

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

Bereaved Children

What helps in primary

How primary children process death

Children's understanding of death changes with age: • PRE-K / RECEPTION: Often see death as reversible. May ask 'when is mum coming back?' for weeks. Concept of permanence is still developing. • KS1: Understanding that death is permanent emerges, but often inconsistent. Fear that other loved ones will die. Magical thinking ('it was my fault'). • KS2: Conceptual understanding largely in place. May suppress feelings, especially in upper KS2, due to social awareness. Grief shows as anger or detachment as often as sadness. Grief is not linear. Children grieve in waves, often returning to grief at major transitions, anniversaries, and developmental milestones — sometimes years later. The death of a parent at age 5 may produce grief responses at 8, at 11, at 14.

How grief shows in school

<p>Withdrawal</p> <p>Quieter, less engaged. Looking out the window. Not joining in. Sometimes mistaken for laziness or rudeness.</p>	<p>Aggression / irritability</p> <p>Disproportionate anger about small things. Often grief in disguise. Especially common in older boys.</p>
<p>Regression</p> <p>Returning to younger behaviors. Thumb-sucking, baby talk, separation anxiety. Normal grief response in young children.</p>	<p>Hyper-functioning</p> <p>Some children become extra-mature, extra-helpful, extra-focused. Looks like coping but can be a freeze response. Watch them especially.</p>
<p>Physical complaints</p> <p>Tummy aches, headaches. Genuine somatic experience of grief. Not faking.</p>	<p>Concentration loss</p> <p>Cognitive load of grief is enormous. Schoolwork drops. Don't punish.</p>



Asking the same questions repeatedly

Especially younger children. 'Will you die too?'
'When will Daddy come back?' Patient repeated answers help.

Before they return to school

If you know a child is grieving and returning, plan ahead: 1. **CONTACT THE FAMILY.** Briefly. 'Just want to know how you'd like us to handle [child]'s return. What helps. What doesn't.' 2. **ASK WHAT THE CLASS HAS BEEN TOLD.** Often the family wants to control the message. Honour their wishes within reason. 3. **PLAN FOR THE FIRST DAY.** Designated safe space if needed. A signal to take a break. Reduced demands. 4. **BRIEF KEY STAFF.** SENDCo, supply teachers, supervisors. They need to know. 5. **ALERT YOURSELF.** The first day back will be emotional. Plan your own capacity.

What to say (and what NOT to say)

Helpful	Unhelpful
I'm so sorry [name] died.	I'm sorry for your loss.
This is so hard. I'm here if you need anything.	Be brave / be strong for your mum.
I'd love to hear about [name] sometime, if you want.	At least they're not in pain anymore.
It's OK to feel sad. It's OK to feel angry.	Try not to think about it.
You can come back to me whenever.	Things will be back to normal soon.
I don't know what to say, but I'm glad you're here.	Everything happens for a reason.
Saying nothing is fine — sometimes that's what helps.	I know how you feel.

Practical adjustments

REDUCE COGNITIVE DEMAND for the first weeks: • Lower-pressure tasks where possible • Allow scribed answers, voice-recorded responses • Don't penalise concentration lapses • Reduce homework if appropriate **ALLOW BREAKS:** • A signal for 'I need a moment' — a hand sign, a card on the desk • A specific safe space (quiet area, librarian's room, with TA) • Permission to leave the room without explanation **WATCH FOR TRIGGERS:** • Mother's Day / Father's Day if relevant parent has died • Anniversaries (the date they died, birthdays, holidays) • Books / lessons mentioning death or loss • Family-related curriculum content • Sudden changes in routine **USE PEERS CAREFULLY:** • Most peers want to help but don't know how • A briefing



to the class (with family permission) can help: 'Sam's mum has died. He may be sad sometimes. Be kind. Don't ask lots of questions.' • Designate one or two specific 'check on Sam' friends if appropriate

When grief becomes complicated

Most children grieve and gradually adapt over time, with the wave-like pattern continuing for years but reducing in intensity. Some children develop more concerning patterns. Worth flagging to SENDCo / pastoral lead: • Persistent inability to function at school after 6+ months • Severe withdrawal from friends and activities • Significant academic regression that doesn't recover • Self-harm or talk of self-harm • Persistent sleep disturbance affecting daytime functioning • Violent or self-destructive behaviour • Strong belief that the death was their fault, persisting

These children may need specialist support — child bereavement services (Winston's Wish in UK, similar elsewhere), CAMHS referral, school counsellor. Don't try to manage long-term complicated grief alone.

Looking after yourself

Teaching a bereaved child is emotionally demanding. You will absorb some of their grief. This is human and it costs you something. • Talk to a colleague who isn't directly involved. Not gossip — debrief. • Notice your own boundaries. You can't be available unlimited. • If your own losses are touched, take care. You may need to talk to someone. • School counsellors (where available) often see staff too. You're doing important work. It's okay if it costs.

