

## COVID related critical incident support in schools:

### Camden Educational Psychology Service

April 2020 (Version 2)

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 within the school and the wider school community. This is coupled with a collective raised level of anxiety due to uncertainty around the corona crisis and the additional complication of the nationwide closure of schools.

Camden's Educational Psychology Team continues to offer a critical incident response to Headteachers in schools, and to senior leaders where they have a lead for critical incident responses in that school. In the event of a COVID related critical incident, the Educational Psychology Service's primary aim will be to offer short-term psychological support to the schools management team to appropriately manage the event. The approach taken will focus on supporting the school to promote a sense of safety, calm, self and community efficacy, connectedness and hope.

#### A new context

It is likely that schools will need to manage their responses in particularly challenging circumstances when most children are at home and most staff working remotely, and with many staff self-isolating with suspected Covid-19 or because they are at increased risk. Whilst huge efforts are being made to stay in regular contact with children and young people, school communities are likely to feel less connected and especially over school holiday periods.

#### **A graduated approach to providing support**

Responses to critical incidents generally follow a recognised pattern and therefore we will work within our established levels systems [*refer to EPS critical incident response leaflet*] in order to respond rapidly to an incident.

**Level 1:** In the event of the death of parent of a CYP on roll and/or family member which may impact some of the school community.

We aim to support schools to be able to access resources and feel prepared to respond in order to support children who have experienced bereavement in the first instance. (Please see attached appendices). Headteachers may then wish to have a telephone conversation with their school's allocated Educational Psychologist to be able to think together about how best to approach the unique circumstance. In the event that your school's allocated psychologist is unavailable, please contact the team on the telephone numbers below and we will ensure an EP is made available to contact you for a telephone consultation. Schools may also contact a member of Camden Learning who will forward the message to

**Level 2:** In the event of the death of a pupil on roll and/or a staff member, impacting on the whole school community.

We are offering Headteachers and key staff in the school a skype consultation with two educational psychologists – ideally your school’s educational psychologist together with one of the team’s leads for critical incidents. Please contact the team on the telephone numbers below and we will contact you to offer initial support and arrange a follow up telephone consultation with identified members of the school staff and Educational Psychology Service (EPS).

Schools may also contact a member of Camden Learning who will forward the message to an available member of the EPS.

**Level 3:** Where there is a critical incident that impacts on the wider community, for example death as a result of serious youth violence.

Events at level 3 are usually responded to and co-ordinated by agencies such as the police, Early Help, Youth Offending Service. We will continue to offer schools support within a wider response. The Headteacher can contact the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) directly, or alternatively another agency may have alerted the EPS and we will make contact with the Headteacher to think through what support is needed.

### **What happens when we work with you following a critical incident?**

What happens next depends on the individual needs of the school. However, it will generally include advice on the following (with a particular 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
- What is the 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
- Share 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 – accessing LB Camden support and advice.

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. For levels 2 and 3 responses, this is typically by a combination of telephone calls and emails and (in current circumstances remote) meetings with Headteachers and key staff.

### **How can the school support bereaved children?**

Support from teachers and school staff is crucial for bereaved children and young people (or those facing bereavement) during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic when children are isolated from their usual support networks. There are strategies that schools can put in place to remind children that they are being 'held in mind' and supported from a distance. Many of these are simply what the school would normally do, taken into a virtual context i.e. keeping in touch, keeping routines and listening and reassuring. *[Adapted from guidance provided on Winston's Wish website].*

In line with what we know about the grieving process, help and support are best provided by a trusted, familiar adult as and when it is needed. In time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional counselling. Therefore, 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. However, this is the process under normal circumstances. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, grief support systems and much-needed mourning rituals are being disrupted and therefore schools need to be mindful that loss experienced, under these extraordinary circumstances, may lead to a more complicated grief response and as such it will be important to think creatively around how to support bereaved children and families to feel connected in a time of crisis. Some families with less community support may wish to seek professional support earlier, in particular while we remain in 'lock-down'.

Many schools also contact their allocated CAMHS clinicians, particularly to support direct work with families.

### **Complicating factors around bereavement from COVID-19 which may affect children, families and school communities**

*[Guidance provided by Winston's Wish Website]*

- **Unpredictability:** It's not only very old, very frail people who are dying. The person they know may have been a little frail before they contracted the virus or they may have appeared perfectly well.
- **Suddenness:** People may sicken and die quite rapidly; children will have little time to adjust to a rapidly changing future.
- **Distance:** Children won't be able to spend time with their dying relative, won't be able to touch or hug them or even be in the same room.

