

# The School Bereavement Toolkit

A Practical Guide  
to Supporting  
Children



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A **Speechmark** Book

*Jacquie Palmer*

Illustrated by **Lucy Spink**



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# *The School Bereavement Toolkit*

A Practical Guide to  
Supporting Children

**Jacquie Palmer**

**Illustrated by Lucy Spink**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Palmer, Jacquie, author.

Title: The school bereavement toolkit : a practical guide to supporting children / Jacquie Palmer ; illustrated by Lucy Spink.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021006261 (print) | LCCN 2021006262 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032026664 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781032026688 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003184515 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Bereavement in children. | Loss (Psychology) | Social work with children.

Classification: LCC BF723.G75 P35 2021 (print) | LCC BF723.G75 (ebook) | DDC 155.9/37083--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021006261>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021006262>

ISBN: 978-1-032-02666-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-02668-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-18451-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Acme

by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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# Introduction

When we are grieving for a significant loss, our lives turn upside down. The pattern of life, however chaotic it was previously, sometimes changes almost completely, often leaving us feeling out of control, confused, shocked and miserable. Children and young people are no different in this respect.

No one knows exactly how many children are bereaved every year. The data is not specifically collected, despite the death of a parent being one of the most devastating losses a child will ever face. Collated data and published mortality figures, census data and other sources suggest that more than forty-five thousand children and young people under the age of eighteen are bereaved of a parent or sibling every year (Winston's Wish, 2019a). This does not include grandparents or other significant people in a child's life. Children may also grieve the loss of a much-loved pet. It is therefore certain that at some point during a teacher's career they will be involved with a child who is grieving for a significant loss.

Forty-one percent of young offenders are thought to have experienced bereavement as a child. There is also a greater likelihood of a bereaved child displaying challenging behaviour (Winston's Wish, 2019b). This can be associated with an increased long-term risk of suicide together with an increase in anxiety and general dissatisfaction with life (for review see Bergman, Axberg and Hanson, 2017). In my own work with bereaved children I have witnessed increased problems with bullying, the bereaved young person sometimes being the bully, and at other times being bullied.

It is tempting for busy staff in schools to either ignore or put off dealing with an issue that does not appear urgent, or is difficult. However, if a child's grief is acknowledged and well managed in the first instance, they will be less likely to require professional counselling, and will be able to cope with their issues much more successfully in the long term.



School is an institution that children and young people attend on a daily basis and is sometimes their only remaining normality, so school staff are very suited to offer support. They can play a major role in how a young person in their charge manages and copes long term with a significant bereavement. This is not an easy task and there are no magic formulae.

The aim of this book is to give a straightforward practical guide for school staff, as well as other adults and carers, to how they might approach supporting a bereaved child in school.



# Basic procedures upon hearing the news and in the longer term

How this is handled will depend on the circumstances of the death.

Some deaths, such as that of a member of staff or a pupil, will have a much greater impact on the school as a whole, differing from the impact of a death within an individual family, involving perhaps only one child.

When many people are affected, the head teacher together with the school governors and possibly the local education authority, will decide on procedures to be followed. A policy for this may already be in place.

If a pupil, teacher or other member of the school community has died, then all the other staff and governors should be informed as soon as possible.

The pupils and their parents should be informed immediately afterwards. Rumours spread fast and it is vital that information be as accurate as possible, particularly if the death has been violent or unexpected.

Areas for consideration, depending on the particular circumstances of the death, include:

- *How the staff, including all midday supervisors, caretakers and governors are informed*

Is a phone call the best way to do this if the death has occurred in the school holidays or at a weekend? An email may be appropriate in some cases or perhaps a phone call from the head teacher/year head.





Consideration needs to be made for the staff doing these tasks. Are they also suffering a bereavement of their own and is it fair to ask them to do this task? Were they especially involved with the person who has died and if so particularly upset?

- *How the pupils are told*

Will this be done in individual classes, as year groups or at a whole school assembly? Is it a child's parent who has died? Has the death been from a condition such as asthma from which others in the school suffer? These are factors that might make some pupils more anxious.



- *How the parents are told*

Can this be done by letter and will this need to be sent by post? Is a text message appropriate? Some parents will be a lot more affected than others.

- *What other strategies need to be put in place?*

What strategies are appropriate in the classroom? Do reminders such as the child's paintings, place at their desk, etc., need to be kept as they are for a while?

Having a notice board where messages to the dead person may be left can create living memories, and might provide a helpful focus point for grieving. Is a Facebook page appropriate?

Do school counsellors need to be brought in? Is it better to have groups where children and young people can express their feelings openly together and ask questions, or are individual sessions more useful? Are pupils going to go to the funeral and do they need preparation for this as to what to expect? Will they need support on the day and do parents need to be with their child? Is there going to be a memorial service in school?

A school for children and young people with complex medical needs who have witnessed several deaths in their community, always has a memorial service. They invite the pupil's family and plan words and songs appropriate for the young person, after which the whole school goes out into the school grounds to release helium balloons, some of which have messages attached to them. This is a moving sight, and helps the children manage difficult emotions which they are not able to express verbally.

Make sure balloons are biodegradable.



A service such as this could be equally suitable for a member of staff.



- *What memories will there be in the long term?*

A primary school where I worked asked all its pupils to plant a daffodil bulb on the grounds of the school, and now each year these flowers come up as a lasting memory of the little girl who died. At the time her brother was also a pupil at the school, and this helped him too.



- *In the case of a pupil or parent dying.*

If possible a member of staff who knows the child concerned should be the one who makes contact with the home, ensuring that the bereavement is then handled in school according to the family's wishes. Particularly important issues might be at what point the child returns to school and the way in which this is handled.

A seven-year-old boy I worked with wanted to come back to school as soon as possible after his father had died. His teacher prepared the class well, but when the boy returned all his classmates made a huge fuss of him. Later he told me that he just wanted to slip back into school and not be noticed. Of course, some children will enjoy the extra attention, but others will not. This situation also highlighted the need not to make assumptions. The mother of the little boy was estranged from his father and there was a general assumption that she was not grieving, however, she was, and it became very hard for her son who thought he had to become the man of the house.



*It is usually helpful for schools to:*

- Make themselves aware of local services and resources which are available to their school and bereaved families.
- Work alongside families to meet individual needs.
- Increase opportunities to involve subjects such as death and dying in the school curriculum from a range of cultural perspectives.
- Invest in a library of suitable books covering the subject.
- Understand the long-term needs of children and young people, as well as those in the short term.

When children are transferring to new teachers or schools at the end of an academic year, it would be helpful to have a list of dates in his or her records, such as the date of the death and any important birthdays or anniversaries, so the new teacher or school can be aware when the young person might be finding it especially difficult to cope.



# MY IMPORTANT DATES



MY NAME: .....

MY BIRTHDAY: .....

WHO DIED: .....

THEIR BIRTHDAY: .....

WHEN THEY DIED: .....



## OTHER FAMILY BIRTHDAYS:

NAME	DATE



## OTHER DATES THAT ARE IMPORTANT:

DATE	REASON IT IS IMPORTANT

