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# Guidance and Support for Schools in response to Bereavement and Loss during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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## 1. Introduction to the guidance

The Coronavirus pandemic is impacting on all our schools, families, communities and way of life. The current situation means that there is an increased risk of critical incidents, both in the school and the wider school community. This is coupled with a collective raised level of anxiety due to uncertainty around the pandemic and the additional complication of the nationwide closure of schools. There is guidance for schools and families about helpful resources and the support that our service is offering on our [website](#).

Wolverhampton Educational Psychology Service (EPS) continues to offer a critical incident response to schools. In the event of a Coronavirus related death our primary aim will be to offer short-term psychological support and advice to the school's management team to assist them in appropriately managing their school's response. The approach taken will focus on supporting the school with practical steps that can be taken to minimise and contain the impact, provide support and guidance on management of the critical incident, and facilitating effective communication, whilst also offering support for the well-being of school staff and families (as far as possible) during the initial school response.

The Educational Psychology Service developed a guidance document for schools and services for children and young people within the local authority to assist them when responding to a crisis or critical incident ([Coping with Crises Guidance](#)). This guidance document aims to focus on responding to a critical incident whereby a school community has experienced a loss or bereavement directly as a result of Coronavirus. We have developed tailored responses to the most likely incidents of Bereavement and Loss that may occur (see section 2, Table 1). **This work will be offered free of charge and we will be offering support to all schools within Wolverhampton.**

## 2. Support being offered following a bereavement as a result of coronavirus

Loss and Bereavement for the purposes of this guidance is described as:

***'incidents that occur within the school community that involve bereavement and/or loss as a direct result of the Coronavirus pandemic'***

Schools may find it difficult to manage this type of critical incident in the particularly challenging current circumstances where most children are at home and most staff are working remotely. Whilst huge efforts are being made to stay in regular contact with children and young people, school communities are likely to feel less connected, especially during school holiday periods.

In the event of a Coronavirus related Critical Incident the Educational Psychology Service would aim to deliver the support outlined in Table 1 below. In line with our [Coping with Crises Guidance](#) documents, elements of the Critical Incident Pathway will also form part of this guidance. Notably, schools and supporting Local Authority (LA) professionals will be asked to complete the Notification Forms Part 1 & Part 2 in some instances (see Table 1).

Table 1: EPS Offer of Support in the response to a Coronavirus related Critical Incident

<b>Bereavement and Loss</b>	<b>Support Offered</b>
<p><b>In the event of a death impacting on <u>some of the school community</u> such as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a parent/carer of a pupil on roll.</li> <li>- close family of a member of staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We aim to support schools to be able to access resources and feel prepared to respond.</li> <li>• If you have a Service Level Agreement with us, please contact your allocated Educational Psychologist to be able to discuss together about how best to approach the unique circumstance.</li> <li>• If you do not have a Service Level Agreement with us or your allocated psychologist is unavailable, please contact the team on 01902 550609 and we will ensure an Educational Psychologist will contact you for a telephone consultation.</li> <li>• Support we can offer includes guidance in planning your response, support for senior leaders, signposting to useful resources and phone support for staff, families and young people.</li> </ul>
<p><b>In the event of a death impacting on the <u>whole school community</u> such as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a pupil on roll</li> <li>- a staff member.</li> </ul> <p>NB: School to complete the Critical Incident Notification Form and return to Director of Education (<a href="#">Appendix 1</a>).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please contact the team on 01902 550609 and we will contact you to develop our initial offer of support dependent on what you may require.</li> <li>• We are offering Head Teachers and key staff in the school a skype/video consultation with two Educational Psychologists – ideally your school’s Educational Psychologist together with another Educational Psychologist.</li> <li>• Through consultation we will discuss steps and support school can take and provide, and the response and support from EPS.</li> <li>• Support we can offer includes guidance in planning your response, support for senior leaders, signposting to useful resources and phone support for staff, families and young people.</li> </ul>

### 3. What happens when we work with you following a bereavement or loss?

What happens next depends on the individual needs of the school. However, it will generally include advice on the following, with a focus on promoting connectedness, whilst apart at this time.