- **Fear:** People may react to the news that this person had died with instinctive fear rather than instinctive comfort.
- **Separation:** Children and young people will be physically distant from those who might support them – friends, teachers, wider family.
- **Support structures:** The current disruption of normal routine may mean children and young people have fewer places in which to switch off and focus on something else: for example, school, sports club, etc.
- **Anger:** Children and young people may feel angry about things they perceive to have contributed to this death: people being slow to self-isolate, lack of ventilators etc.
- **Anxiety:** While children and young people will worry about other family members dying after any death, in the present situation, such anxiety is sharper and less easy to soothe.
- **Lack of ‘specialness’:** More and more people will be or will know someone affected by a death due to coronavirus. The death of a child’s important person won’t receive as much attention as before this crisis.
- **Constantly reminded:** It will be hard for children to avoid hearing other stories of people affected by coronavirus.
- **Absence of rituals:** With heavy restrictions on funerals, children and young people will have less chance to ‘say goodbye’ in a formal sense

Bearing all of the complexity above in mind, 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, Headteachers 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. This is in part why the Educational Psychology Service responds initially to Headteachers.

### **COVID related bereavement guidance**

We have included a number of appendices in this document which can begin to provide a framework for the school to deal sensitively and compassionately with bereavement, as a result of coronavirus. It is hoped that this guidance can be consulted in the first instance with regards to a Level 1 incidents (as outlined above), in addition to our existing CIR policy guidance, which continues to remain relevant in responding to critical incidents generally (and which we will resend with this document).

### **Contact Us:**

Please be aware that even though we are working from home, we may not be immediately available or may be on annual leave over the school holiday period, and so we have offered a range of contact points.

**Dr Kerry Moore – Educational Psychologist:**

[DrKerry.Moore@camden.gov.uk](mailto:DrKerry.Moore@camden.gov.uk)

Tel: 020 7974 7166

**Colin Chance- Educational Psychologist**

[colin.chance@camden.gov.uk](mailto:colin.chance@camden.gov.uk)

Tel: 020 7974 1443

**Hilary Forbes- Principal Educational Psychologist**

[hilary.forbes@camden.gov.uk](mailto:hilary.forbes@camden.gov.uk)

Tel: 020 767974 6547

**Please email all three if none of us are immediately available to receive your call  
– we will call you back. Contact can also be made via Camden Learning.**

## List of appendices and resource materials

- Appendix 1 Initial School Response (both short-term during closure and medium term)
- Appendix 2 How to support a bereaved child or young person
- Appendix 3 Children's concepts of death by age
- Appendix 4 How do you react and speak to a bereaved child
- Appendix 5 Preparing students for the return of a grieving child
- Appendix 6 Supporting a grieving child in the classroom
- Appendix 7 Publications, resources and support services



**Initial response in the event of the death of a parent  
(Adapted to suit each individual incident)**

1. Head teacher (or tutor/class teacher or head of year) makes contact with the family to:

- acknowledge what has happened
- express support
- discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community
- check if family want their contact information shared

2. Head teacher 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. (There are a few exceptions, for example, when the death is known about and already widely discussed within the school community).

3. Head teacher shares information with the governors.

4. Head teacher (or tutor/class teacher or head of year) makes contact with the young person 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. A simple form of words that parents can share with their children is appreciated. 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 suddenly/had been ill for a long time. 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]/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.

### **Further Support**

1. Keep the support-at-a-distance coming through the chosen contact/s.

2. Consider compiling condolences for the child from their peers. This could include collected 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.

3. When schools re-open, remember the support needs of bereaved children in planning their return to the classroom (See appendices 4 & 5).

*With thanks to Winston's Wish*



**Supporting a bereaved child or young person**

Information, advice and guidance in this area provided by Winston's Wish is excellent, please see below for the areas covered and links for ease for where it can be located quickly, in addition to other helpful links in these areas.

Talking to children about coronavirus	<a href="https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/">https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/</a>  <a href="https://krisepsykologi.no/what-can-we-say-to-children-about-coronavirus/">https://krisepsykologi.no/what-can-we-say-to-children-about-coronavirus/</a>  <a href="https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf">https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf</a>
Telling a child someone is seriously ill	<a href="https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-children-young-people-serious-illness/">https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-children-young-people-serious-illness/</a>
Telling a child someone has died from coronavirus	<a href="https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/">https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/</a>
How to say goodbye when a funeral is not possible	<a href="https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-funerals-alternative-goodbyes/">https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-funerals-alternative-goodbyes/</a>
Ways to manage your anxiety about coronavirus	<a href="https://www.winstonswish.org/ways-to-manage-anxiety-about-coronavirus/">https://www.winstonswish.org/ways-to-manage-anxiety-about-coronavirus/</a>

## **How children and young people of different ages may understand and respond to death**

Children's responses to loss and death reflect their developmental stage of thinking. The ages suggested are only approximate guides and will vary from one child to another. Understanding does of course vary with age, experience, developmental or cognitive level, personality and family circumstances.

