a sample template is attached).
- Arrange a staff meeting at the end of the day to ensure that staff are coping with the situation. Identify any unresolved problems or ongoing issues. Check that staff who live alone have contact numbers of friends in the case of need.
- In discussion with the headteacher, chair of governors and vicar, identify those who will be providing bereavement support.
- Make it clear what the procedures will be for informing pupils and the wider community and take the views of staff into account.

### **Guidelines for breaking news of a death to children:**

- Where possible, pupils need to be informed in small groups, i.e. class or tutor groups.
- Identify those pupils who had a close/ long term relationship with the person who has died so that they can be told separately.
- In consultation with the vicar, it may be helpful to hold a special collective worship to bring the school together at the end of the day.
- If appropriate, a special church service or school collective worship can be held at a later time to remember the person who has died.
- Allow the children to ask questions and answer them honestly and factually in terms that they will understand. They will want to question the place of God within this. Try to avoid platitudes or heavy explanations. Pupils will want to verbalise feelings; they will need to



talk about the situation and share their experiences of death. Avoid using euphemisms

- Those children who have had more involvement with the person should be given the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences either within the group or in a one-to-one situation.
- Reassure pupils that not all people who are ill or have an accident will die, and that many people do get better. Ensure that the death of a close friend has nothing to do with what they might have said or done. It is in no way their fault.
- Many pupils will feel the need to show and display their emotions. It is worth opening a 'Memorial Book' for pupils to write thoughts and prayers. Flowers etc. may need to be placed in a central place inside the school.
- With discussion, limit the amount of time. It is preferable to resume normal activities as soon as possible. The regular pattern of the school day is important in helping keep the community together.
- Identify the person(s) who will be helping support pupils at this time.

### **Things to consider:**

- Within the Church school environment it is important to deal sensitively with those who have a strong religious tradition and those who have very little. The needs of the school and the community need to be handled with considerable sensitivity and tact.
- Ensure that all parties i.e. school and clergy/church are working together to help support the family and those who grieve. It may be helpful to formulate some kind of 'action plan', outlining who has been allocated responsibilities (see later).
- It might be appropriate to close the school on the day of the funeral but it is unlikely to be helpful to close it prior to this.
- Some parents, children and staff may not wish to attend special services and this should be respected.
- Parents and pupils will want to show a visible display, flowers, letters, prayers, candles, etc.
- Try to engender an awareness of when people need help and support, particularly those who worked closely with the person who has died and secretaries/administrative staff who are taking telephone calls, dealing with parents, etc.

- Consider practical issues like flowers, a collection, staff cover, transport, making sure everyone knows if the school is closed.
- Great emotional damage can be caused by people who are not aware of the pitfalls and sensitivities involved in offering bereavement counselling. A number of organisations, e.g. Cruse and local hospices are keen to give schools advice and offer professional counselling for pupils and families.
- Schools may need information and advice on the various death traditions and customs of faiths other than Christian. Inadvertent insensitivity or ignorance can cause great offence and add to a family's grief (SACREs have issued valuable advice).
- In all classes there should always be age appropriate books about death, so that children begin to know and understand the vocabulary of death (see recommendations below). These help children articulate their fears and distress when the time comes.
- Learning about dying and death should be an ordinary part of the RE curriculum (e.g. Easter).

Consider setting up a Christian listening project with volunteers from the local parish – this could be started in response to a critical incident or may already be in existence and be drawn on at this time. If children are already used to this and have built relationships with volunteers then the support that it will offer could be more effective. Advice and training about listening are available from the SDBE.

### **Some reflections from experienced headteachers:**

*We had to deal with the death of one of our Year 5 children a few years ago. My deputy and I found the information and support on the Winston's Wish website really helpful.*

*We also drew heavily on our vicar at the time and made sure that staff were comfortable in talking to the children about what had happened. One of our teachers has recently had a family bereavement and wasn't in a place to speak to the children about the child who had died so we took on that role for her. We tried to be as open and honest with the children as possible as it helped us all cope.*

*We involved the children in planning a special celebratory service of her life in school and afterwards created a memorial woodland walk - both of these activities helped us all process what had happened. It's a tough, tough time for any school and for the family involved but we drew lots of strength from each other.*

