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| **Supporting Bereaved Children and Young People**Guidance for Essex Schools and Education Settings**Essex Educational Psychology**September 2024 |

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The following guidance is a summary of the best practice from the seminal book

by Ian Gilbert (with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert)

**The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools**

* **Most important response to a bereaved child is attending to what they say or they indicate (through their behaviour) as to how they are living with that death and what helps them.**
1. As soon as the death is known to the school have a senior member of staff talk to the immediate classmates about what has happened and offer support for those who may be affected.
* Ignorance is a vacuum that gossip quickly fills.
1. Send a condolence card and encourage classmates to do the same.
* Saying ‘I didn’t know what to do’ and doing nothing is a form of moral cowardice. No-one else knows what to do either.
1. When the child comes back to school talk to them (but don’t patronise them). Ask them how they would like their teachers to act.
* Possible strategy could be to deflect your sympathy towards another family member.
* Be aware that grief is like standing on a beach and being hit by waves. You don’t know when they are going to hit but you know they will and there is nothing you can do to stop it.
* Make sure all teaching and non-teaching staff are keeping a discreet and caring watch over the child.
1. Teach other children to know what to say and how to handle things.
* Culturally we treat death like Belgium. We know it’s not far away but no-one wants to talk about it let alone go there.
* The more you can talk about dying with the children, before a real-life death takes place in your school the better (in Gilbert’s view).
* Don’t let them think if the grieving child is laughing then they have forgotten. Or if they are crying they should be given a tissue to make them stop.
1. School can be a place to escape from what is going on at home.
* But one size won’t fit all.
* Ask the child and liaise with the parent about the preferred strategy of the child.
1. Grieving is mentally and physically exhausting.
* At home talking about what has happened and how everyone is feeling is no respecter of bedtimes.
1. Be tolerant of homework and other work commitments.
* Be firm but caring as you try to ensure they don’t get too far behind.
1. Talk to the spouse if they come to the school.
* Be mindful of the enormous effort the parent is making and the strain they are under.
* However hard it is for you it is so much harder for them.
1. Keep on talking to the child and letting them know you still remember, even in small ways.
* Adults grieve in rivers where they are fully immersed in their grief for an extended period of time following a death. Little children grieve in puddles.
* The bereaved person never forgets about the person they are missing and the fact that you mention them by name means that person is still, in some way, alive.
1. Remember the anniversaries.
* Make a note of date/s.
* Filling in a ‘holiday form’.
* Transitions to other schools.
1. Be aware of areas you may cover in the curriculum that may bring back memories.
* Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, life after death in RE, areas that touch on illness.
* Give the child a warning. Give them the choice.
1. Be mindful of other children who have lost a loved one as it will bring back many memories.
* 24000 children a year have to come to terms with losing a parent; 3000 YP a year die from accidents or illness; 6000 families a year affected by suicide. Sooner or later, probably sooner, the issue will arise in a school.
* Consider having a quiet, discreet word with the child who has previously lost a loved one, to see how they’re doing too.
1. Learn about helping children to cope with bereavement from the various agencies out there.
* Local hospices, church groups, Yoyo project
* Larger organisations: Winston’s Wish, Cruse, Child Bereavement UK.
1. Time heals in bereavement as much as it does following an amputation.
* But healing implies getting better, going back to how it was, being as good as before.
* In bereavement, life gets better, not because of the absence of the pain, but because you learn to live your life despite it.
* Grieving can be like a ‘pebble in your pocket’ (always there, uncomfortable at times, sticks into you when you least expect it, but at times you can get it out and hold it and deal with it, then put it back in your pocket till next time, and get on with your life).
* If you’re worried about not talking to someone about their loss for fear of upsetting them, don’t worry. They’re upset anyway, just hiding it. And talking to them can help.
1. You can make a terrible situation a bit less stressful for a grieving family.
* Nothing can take away the pain of the loss the children are dealing with. But actions from school staff – small ones, whole-school ones, genuine ones, professional ones, personal ones – can make an awful scenario just a little bit easier to deal with.

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