### Babies and toddlers

Babies will be influenced primarily by parents/carers emotional states and may be unsettled for a few weeks. Toddlers will not understand the permanence of death and may repeatedly ask about the deceased coming back. They may believe they did something wrong to cause the person to leave.

### Egocentric/magical thinking (3-7 years)

Young children are very egocentric in their thinking. They tend to see themselves as the centre of the universe and so believe their own wishes, thoughts and actions cause what happens to themselves and others.

The child may experience a compelling urge to recover the lost one (which fits in with their experience of fairy stories). They may think that if they are always good, endure bad things and wait for a long time the lost one will return.

They may become fearful that they themselves will die. They may react quite casually to the loss at first but then become upset or ask about loss/death at a later time.

The child may re-enact the cause of death or some aspect of it (for example, the funeral). This can be distressing for the adults but serves an important function for the child. Play is a means of understanding and integrating life's experiences.

### Concrete thinking (7-11 years)

From 7-11 years thinking tends to be quite black and white (either/or; good guys/bad guys).

Their capacity for subtlety, ambiguities or euphemisms is limited. Therefore phrases such as, 'We lost your sister,' 'Granny has gone to sleep,' 'Granddad is at rest,' can be confusing and frightening. In the latter part of this stage the permanence of death begins to be recognised. They also begin to realise that they themselves will die sometime.

### Abstract thinking (11 years onwards)

By 11 or 12 a child is likely to perceive the finality of death in an adult way. At this age it is also easier for them to understand spiritual concepts of death. Adolescents are likely to be unpredictable in their response to losing a loved one. Some might want to be close to the family, whilst others might want to distance themselves and align with

peer group, as is expected in adolescence. Adolescents will need time and space to process fluctuating emotions.

### Puddle Jumping

Children's experience of bereavement is as painful as adults, but there may be differences in how they respond. Adults grieve intensely and consistently, whereas children and young people can be distracted from their grief. They tend to experience periods of intense emotion alongside their more usual moods. This does not, however, mean that children's grieving is superficial. Children and young people can experience grief in different ways from adults. Because children often live more in the moment, they sometimes react in a way known as 'puddle jumping'. Children can seem to dip in and out of their grief, in the puddle of grief one minute, crying and inconsolable, and then happily playing with a friend the next. This dipping in and out can protect children from being overwhelmed by intense feelings of grief.

**How do you react and speak to a pupil who has been bereaved?**

Teachers and support staff are NOT counsellors

A common statement by adults confronting the bereaved is, "I'm not sure what to say".

***However knowing what to say is far less important than knowing how to listen.***

Grieving can be an intensely isolating business and often those suffering just want sympathetic companionship on their journey.

Children/young people will benefit greatly from contact with a familiar adult, such as a class teacher or form tutor and the 'healthy normality' that this provides at a difficult time.

Key points for school staff to remember when talking to a bereaved child

Don't pretend nothing has happened, show you are concerned, sympathetic and willing to discuss the bereavement or loss but do not force unwilling children to discuss these issues-their right to privacy should be respected.

Listen carefully with full attention if a child/young person wants to talk-avoid an emphasis on advice or interpretation.

Use the following strategies as appropriate

- a) A simple acknowledgement and appreciation of what the child/young person has said
- b) Reflect back what you think the child/young person has said (reflecting back as a question gives the chance for a child to correct you if necessary )
- c) Speak the emotions that you hear, e.g. "That sounds really sad, did you feel angry then? It must have been a very worrying time for you."
- d) From time to time it may be helpful to summarise briefly what you have heard. This can give a child/young person a fresh perspective –"So you didn't know when she went into hospital that she was so seriously ill".
- e) Try to answer any questions as honestly and accurately as you can in words the child/young person will understand.
- f) Let children/young people know that is OK to cry-give them the message that grief is a natural response to loss.
- g) Try not to hide your own feelings-it's OK for children/young people to know you are upset too –explain in simple terms that such events upset everyone.

*With thanks to East Sussex County Council – Trauma, Bereavement and Loss:  
Guidance for Schools in Dealing with CIs*

## Preparing students for the return of a grieving child

(Resources from Grief Encounter)

When a classmate has experienced a death it is usual for children and young people of ages to be anxious about what they should say and how they should treat them. Class teachers are often themselves apprehensive about how to support all the children in their care.