*A member of staff died overnight once - I personally rang each parent of the children in the class, after briefing the staff the next morning they all told their own classes. We contacted the EP service who used to offer support and the district manager at the time - and of course the diocese. We liaised with the family and the parents and children of the class that she taught were invited to the crematorium - some did go. We had to decide who would represent the school and Governors and closed some classes as a result.*

*Afterwards, we kept in touch with her family and had a memorial/celebration service at school for her life - the children were involved and also suggested something to remember her by - a bench was named after her and placed in a quiet area of the school.*

*When a child has died, huge sensitivity about telling class mates is needed and in dealing with the emotion - lots of time to talk, ELSA's, etc, on hand to see children - 1:1 if needed. Reading lots of passages to help support - a lovely, quite old fashioned booklet called Water bugs and dragonflies by Doris Stickney was useful, as well as counselling support offered by Simon Says charity. In both cases it led to special remembrance services, a special "white" garden was set up at the school and a plaque - there is also an on-going charity in remembrance and the children get involved.*

*We had a member of staff who sadly died last academic year. She had been a member of the school team for over 11 years and in a small school this meant she had worked with all the children and was known by all the families. We tried to deal with this sensitively and let parents know first in a letter which was sent home in an envelope. This meant they could talk to their children on an individual basis first. We then had a very open culture at school; we talked to children about it if they wanted to. Parents let us know if their child was upset about the news, children who made cards were assured that these would be given to the family members (which they were). Our ELSA made time to talk to children about their feelings and children made use of our worry box, we set up an award in the name of the member of staff (they had an artistic background and so we have a yearly*

*art award). We closed the school on the afternoon of the funeral so that staff could attend and talked to children about this as well. Families sent cards and wishes to the family which were shared with the family.*

## **Further support and advice**

The following organisations provide excellent advice and support materials for coping with bereavement within a school context:

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk) – Cruse provides counselling and support and offers information, advice, education and training services. It aims to promote the well-being of bereaved people and to enable them to understand their grief and cope with their loss.

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk) – National UK charity providing specialised training and support for professionals to help them respond to the needs of bereaved families.

[www.natbp.org.uk](http://www.natbp.org.uk) – A charity offering advice and support to both families and professionals.

[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk) – A charity offering advice and support for families who have lost a child.

[www.stchristophers.org.uk](http://www.stchristophers.org.uk) – A charity providing professional care and supporting the emotional, spiritual and social needs of their patients, their families, children, friends and carers.

[www.helenanddouglas.org.uk](http://www.helenanddouglas.org.uk) – A registered charity providing professional care, practical support and friendship for children and young people with life-limiting conditions, as well as support for their families.

<http://www.reonline.org.uk/ks2/kwlist.php> - Information about death in different faiths.

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk) – Schools information packs and lesson aids.

[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk) – Lots of support materials including downloadable information packs put together for use in schools.

The 2011 Grove Booklet, 'Journeying Through Bereavement in Schools' is an excellent resource. (available to download from [www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk))

**Example action plan for the school**

<b>Lead Roles</b>	<b>Person/s Responsible</b>	<b>Mobile Number</b>
Ask clergy to visit the school and offer any support needed for example, pray with staff, pupils, listen to people, be out on the playground and in the staffroom		
Set up prayer space / reflection area in the church and possibly in school too		
Clergy support for the school, e.g. collective worship or a service		
Send a card/flowers to the family		
Help plan a funeral or memorial service, the diocese has advice and ideas from past experience that may help		

### **Template letter for informing parents of the death of an adult:**

Dear Parents,

It is with great sadness that I have to inform you of the tragic death of <Name>, who has been a <teacher/ teaching assistant> at the school for <years>. Our thoughts and prayers are with <Name .....>'s family at this difficult time.

All of the children have been informed today of <Name's> death and there will undoubtedly be a sense of shock and sadness within the school community during the coming days.

Children are likely to ask questions about death that need to be answered honestly and factually according to their age and understanding.

The children have been told that their teachers are will try to answer their questions at school but if there is anything else that would support you in talking to your child, please do not hesitate to contact the school office.

Once details regarding the funeral are clearer, then parents will be informed of what arrangements the school will make regarding flowers and a memorial.