- Clarifying the facts – what is known, what are perceived or potential narratives in the community, including social media
- Communication with parents – language, messaging, listening and asking questions
- Gaining family's views on what can be shared / what they want to be shared
- How to communicate the information to children and staff – to whom, and when
- Sharing of information with school staff to talk about typical responses to critical incidents and how to manage them
- Reducing anxiety and de-escalating panic responses – families, children, staff.
- Support for staff and pupils both within school and externally regarding their own wellbeing
- Identification of and planning for vulnerable children who may be affected.
- Managing social media and the press

At all levels, the EP will support the school in the immediate aftermath of the incident and follow up with you over the next few days to help support with any issues which arise. This will typically be through a combination of telephone calls, video meetings and emails.

We are also able to offer remote support to children, families and staff where appropriate. Having said this, help and support for children and their families are best provided by a trusted, familiar adult as and when it is needed and we can support you to do this.

In time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional counselling. We do not advise an immediate offer of counselling to bereaved families – grief is a normal process and those who are grieving may need to be reassured that whatever emotions they are feeling, it is perfectly normal, and there is no one process of grieving for all. It is usually only when feelings remain overwhelming over a period of weeks when counselling support may become a more appropriate offer.

Some families with less community support may wish to seek professional support earlier while the 'stay at home' guidance is in place. Therefore, it is extremely important that school staff endeavour to remain in regular contact with bereaved families to be aware of how they are managing and coping with their loss on a week to week basis.

In the following sections we have provided guidance for school staff on how they may offer support and respond to the needs of a grieving family, colleague or pupil. Please see [Appendix 2](#) for links to additional resources

## 4. Guidance on your initial school response

Your initial response (to be adapted for your situation and your school):

1. The Head Teacher (or tutor/class teacher or head of year) should contact the family to:
  - acknowledge what has happened
  - express support and sorrow for their loss
  - discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community
  - check if the family want their contact information shared, should a platform for condolences be arranged (or offer to provide one for them).
  - ask whether there is any immediate help you can offer.
2. The Head Teacher shares information with their Chair of Governors.
3. The Head Teacher then shares the information with rest of staff and, where possible, follows family choice on how this news is shared more widely with a) the child's peers and b) the rest of the school.
4. Head Teacher (or tutor/class teacher or head of year) makes contact with a child or young person who has experienced a loss as a result of Coronavirus in a way that is deemed appropriate (and in line with guidance on social distancing). This could be via the phone or video chats, or through a written card or letter to the child/young person to acknowledge what has happened and express support.
5. One (or two) contacts are agreed with the family to liaise with them and the child. This may be the Head Teacher and class teacher, or a less obvious supporter requested by the child.
6. The information is shared with the school community, as agreed with the family. For example:
  - *"We have some sad news to share. We heard today that the [relationship e.g. father] of [name] in Year [X] has died. S/he died as a result of their symptoms of Coronavirus. We are in touch with the family and have expressed our sadness and our support. The family would appreciate any condolences which can be sent to [contact details]/ [digital platform]. At the moment, the family would prefer some time to absorb what has happened but will appreciate your condolences in a while. If you have concerns about your child, contact their class teacher/tutor."*
7. The impact of this news on any other children in the school who have been bereaved or whose relative is seriously ill should be considered and direct contact made by their class teacher/tutor.
8. Check in on staff response. Any death affecting a student can trigger other remembered griefs and, at this time of crisis, a sense of helplessness in not being able to respond as wished.

## 5. Reactions to expect following a death due to coronavirus

Family members of the person who has died may have particularly strong emotions around possible feelings of guilt as well as feelings of loss. They may have been socially isolated from the person who has died, and not had recent or usual levels of contact. The key focus with families is to listen to their concerns and worries, exploring the impact on the various members of their family.

Families or staff colleagues may need reassurance that their response is 'normal' and we can manage to hear them speak about painful issues. Those staff in direct contact with bereaved families will need support around them to debrief and process their own feelings. In particular, Head Teachers will be holding and containing levels of anxiety from across different parts of the school community, and will need to think about where they get their own emotional support. The Educational Psychology Service can provide this support to the Senior Leadership Team and other staff members where appropriate.