### Discuss the bereavement with the class before the student returns

Once it is known when the student is returning to school it is advisable to have a class discussion about death and how grief affects different people, even if there was a previous discussion when the news was first received. Naturally, this should be delivered in an age appropriate way but some points for discussion are:

- Encourage the sharing of feelings, possibly through thinking about other types of losses that students have experienced and what helped them cope.
- Explore what difficulties the student may experience when they return to school through thinking about how they might like others to treat them. Would they like to be left alone or want to talk about it? The idea that someone is likely to want both at different times or from different people can be introduced.
- Discuss how students might reach out to their classmate. Encourage them to think about this in the context of their friendship before the death. Would they want to offer to talk or make plans outside of school? Or would it be more appropriate for them to offer to help them catch up with school work?
- Make students aware that their classmate may act differently when they return. They may seem withdrawn and unfriendly or they may be upset and moody. They should understand that this is normal and nothing to do with them.

Be aware that the bereavement may have an impact on other students, stirring up their own feelings of loss and separation. Close friends of the bereaved and his/her family may also need additional support to help them cope with feelings of helplessness or being 'shut out'.

***It should be noted that whilst the above is considered good practice in supporting bereaved children upon return to school, it is understandable that schools may be apprehensive about adopting this approach following the coronavirus pandemic in terms of the collective losses likely to be experienced by a number of children. Thoughtful consideration will need to be given to how best to address this. The EPS can support with this.***

## **Appendix 6**

### **Supporting grieving children to return to school**

- Schools can provide the stability which a bereaved pupil needs by offering a flexible normality with familiar, caring adults.
- Return to school should be planned, ideally by meeting with the pupil and their family/carers.
- Find out what the pupil has been told and how they want to manage their return to school.
- Inform all staff about the death and how the pupil would like to manage it. Include anyone in contact with the young person, e.g. peripatetic teachers, visitors, volunteers etc.
- Acknowledge the death.
- Offer strategies to help such as time-out options, manage lunchtimes, support friends etc.
- Check in with the pupil regularly and make sure that they are managing their grief



## Appendix 7

### Publications, resources and support services

#### **Resources**

Camden Learning redistributed the Educational Psychology Service's Critical Incident leaflet for schools on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

The EPS distributed tips in 'Looking after yourself / looking after your children' which was redistributed with version 1 of this document.

#### **Books and Publications**

"Children and Grief. When a Parent Dies". J. William Worden. Guildford Press. ISBN 1-57230-148-1.

"Grief in Children. A Handbook for Adults". 2nd edition. Dyregrov, Atle (2008). Jessica Kingsley Publishers. ISBN 978-1-84310-612-8.

"Grief in Young Children. A Handbook for Adults". Dyregrov, Atle (2008). Jessica Kingsley Publishers. ISBN 978-1-84310-650-0.

Winston's Wish have a number of specialist books to help parents, carers and professionals to support children and young people bereaved by a loved one.

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/publications-resources/>

#### **Websites:**

Websites with information to support schools when a member of staff or pupil dies or are affected by the death of a loved one

#### **Grief Encounter**

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

Support for bereaved children and their families

#### **Child Bereavement UK**

<https://childbereavementuk.org/>

Support for families when a child dies, has COVID specific resources, including a helpful short video.

Resources to equip pupils with coping skills for bereavement, now and in later life

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/elephants-tea-party>

#### **Winston's Wish**

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

Support for children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling with a number of COVID specific resources and guidance which have been drawn upon throughout this document.



## **CRUSE**

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

Support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies. There's a section for schools <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-schools>

## **Camden Employee Assistance Programme**

<http://www.eapdirect.co.uk/>

Free, confidential service available to all Camden employees and their families where schools access the service. Accessed via telephone, email, instant messaging and online. It is available 24 hours a day. 0800 243 458

Darren Williams ([Darren.williams@camden.gov.uk](mailto:Darren.williams@camden.gov.uk) – tel. 020 7974 2117) is the lead officer in Camden should schools wish to join the programme.

## **Camden Listening and Counselling Centre**

<http://www.camdenlistening.org.uk/>

**Low-cost Counselling Service based in Camden**

**020 7482 6200**

Information published on Camden's website may be helpful to staff in contact with bereaved families: <https://www.camden.gov.uk/COVID-19>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/>

There are a number of COVID related videos for children, helpful for children worried about the virus and how it will affect them and to support parents/teachers to talk to children about the virus.

Also

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

[https://papyrus-uk.org/-for those affected by suicide](https://papyrus-uk.org/-for-those-affected-by-suicide)

*With thanks to Bradford EPS whose critical incident advice supplemented our own, East Sussex County Council, Child Bereavement UK, Winston's Wish and Grief Encounter.*