<Headteacher>

### **Template letter for informing parents of the death of a child:**

*(The content needs to be checked with the family first.)*

Dear Parents,

Your child's class teacher had the sad and difficult task today of informing the children of the death of: Name> a pupil in <Year>.

<Name> had been fighting cancer for some considerable time. As you may be aware, many children who have this illness get better but sadly <Name> had been ill for a long time and died peacefully yesterday. Our thoughts and prayers are with <Name's> family at this time.

There will undoubtedly be a sense of shock and sadness within the school community during the coming days. Children are likely to ask questions about death that need to be answered honestly and factually according to their age and understanding.

The children have been told that their teachers are will try to answer their questions at school but if there is anything else that would support you in talking to your child, please do not hesitate to contact the school office.

In full consultation with the family the school will arrange a memorial service as a means of celebrating <Name's> life.

<Headteacher>

## **Collective Worship on the theme of Saying Goodbye**

### **Introduction:**

It is always a good idea to hold a special service when there has been a death of a child or an adult in the school. It brings the school community together and enables them to share their memories and grief. Death can be after a long illness when there has been time to think and prepare or it can be sudden. In both cases, there is not always time to prepare something in advance. The outline below will give you a simple structure to follow or adapt.

If members of the family wish to attend, it makes it more personal and they often find comfort in being present. Others may find it hard, but they should be offered the choice.

### **Creating an atmosphere for worship:**

It is worth considering where the worship might take place. It might be in the school hall or perhaps in the local church. It might be that in the summer term it could be held outside.

Thought should be given as to how an atmosphere can be created. It is often a lovely idea to have photographs of the deceased on a PowerPoint loop that the pupils can watch, reflect and remember as they enter. This should be discussed with the grieving family as it could cause distress. It might be more appropriate to have images of growth and hope from the natural world.



It is also a good idea to set up a special table/altar with a special cloth, candle, a photograph and some flowers (and perhaps a sprig of rosemary for remembrance).

### **Introductory music:**

There is a vast amount of appropriate music that can be used. It is a good idea to consult the classes as there may be some favourite music. It is a good idea to encourage the staff to contribute ideas.

### **The act of worship:**

Welcome everyone and begin by explaining how important it is to remember.

Give a brief factual input about the circumstances surrounding the death.

Light the candle.

Perhaps pupils and staff can alternate between memories of the person and bringing objects or pictures/drawings to remember the deceased and placing them on the table.

It is often a good idea to have a special memory box prepared on the table.

This can be used to place the objects in at the end and it can be presented to the family.

### **Prayer and reflection:**

There are many published prayers for these times, but it is often prayers from the pupils themselves that have more meaning.

It is also a lovely idea to have a large bowl of water or an empty basket. Children and adults can pick up a pebble, come forward and, using the pebbles as a vehicle for prayer, carefully drop their pebbles/prayers/thoughts about the person into the bowl or empty basket.

It is important that all of the children have an opportunity to say goodbye.



## Hymns and songs / exit music:

You may want to sing a hymn, but this is often difficult when pupils and adults are feeling sad. It might be that pupils leave to a favourite song. It can be more uplifting to change the atmosphere.

It is a good idea to hold the worship before break or lunchtime, so that those who feel quite sad can have time to recover before going back to a normal timetable. Some pupils may require someone to talk to.

