

#### **4- Step Response Plan to a Bereavement during Covid-19 Coronavirus Period**

**Step 1:** Initial remote contact with the child and family, responding to immediate needs

**Step 2:** Longer term remote support for the child and family during coronavirus restrictions

**Step 3:** School sharing information of the bereavement with staff, children and families

**Step 4:** Longer term in-school work with children affected by bereavement as result of coronavirus

In the event of a bereavement:

#### **Step 1: Initial contact will be made with the family as a 'holding' position to explore and meet initial, immediate needs such as:**

- An initial crisis counselling session by school's allocated Catholic Care Worker, with an adult caregiver within the family via phone / video call to allow them to reach out and share how they are feeling at that time
- An initial crisis session with the child(ren) via phone/video call by Catholic Care worker to allow them to reach out and share how they are feeling
- Childcare arrangements to be made by school if these can be provided to offer a different environment for the child/ren effected and to enable the family to make practical arrangements
- Catholic Care worker to provide practical support ie food parcels / shopping service to take that pressure off the family
- Catholic Care worker to assist family by offering advice on processes to follow in cases of death and funeral arrangements at this time and forms to complete etc

#### **Step 2: Telephone counselling**

- Catholic Care worker to make a referral to Catholic Care telephone counsellors for regular, longer-term telephone counselling support for adults effected by the death
- Catholic Care worker to provide regular, longer-term telephone/video grief-based sessions for children effected. Additional Catholic Care workers may be called upon if the number of bereavements in school is high.

### **Step 3: School's sharing of the information**

#### **A. Family consent:**

- School to ascertain what information the family would prefer to have disclosed to the school community.
- School to agree with family at what stage this information should be shared – taking into account what is in the best interests of the family and wider school community.

#### **B. Inform staff:**

- Arrange a staff meeting for the earliest opportunity for staff at school and absent staff via telephone / video conference call.
- At the staff meeting, tell the story of what happened leading up to the death.
- Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred.
- Tell staff the information that the family would prefer to have disclosed.

#### **Be prepared for strong reactions of upset and feelings of anger/guilt from staff members, including:**

- Consider the relationship between staff members and the deceased and how it will impact upon them
- Consider how staff members may connect the current incident to personal experiences of grief, loss and/or trauma.
- Consider how staff members may have fearful – and most likely irrational – thoughts of personal responsibility for the death.

Encourage everyone to consider how to meet their own support needs; this may be from friends, family, support services and/or colleagues.

- Be prepared for the need to enlist cover staff for those who are too overwhelmed to work.
- Signpost staff members to Catholic Care worker for support or provide contact details for grief support services in your local area.

#### **C. Inform children & families :**

##### **(i) Inform children at school**

Provide staff with a script about what has happened so that consistent information is given to all of the children in school. A sample script is given below.

#### **Notes to remember for staff:**

When communicating with children:

- Refer to the person's name as they had been known
- Avoid the confusion of euphemisms such as 'lost' and 'passed away'
- Use clear words such as 'dead', 'died' and 'death'.
- To prevent your staff from needing to think of appropriate answers on the spot, where possible, include answers to difficult questions that children may ask.

#### **Sample scripts for teaching staff to use with children in school :**

“I’ve got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. I know most of you will have heard of coronavirus, and you will know that a lot of the time people with coronavirus have been getting better, but other times people have died from it. *Mr/s X teacher / child / child’s family member* has been ill with coronavirus, and I have to tell you that *s/he* died yesterday in hospital. Let’s take some time to think/pray for them and their families at this difficult time.”

**(ii) Prepare a letter to parents and carers. A sample letter is given below.**

Dear Parent,

As a school we have had the sad task of informing your child that (Name.....). a pupil/member of staff has recently died due to being ill with Covid-19 Coronavirus.

It is important that both parents and school work together to support our children.

When someone dies their family and friends experience lots of different feelings including sadness, upset, anger, anxiety and confusion, to name but a few. These are all a normal part of the grieving process.

The children have been told that their teachers and staff are willing to try and answer any questions at school.

Advice and support is also being offered from our Catholic Care Worker. If you wish to contact her, please call the school office and they will arrange to call you.

Bereavement and loss websites can be accessed via websites including:

For children:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>

For adults:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

<https://www.bereavementuk.co.uk/>

<https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>

Yours sincerely

Head teacher

\*Include information on the ‘Ages and stages of understanding of death and grief’ as part of the letter or signpost to a link on the website - please see this information at the end of this document

**Please remember:**

Do not worry if the chaos of events does not allow you to follow plans and policies to the letter.

- Follow your intuition
- Remember that keeping people as informed as possible is always helpful
- One single individual should not feel burdened with all responsibility; this needs to be shared among senior leadership.
- Trained and experienced practitioners are available on the Winston’s Wish Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021) should you want to check out ideas throughout the day.

