

Bereavement Guidance for Schools and Parent/Carers during COVID19

Supporting the document for 'COVID19 Critical Incident support in Schools'

RBWM Educational Psychology Service

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Generally people deal with adversity in a sensible way. People don't usually panic. People cope. People are tougher than we sometimes give them credit for. People show great courage, resourcefulness, adaptability, resiliency, hopefulness and humanitarianism

Wessely S, 2005

More children and young people will experience bereavement during the current global COVID 19 pandemic. Isolation and regular information regarding Covid 19 can also make the grief process more difficult and distressing, particularly in a context where social distancing is in place. Usually, physical contact and connection brings comfort and support during distressing times, and so we have put together some guidance to help us think about how we can support each other in these new and evolving times.

This guidance is in addition to the new COVID19 Critical Incident support in Schools (April 2020).

Grieving and isolation

Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Advice is usually to avoid isolating yourself, but we are in a situation where increasing numbers of people are being told to self-isolate and cut all but essential physical contact with others.

This can make feelings of loneliness and grief more intense. A bereaved family might be isolated together, and although this at times may be a support, at other times tensions and resentments could be magnified making it difficult for them to help each other. If children and teenagers are isolated it could be difficult for carers to keep them occupied and deal with their own emotions and fears. The impact of dealing with bereavement, compounded with feelings of worry about external situations, can mean that feelings of grief aren't fully expressed.

Isolation can also make it harder to process grief. At times like this when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, people can find themselves distracted from dealing with their grief.

Practical concerns and considerations may also come up. The person who died may have been a partner, parent or carer and the bereaved person may be left without practical or emotional

support at a time they need it most. Friends and relatives who might otherwise have been able to provide practical support, e.g. help with meals and shopping may also be isolating or preoccupied with their own family's situation

How you can help yourself

Although you may not be able to see people in person, you can **keep in regular contact with others** using the phone, text, or internet if it is available to you.

Look after yourself and get rest. You may find the following helpful:

- get some fresh air or sunlight each day - even opening a window can help
- do some exercise around the house if you are able
- keep to a regular routine of getting up and dressed and eating meals at the usual time, whether you are on your own or part of a family group.

At times when you have more energy, you might want to find some jobs to do around the house or garden (if you have one). It is normal to move between intense grieving and looking to the future after someone dies, and there may be some things you can achieve even if you cannot go out.

Don't feel guilty if you are struggling. Reach out to others who might be finding it difficult too, you may be able to help each other.

Seek practical help from friends, family or neighbours.

The Educational Psychology team will be working with the Local Authority in supporting wellbeing through these difficult times.

How you can help another person

Try to stay in contact with bereaved friends and family even if you cannot visit. Find out if they can talk on the phone, or over the internet if they have the technology available. Let them talk about how they are feeling and about the person who has died – talking can be one of the most helpful things. Consider sending a letter, card or note to let them know you are thinking of them.

If you run or attend a regular social group or activity and this has been cancelled, consider keeping in touch with the members using other means, or perhaps even running the group using Skype or another video messaging service.

If you know someone might struggle practically, offer to help by delivering off supplies and gifts. You should always follow the latest government guidelines about social contact.

How children and young people can be supported at home or in school

It is important to remember that all the evidence so far is that children are less likely to become infected or, if infected, show milder symptoms of the coronavirus than adults.

However, children and young people will be hugely affected by what is going on around them at this difficult time. Their lives are changing and they will have picked up worries and fears about

the virus and the possibility that they or someone they love and depend on may get ill. They may be particularly worried that grandparents, older relatives and family members with health conditions or disabilities might die. They will also pick up on other worries parents and carers may have about the situation.

For families in isolation, it may mean that activities usually available which help children and young people switch off, relax and cope with stress are not available. It is not unusual for tempers to fray when families are together for long periods, in close quarters.

Talk honestly with children about both facts and emotions. Ask what they know – they may be getting information from friends or social media which is incorrect or distorted.

With a younger child you may need to give information in small chunks. Talking about the situation and about the possibility of death and dying is an ongoing conversation. It's OK to let them know if you don't know the answers to some of their questions.

Don't make promises ('Grandma will be fine') but reassure them that they are loved and supported. Parents/ carers should let them know about any plans for what might happen if some in the family gets ill.

Families need to keep to a routine and help children get some exercise even if they can't leave the house. Help them keep in contact with friends and relatives over the phone or internet.

Don't set unrealistic goals about what you can do under exceptional circumstances, especially if you are working at home and caring for young children.

If you are at home try to make sure you all get some time apart, and time to relax. Where possible, let children and young people make some choices about what they are doing, as this may help give them some sense of control over their lives.

Balancing Fact with Reassurance and Resilience

One continual challenge for keyworkers, parents and carers supporting children and young people facing bereavement or those who have been bereaved is balancing fact, reassurance and resilience. Children are expert at knowing if they are not being told the truth or not.

Equally, they will know the difference between genuine and false reassurance. Rather than saying *"nobody we know is going to die"*, maybe consider saying: *"from all I've heard, it is extremely unlikely that anyone we know will die and we will do everything we can do to keep safe."*

Children feel empowered when they know what to do to keep safe so explain about the importance of washing their hands and perhaps put pictures of this in the bathroom and kitchen to make it a fun activity.

Looking after yourself is key as you have to put on your own oxygen mask first before you can resiliently and safely look after the needs, worries and wellbeing of others.

Additional Information

Support for Education Settings Following a Child Death

Cruse Bereavement Care has published specific booklets for young people and their carers that can be found here:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/parents/free-booklets-children-young-people-and-their-carers>

Winston's Wish

How schools can support children and young people

How to tell a child or young person that someone has died from coronavirus

How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible

Support for Bereaved Children

Organisations offering bereavement support and advice include the following:

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus 0808 802 0021

Seesaw www.facebook.com/SeeSawCharity

Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org 0800 028 8840

Grief Encounters <https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/> 0808 802 0111

Support for Bereaved Adults

Bereavement Care www.bereavementcareandsupport.co.uk 0208 427 5720

Cruse Bereavement Counselling www.cruse.org.uk 0808 808 1677