

PARENT COMMUNICATION · ALL GRADES

Bereavement & Family Crisis

School response

Why this matters

A child experiences bereavement or family crisis at every primary school every year. Sometimes you'll know in advance. Sometimes the child will arrive at school and tell you something that changes the day. Most teachers feel underprepared for this. There's no INSET that covers it well. But the response matters enormously — for the child, for the family, and for how the child experiences school for years afterwards. This isn't a complete guide — every situation is different. It's a starting framework.

When you find out

<p>Tell SLT immediately</p> <p>DSL, Head, SENDCo. They need to know to coordinate response — not because they don't trust you, but because the child needs more than one supportive adult.</p>	<p>Find out what's happening</p> <p>From the parent if possible. Has someone died? Is someone seriously ill? Has there been a separation? What does the child know? Who has told them what?</p>
<p>Ask the parent what they want</p> <p>Should the class know? Should other families know? Should we mention it at all? Different families handle this very differently.</p>	<p>Don't ask the child to lead</p> <p>Don't ask 'do you want to talk about it?' as a default. Some do, many don't. Follow their lead, don't make them perform their loss.</p>

First day back

<p>Greet warmly, normally</p> <p>Don't make a big thing of it. The child wants to be the same child they were before. 'Morning, Sam — good to see you' is often what they need.</p>	<p>Acknowledge briefly, in private</p> <p>Quiet word at the start of the day. 'I heard about Granddad. I'm so sorry. If anything is hard today, just come to me.' That's enough.</p>
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<p>Have an exit plan ready</p> <p>Tell them where they can go if they need a break. The library. A specific TA. A safe space. Knowing it exists matters more than using it.</p>	<p>Watch but don't hover</p> <p>Be aware of how they're doing. Don't keep checking — that's intrusive. Trust the child to come to you if they need.</p>
<p>Keep the day mostly normal</p> <p>Routine and normality is often what grieving children need most. Don't drop expectations entirely. Don't pile on either.</p>	<p>Watch for delayed response</p> <p>Some children respond immediately. Some respond weeks or months later. Don't conclude they're 'fine' early. Stay attentive.</p>

Longer-term

<p>Note the anniversary</p> <p>First anniversary, birthdays, key family events. Often hardest. Even noting privately helps you support the child.</p>	<p>Don't be afraid of the topic</p> <p>Many children want their loss acknowledged occasionally. 'How are you doing?' or 'I was thinking about your dad today' can mean a lot.</p>
<p>Share with the next teacher</p> <p>Make sure transition information includes the loss. The new teacher needs to know — and the child shouldn't have to explain again.</p>	<p>Watch for behavior changes</p> <p>Grief often shows up as anger, withdrawal, perfectionism, regression. Behavior 'issues' may be grief in disguise. Investigate gently.</p>

What NOT to do

1. DON'T make assumptions about what the child believes / feels / understands. Different families talk about death/illness/loss very differently. 2. DON'T offer your own theology. 'They're in heaven now' may comfort or offend depending on family. Stay neutral. 3. DON'T tell other children without permission. The family decides what's shared and how. 4. DON'T expect the child to comfort you. If you're upset, manage that elsewhere. The child's grief is the focus. 5. DON'T over-protect by removing the child from normal class activities. Routine helps. 6. DON'T keep the child in for special talks. Brief, quiet support beats lengthy intervention.

Resources for families

If a family asks where to turn: • Winston's Wish (UK) — bereavement charity for children, free helpline • Child Bereavement UK — practical support and resources • The Dougy Center (US) — children's grief support • Local hospice services — often offer family bereavement support • GP — for emotional health concerns affecting the child • Educational Psychology — through school SENDCo if needed Don't dump a list on the family. If they ask, recommend one or two appropriate resources warmly.



Looking after yourself

Supporting a grieving child is emotionally demanding. Don't carry it alone. • Talk to a colleague (in supervision, not gossip) • Use any school-provided wellbeing support • Be aware: this work can trigger your own losses • Take a moment after hard conversations • Know when to refer to specialists — you're a teacher, not a therapist The child needs you to be steady. You can only be steady if you're looked after too.