## 6. How to support families following a loss or bereavement from coronavirus

Try to stay in contact with bereaved friends and family whilst maintaining social distancing. 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 for a person who has been bereaved. Consider sending a letter, card or note to let them know you are thinking of them. Links to additional resources and guidance can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

Some main points to consider include:

- Keep the support at a distance and coming through chosen contacts/ methods.
- Consider compiling condolences for the child or family from their peers. This could include collecting messages and compiling an electronic book of condolence to email to the family. Other people might choose to send photos or drawings to remember them by. Once school is open again, you could offer a memorial of these drawings to display in school and then give to the family afterwards.
- Share useful resources with the family ([see Appendix 2](#))
- When schools re-open, remember the support needs of bereaved children in planning their return to the classroom. Your link Educational Psychologist can help at this time.
- If they are part of a group or social network e.g. through some form of exercise club or a faith group, and this activity has been cancelled, consider encouraging them to keep 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, explore members of their family/ social network/ community/ faith group (for example) who may be able to offer to help by delivering supplies. Perhaps you could offer to contact them on their behalf to help

facilitate communication. If there are local charities such as food banks or local shops/ pharmacies who may be able to deliver, perhaps you could offer to contact them on their behalf. Please remember to always follow the latest government guidelines about social contact.

## 7. How to support children and young people following a loss or bereavement from coronavirus

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 will further exacerbate their worries and fears. 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 that parents and carers may have about the situation, such as the financial impact of having to stay at home, or the lack of physical space within the home that is available for all (particularly if individual members of the household are self-isolating due to experiencing symptoms).

Supporting bereaved children will be very difficult, particularly for adults who may already be struggling with their own reactions and emotions of loss and grief. When communicating with children and young people you could try to:

- Use words that children understand and are [age appropriate](#).
- Give the information a bit at a time, allowing them the opportunity for them to ask questions. Older children are likely to want and be able to manage more information.
- Tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred, and you want to understand and help them.
- Encourage children to ask questions and answer their questions honestly and simply.
- Tell them that the reactions they are having are normal.
- Pay extra attention, spend extra time with them, be more nurturing and comforting.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Use pictures and storybooks. These are particularly helpful for younger children or children with special needs. Social Stories can be used for children with communication difficulties. Carol Gray has opened her resources to free access and her [social story for the coronavirus](#) useful.
- If they are feeling guilt or shame, emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen.
- Explore and advise the child about appropriate use of social media, encourage parents to monitor their use, particularly during this vulnerable time, and raise any concerns you have with their parents. Please see [Appendix 2](#) for resources around safe use and access of the internet/ social media.
- 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. Try to help them to think about how they could get some time apart, and time to relax. Let children and young people make some choices about what they are doing (e.g. what game to play or clothes to wear), as this may help give them some sense of control over their lives.

- 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.
- Don't make promises ('Grandma will be fine') but reassure them that they are loved and supported, and that if we all continue to try our best to reduce our chances of spreading/catching the virus then this could help most of us to stay safe and well.
- 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. Help them understand that it's still ok to smile and laugh and have fun sometimes even though they may be sad for their loss. Everyone deals with loss differently and there is no right or wrong way. Everyone who is experiencing loss may just need to try to be sensitive of how others are managing and expressing their emotions and grief.

As an adult, remind yourself that:

- Sometimes we must accept that some things can't be 'made better'
- 'Super parents' or 'super teachers' don't exist. Just do and say what you can.
- Don't be afraid to show children how you are feeling.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Help them to understand the relationship between anger and trauma.
- Help them find safe ways to express their feelings e.g. by drawing, taking exercise or talking.
- Do not be surprised by changes in behaviour or personality. The short- and long-term impact of loss and death can vary from individual to individual. Try to be patient and offer them space to process their feelings and try to demonstrate acceptance and respect.

### **Supporting children with additional needs**

Children with additional needs may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings. Children with learning needs may find the concept of death and its permanence particularly difficult to grasp.

Children with additional needs do not need protection from the feelings and emotions associated with grief but support and help to express them and reassurance that these sometimes powerful and overwhelming emotions are normal and necessary. Children with learning difficulties may have less vocabulary and tend to express their feelings even more through behaviour rather than words.

The following can be comforting ways to share feelings:

Coronavirus Bereavement Response Guidance for Schools April 2020  
<http://www.educationalpsychologywolverhampton.co.uk/>

- Looking together at photographs of the person who has died and sharing memories
- A comfort object can be an aid for getting through difficult moments, such as a small comforter or a recognisable item of clothing that belonged to the person who has died
- Putting together a memory box of tangible reminders of the person who has died can give great comfort. This should be their personal collection of reminders of who that person was and what they meant to them. It also gives a child some control back in their lives as they choose what does and what does not go into their box.
- A cushion made from an item of remembered clothing
- Listening to the parent/sibling's favourite music
- A book made about the person who has died
- A candle lit on special days
- Use of pictures and storybooks may help. These are particularly helpful for younger children or children with special needs. Social Stories can be used for children with communication difficulties. Carol Gray has opened her resources to free access and her [social story for the coronavirus](#) is useful.