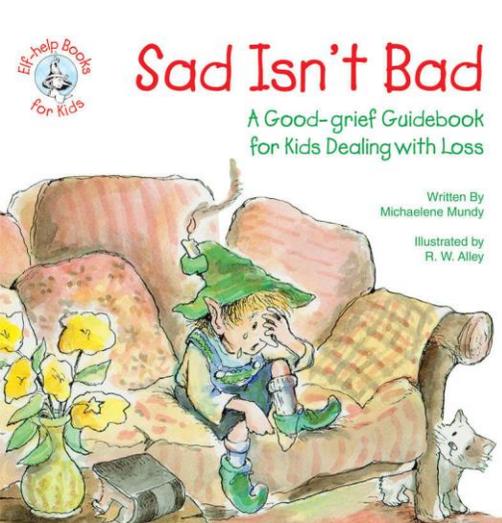
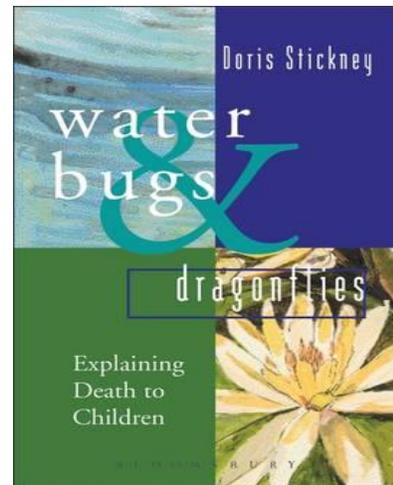
The school may consider designing and setting up a memory garden where they could plant seeds or plants to remember the person. The pebbles can be weather-proofed and placed there as well. The school may wish to buy a special seat or a fountain or something to create a space for reflection.

## Books for children:

Water Bugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children (Looking Up) by Doris Stickney (Feb 2004)

Always and Forever by Alan Durant and Debi Gliori (Sep 2004)

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Michaelene Mundy (Mar 2004)



When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief (Drawing Out Feelings) by Marge Heegaard (Jan 1991)

Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley and Susan Varley (Dec 1992)

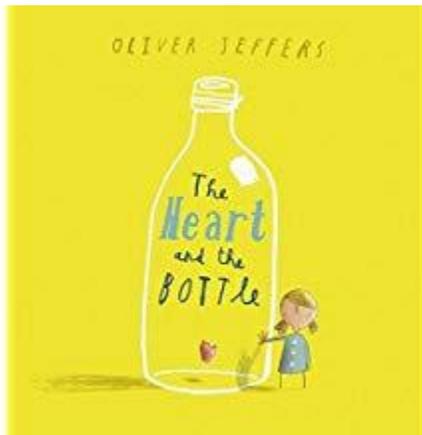
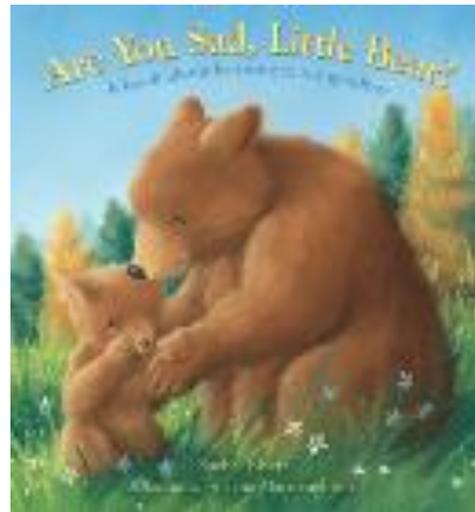
Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone Has Died (Winstons Wish) by Diana Crossley and Kate Sheppard (Oct 2000)

Gentle Willow: A Story for Children about Dying by Joyce C. Mills and Cary Pillo (Dec 2003)

Michael Rosen's Sad Book by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake (Feb 2008)

Up in Heaven by Emma Chichester Clark (April 2004)

The Yearning Tree: A Children's Bereavement Resource by Gina S. Farago (Feb 2011)



The Day the Sea went out and never came back (Helping Children with Feelings) by Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong (Oct 2003)

I Miss You by Pat Thomas (May 2009)

The 10th good thing about Barney by Judith Viorst

The day Great-grandma moved house: A Story Explaining Death and Bereavement to Young Children by Joy Smith and Angela Paifrey (Nov 2000)

Does God Have An Airplane?: A Candid Journey of Bereavement Through the Eyes of a Child by Kimberly Mettler-Eells (Jan 2010)