## **Step 4: Longer term in-school work with children who have experienced bereavement as a result of Coronavirus \***

When children return back to school ...

### **A. Referrals to Catholic Care Worker**

- Catholic Care worker to continue ongoing work with all children effected by the coronavirus within the school setting.

- New referrals for bereavements can be made to Catholic Care worker

### **B. All staff**

All staff working with the children when they return to school can support bereaved children in their daily interactions. It is helpful for staff to remember:

- A young people's responses to the death of someone important will vary according to:
  - Their age
  - Their relationship with the person
  - Previous experience of death or trauma within the family
  - Their own resilience and the support and care they receive
  - The cause and nature of the death (e.g. whether sudden or expected, by suicide or violence)

#### **If a death is sudden, as in the case of coronavirus:**

- There may have been no chance for goodbyes and no chance for preparations or adjustment. The last conversations the child had with the deceased person may linger in their memory.

#### **To involve children & young people in the mourning process staff can:**

- **Listen** to pupils who want to share. Simply listening can be a powerful healing force.
- **Protect** pupils who are fragile from others who may ridicule or bully them for their sensitivity.
- **Model** adult behaviour that demonstrates to pupils how responsible adults react to grief and loss yet maintain calm routines in school.
- **Ages and Stages:** Staff can also consult the 'ages and stages of how children are effected by grief' table at the bottom of this document to understand how the children they are working with may be processing their grief.

### **C.School-based interventions**

- **Hold a special assembly / remembrance service within school**

A special assembly can be useful to normalise and share grief, and to let pupils know that it is OK to be sad, and equally it is OK to not feel affected.

Pupils and staff could be involved with planning (with adult support depending on the pupil's age and understanding) as it provides a collective sense of doing something positive. Some ideas for the assembly/service:

- Light a memory candle and reflect for a minute

- Create memory box or book, and invite pupils to contribute their written memories or stories on an individual card to be stuck in the book or placed in the box.
- Pupils may wish to recite poems, songs or stories about the deceased.

### Ending the assembly/service needs thoughtful planning.

Some ideas:

- Blowing out the memory candle
- Ask pupils to bring a farewell message to the event, to put into a special box as they leave.
- Reflective but uplifting music

#### ● **The school curriculum**

Provides opportunities for teachers and pupils to explore experiences and feelings of grief, including English Literature, the Sciences, Religious Education, History and Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE).

However staff should take care to think how bereaved children may be affected by lesson content. Families should be consulted over whether it is appropriate for their child to attend, about different religious / cultural beliefs, and if additional support may be needed.

#### ● **Plant a special tree in the school garden**

This should be for all the people who have died as a result of coronavirus rather than just one person, as failure to respond similarly in the future to the death of another person may cause upset. Special events around the memory tree can be held to remember the bereaved throughout the year, for example decorating the tree at Christmas and Easter, singing hymns and saying prayers around the tree.

#### ● **Memory stones**

This activity can be undertaken in a group setting or 1-2-1. 3 types of stones are required:

1. A jagged, rocky pebble: Encourage description of how it feels when held tightly, i.e. “not nice”, “sharp”, “a bit painful”.

Explain that that this stone is like the difficult memories and thoughts that some pupils may have, such as struggling with the way the person died, or feelings of guilt and shame about having a difficult relationship with the person, or wishing their last words to the deceased were different.

2. A normal, rounded pebble: Encourage description of how it is, i.e. “normal”, “smooth”, “ordinary”. Explain that this stone is like the ordinary memories of the person, such as their favourite lesson or food.

3. A shiny gemstone: Encourage description i.e. “shiny”, “precious”, “nice”. Explain that this stone is like the positive memories of the deceased, such as on a school trip or a fun moment.

All three stones are valid and the memories they represent are all true. The stones can all be held together in one hand, like the memories can all be held in mind together.

### **Additional information:**

\*As per above, the following information that can be included on the letter home for parents and can be shared with staff to help them in their daily interactions with children effected by bereavement:

### **How Ages and Stages affects a Child's understanding of Death and the Grieving Process**

#### **Children under 3 years old:**

- Very young children and babies are not able to understand death but experience the loss as a separation from someone they have an attachment to.
- Children at this age have little language to express their loss and will react to it by crying inconsolably or become withdrawn.
- They will be affected by the emotional state of their care givers. They may repeatedly search for the deceased person or have an unspoken expectation that they will 'return'.
- They also benefit from the same type of consistent and repeated explanations as detailed below for ages 3 to 5 and the maintenance of routine.