### **Cultural, Religious and Faith Factors**

- If a child is attending a school during the Coronavirus pandemic the staff's response should be sensitive to different religious beliefs and different traditions.
- Don't be afraid to ask the child or family about their beliefs. Asking shows an openness to learn and provides the family with an opportunity to share their feeling and beliefs.
- Respect a child's beliefs whatever they are. Allow the child to trust and express his/her own beliefs. Do not impose your own beliefs however supportive you feel they are to you.
- Be aware of your local community and involve spiritual leaders if this is appropriate. These leaders may have considerable experience and understanding in these matters. However, be sure and explicit about how any events can be planned to ensure social distancing whilst managing the emotions and feelings of those involved sensitively and compassionately.

## **8. Supporting yourself and your staff**

Be sure to offer members of staff who have been responding to the needs of the pupils and those who will have been affected by the loss a safe space to talk together. Try to plan for some sort of mutual support, for example, a joined video chat/ skype with key colleagues, like you might do in the staffroom at the end of the school day, to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions. The Educational Psychology Service can also offer individual consultations for staff who are particularly affected if required. Please let us know if you are concerned about any individual members of staff.

Please see [Appendix 2](#) for resources around looking after yourself and your staff's well-being.

**Appendix 1:**  
**Critical Incident Information Notification Form – Part 1**

This form is to be completed and sent to the Director of Education where there has been a Loss or Bereavement related to Coronavirus.

<b>Name of School:</b>	
<b>Details of the Incident (factual information only):</b>	
<b>Critical Incident Team Leader:</b>	

## **Appendix 2:** **Resources you can use and share when supporting families and children**

There are some really helpful resources developed by [Winston's Wish](#), [Child Bereavement UK](#) and [Cruse Bereavement Care](#). We have selected a few of those that we think will be most appropriate.

### **Resources for adults to use when supporting children:**

- [Coronavirus: Dealing with bereavement and grief](#)
- [Coronavirus: How schools can support bereaved children and young people](#)
- [Telling a child someone died from coronavirus](#)
- [Supporting bereaved children through difficult times](#)
- [Supporting bereaved children under the age of 5](#)
- [Supporting bereaved children and young people with additional needs through grief](#)
- [Supporting a bereaved child with an autism spectrum condition](#)
- [Children's understanding of death at different ages](#)
- [Coronavirus: how to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible](#)
- [Free Helpline number for Winston's Wish \(08088 020 021\)](#) can offer guidance, support and information to parents, carers, teachers and other professionals caring for a child who has experienced or is likely to experience, bereavement.  
*NB: Their Helpline is currently operating a remote service. Please leave a message on their voicemail with your first name and a contact number (with area code) and a Helpline Practitioner will call you back from a withheld number as soon as possible.*
- [Free online chat support service from Winston's Wish](#) to support bereaved families and the professionals caring for them: available 12-4pm, Wednesdays and Fridays

### **Resources to support teenagers:**

- [Hope Again: Young people living after loss](#)
- [Help 2 Make Sense: a branch of Winston's Wish for young people](#)
- [Free 24/7 text support service for bereaved young people from Winston's Wish: Text WW to 85258](#)
- [Free online chat support service from Winston's Wish](#): available 12-4pm, Wednesdays and Fridays
- [Free online Counselling service from Kooth](#)

### **Practical information for families:**

- [Government guidance for families on what to do following a bereavement from coronavirus.](#)

**Resources to help keep children safe online:**

- [Resources from the NSPCC](#)
- [A parents' guide to technology from the UK Safer Internet Centre](#)
- [Guidance to follow if you are concerned about abuse online](#)

**Resources to help you look after your own mental health and well-being as a supporting adult:**

- [An NHS resource about mental well-being whilst staying at home](#)
- [Information from the Mind Mental Health Charity](#)
- [Support and guidance from Education Support, who have a free, confidential helpline for all those working in education.](#)