The Lonely Tree by Nicholas Halliday

The very hungry caterpillar by E Carle

Remembering Mum by G Perkins and L Morris

A Taste of Blackberries by Doris Buchanan Smith

All we know about Heaven by Peter Crowther

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson

Butterfly Summer by Christine Wood

The Day Grandma Died by Jan Selby

Dogger by Shirley Hughes

Emma Says Goodbye by Carolyn Nystrom

Emma's Cat Dies by Nigel Snell

Fred by Posy Simmonds

Frog and the Birdsong by Max Velthuijs

Goodbye Max by Holly Keller

Grandpa's Slide Show by Deborah Gould

Granpa by John Burningham

Gran's Grave by Wendy Green

I Feel Sad by Brian Moses

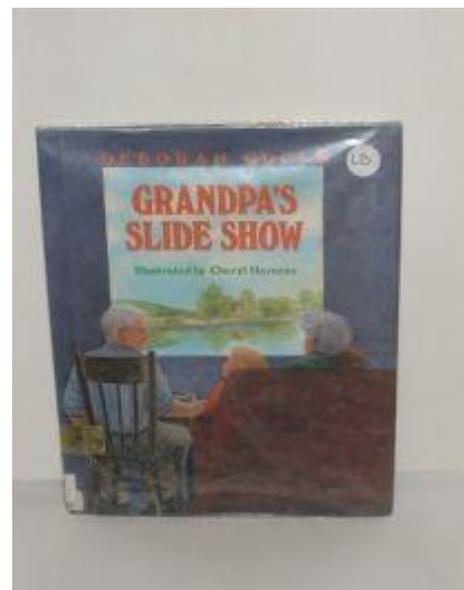
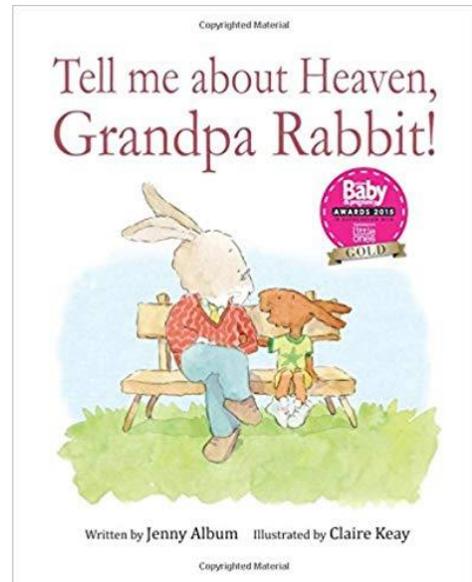
I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhem

Life's End by Denise Chaplin & Lynne Broadbent

Love You Forever by Robert Munsch

Mama's Going to Buy you a Mockingbird by Jean Little

On Eagle's Wings by Sue Mayfield



Patterns in the Sand by Sue Mayfield

Sam's Story by Fiona Chin-Yee

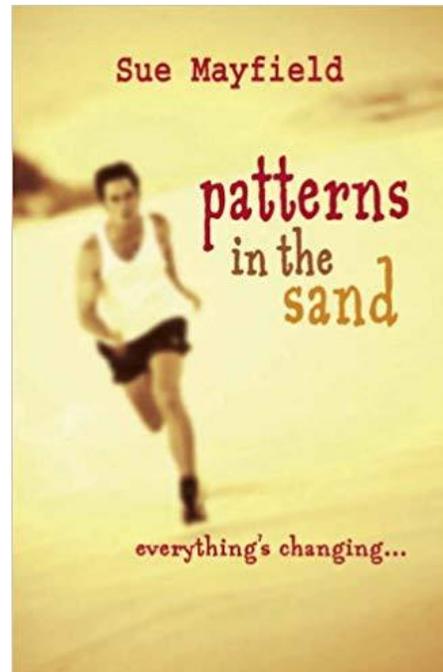
Scrumpy by Elizabeth Dale

Vicky Angel by Jacqueline Wilson

When Mum Died published by Hillins & Sireling

Will my Rabbit go to Heaven? by Jeremy Hughes

The Goodbye Boat by Mary Joslin and Clare St Louis Little



### **Further reading for adults:**

Talking with Children and Young People About Death and Dying: A Resource - Mary Turner & Bob Thomas

Talking About Death and Bereavement in School: How to Help Children Aged 4 to 11 to Feel Supported and Understood - Ann Chadwick

Living with grief in school: Guidance for primary school teachers and staff – Ann Chadwick

The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools (Independent Thinking Series) - Ian Gilbert, with William and Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert

You'll Get Over It: The Rage of Bereavement - Virginia Ironside

Childhood Bereavement: Developing the curriculum and pastoral support - Job & Francis