#### **Early Years Education – aged 3 to 5 – Preschool and Reception:**

- When a child this young experiences the death of someone important, it is important they are helped to know about the person as an integral part of their history.
- Young children often ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to understand their loss. They are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world.
- Their repeated questions are not a sign that our explanations aren't good enough.
- Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss.
- They may worry about how the person who has died will eat breathe and keep warm. It is important to give them simple, factual information and tell them that once someone has died, their body stops working so they don't feel pain anymore and they don't feel hot or cold and they don't need to eat or drink anything.
- Children's thoughts are concrete and characterised by "magical thinking". They may struggle to understand abstract concepts (such as heaven) or roundabout ways of explaining death (e.g. 'gone to sleep').
- Children may believe it was something they said or did that caused the death or they may believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the person back. They need to be reassured that the death was not their fault and gently reminded that the person will not come back.
- It is important to maintain a routine as normal as possible for the child. It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to younger behaviours such as separation anxiety, incontinence, and use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Being tolerant and managing the separation will be helpful for the child and the family.

#### **Key Stage 1 – Ages 5 to 7 – Years 1 and 2:**

- Children of this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent; however, some confusion may still stand. When first told of the death, younger children may be mainly concerned with the 'when' and 'where' of the death.
- They may express concerns about their own future such as: 'What will happen to me? Who will meet me after school? Will I still go to Cubs?' Giving reassurance about everyday activities and arrangements continuing as normal, or clear explanations about alternative arrangements, will be helpful for the child.
- Children may become clingy or more reluctant to see parents and carers leave. There may be a need to stick close to their parent to protect them from the mysterious occurrence that made their dad disappear or at least to be with them if it happens again.
- Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal, but it is important that routines are maintained while gently acknowledging when someone important dies we feel things like sadness and worry in our bodies too.
- They can also feel that in some way they were responsible for the death, e.g. 'I was angry with him and shouted at him. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came to school again. It's my fault.' It can be worth saying something like: 'You do know, don't you, that nothing you said or did made this happen?'

### **Key Stage 2 – Ages 7 to 11 – Years 3, 4, 5 and 6:**

- As children begin to understand more about death and dying, a death may make them anxious about the health and safety of themselves and members of their family. They may feel very responsible for their parent(s) and younger siblings and feel the need to keep a close eye on their safety.
- Children this age can find it difficult to talk about their bereavement and express their feelings behaviourally, such as withdrawing from others or showing increased aggression. They may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers, particularly as the death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else. It is important to avoid clichés like "You're being so brave" as children can interpret this as they should not share their feelings. They may need a safe space or quiet area away from peers to calm down or express their emotions with an adult.
- Children of this age also show curiosity about issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear, factual explanations.
- Children can also think of death as something spooky, like a zombie, or a spirit that comes to get you. Normalising feelings, talking about or drawing specific worries and sharing bad dreams can be reassuring, giving children skills and confidence to feel more in charge of them.
- By the age of 10, children will usually have all of the bits of the jigsaw puzzle of understanding. They will even understand that they are able to cause their own death. They will appreciate clear and detailed information – beyond 'when', 'where' and 'how' the death happened, they will be interested in 'why'.

### **Key Stage 3 – Ages 11 to 14 – Years 7, 8, and 9:**

- In this age range young people are much more aware of the finality of death and the impact the death has on them. They are able to understand death as both concrete and abstract. They begin to move away from dependence on the family and they start to form important relationships with other young people, however the death of someone important can easily destabilise them, leaving them feeling unsafe and more dependent on the family.

- Some older children and teenagers may feel internal conflict as a result of feeling a pull towards being with their peers at the same time as their own need or an expectation that they spend time with their family.
- Their ability to manage their feelings may be disrupted and lead to mood swings or more definite ups and downs in their feelings. Big emotional releases (such as anger or distress) are not uncommon but can be scary for children at this stage. They will benefit from your willingness to listen and your assurances that the feelings are normal.
- It is important to find ways to build their self-esteem. Young people at this age are beginning to think of the longer term consequences of the loss of the relationship. They are aware of the loss they feel in the present, but also of the losses they will experience in the coming months and years when they encounter certain important milestones, or occasions and realise that they won't be able to share these with the person who has died. Talking through these future events and exploring ways of including the person can be helpful.

**Key Stage 4 and Sixth Form – Ages 14 to 18 – Years 10, 11, 12 and 13:**

- Friends and peers are increasingly important as young people develop their ideas of who they are and what is important to them. They want to be accepted by other important people in their lives. Their bodies are changing; they are aware of all sorts of possibilities for themselves and their future.
- Young people may struggle to make longer term plans as the death of someone important causes them to reflect on “the meaning of life” and ponder on the question “what’s the point?” Or you may find that they are so busy with different activities they don't stop to reflect. This can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they are worried about losing control of their emotions.
- It is quite common for risk-taking behaviour to increase during adolescence as young people test the boundaries. Although an adolescent's thought process is most like an adult's, they are still going through important emotional development at this age and are not ready to manage adult responsibilities even if at times they think they are adult.
- They need to be reassured of your care and support and to know that the limits you set are still enforced. As always, if you have any concerns about a young person's safety it is vital you take a pro-active approach and apply your safeguarding policies and procedures.