

Coronavirus Related Critical Incidents in Schools – Briefing

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 corona crisis and the additional complication of the nationwide closure of schools.

Schools will be managing this in the particularly challenging circumstance when most children are at home and most staff working remotely, 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 especially over school holiday periods.

Child Death

In the event of the death of a child the usual procedures and support available will apply. Please see *Child Death Communication Protocol* and *Support for Education Establishments Child Death* attached at the end of this document.

Bereavement (following the death of a family member or member of staff)

Help and support for children and young people who experience bereavement is 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. 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, are perfectly normal, 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, particularly whilst we remain in social isolation.

In the event of a critical incident, Oxfordshire Educational Psychology Service will offer support to the school's management team. The approach taken is founded on helping schools manage the immediate aftermath of an event, including advice and support around communication, practical arrangements and managing emotions. During COVID-19 we would advise schools to plan ahead and prepare for such an event using the guidance below to identify issues that need to be considered.

A member of the Educational Psychology Service or other Education staff will contact you to identify what steps have been taken so far and what needs to happen next.

Preparation: Schools are advised to consider the following issues (for each issue identify more than one member of staff to lead in case of illness)

Communication

- Who will contact the family to offer condolence on behalf of the school sign post to resources or support and remain as a point of contact as needed
The Headteacher will make contact with the family in the first instance. If this is not possible, this contact will be made by the Deputy Headteacher and then the Deputy DSL. The person making contact will:- acknowledge what has happened, express support, discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community and check if family want their contact information shared.
- How will you communicate information to staff: what messaging systems are available? Who will lead on this?
The Headteacher will make telephone contact with staff in the Foundation Stage and Infant Class teams and the governing body, the Deputy Headteacher with the Griffin Class team, lunchtime supervisors and Finance Officer and the Deputy DSL with the Phoenix Class Team.
- How will you communicate information re bereavement if necessary to pupils/students. Will you contact the parents only? Plan a form of words to express regret but at the same time reduce anxiety.
The bereaved family will be asked whether they give their permission to share this information and whether the pupil can be named or unnamed. If permission is granted, this information will be shared with parents via ParentPay using the following wording:- *“We have some sad news to share. We heard today that the [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. The children will be told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child’s questions as they arise.”* Parents will be signposted to resources through Winston’s Wish. Parents will be advised that staff will share the information with pupils (if schools are open) at an appropriate time depending on the circumstances. Staff will share information with pupils in the smallest groups possible.
- How will you communicate with parents? How do you normally communicate with parents? Will this be appropriate? **Parents will be emailed through ParentPay.**

Helpful information to share with staff in advance of an incident

- Share information with staff about typical responses to bereavement and how to manage this while recognising that this is a new situation for all of us.
- Provide information that can be shared with parents about children and young people's responses to bereavement.

Winston's Wish have produced guidance for supporting children and young people during the coronavirus – see the end of this document. These three are helpful and relevant.

Hyperlinks:

Coronavirus [How schools can support children and young people](#)

Coronavirus [How to tell a child or young person that someone has died from coronavirus](#)

Coronavirus [How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible](#)

Identify vulnerable students and staff

- How will you identify those who may be made more vulnerable following a bereavement. Who will do this? Consider a key worker approach to follow up regularly with those families during school closure.
The ELSA will provide a key worker approach but will consult with other staff and seek their support as necessary.
- Some staff may be more vulnerable in this situation ensure that you have support systems in place e.g how can we support each other, use of typical support networks, PAM Assist or equivalent used by school, Cruse counselling
Support will be offered through the OCC staff support package and services included in staff insurance. The HT will check on the well-being of staff regularly as any death affecting a student can trigger other remembered griefs and a sense of helplessness in not being able to respond as wished.

Post event actions

- Senior leadership team to refer to the communication plan made and finalise roles. (staff sickness may be a factor) Please see above.
- What are the family's views on what they want to be shared.
- Agree a script to guide communication with staff and students

For staff:-

"I've got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. After being very unwell with Coronavirus, (Pupil name) from (class) died yesterday in hospital."

For students:-

"I've got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. I know most of you will have heard of Coronavirus, and know that sometimes people

with Coronavirus get better but other times people die from it. (Pupil name) from (class) has been ill with Coronavirus and I have to tell you that he/she died yesterday in hospital.”

Further guidance for staff informing children:-

- **Children and young people will appreciate time to verbalise their feelings and fears. Allow space for “If only’s...” to be acknowledged.**
 - **Discussion – allow pupils to share their own experiences of death, eg. “When my pet/my gran died” etc.**
 - **Be honest about your own feelings and experiences, and talk openly about the relationship that you had with the person.**
 - **Answer pupil’s questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like ‘passed away’, or ‘lost’ etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children.**
 - **Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care.**
 - **It is natural that children may be upset and/or need time to process information, make sure there is a quiet space for them to go to, support available for them both immediately afterwards and in the days that follow**
- Plan for vulnerable students. Do other agencies need to be informed? LCSS? CAMHS? **Other agencies will be informed as necessary/appropriate.**
 - Identify a focus for students to share feelings for example use of tutor / mentor groups; other school sharing forums as appropriate to the age group. A book of condolence or photos/memories of the child may be appropriate but this would be discussed with the family. On return to school pupil support groups would be set up as appropriate and ELSA sessions provided if necessary.
 - Continue to provide homework for students in order to maintain the reassurance of routine.
 - Maintain regular contact with staff – identify any vulnerable staff and provide a support system
 - Consider practical issues such as memorials / books of condolences. Are they going to be appropriate? Discuss with family.
 - Signpost families to information and /or services that are available during COVID - 19 if they have continuing concerns about their child.

Reintegration of a bereaved child into school if attending during the pandemic or returning when schools reopen

- Talk to the family and child, if age appropriate, to see what s/he would like to happen when they return to school.

- Talk to the child's current peers attending school about how people are affected by grief and encourage them to share their own feelings. Ask about how they have coped with bereavement in their own lives and what has helped.
- Discuss how difficult it may be for the bereaved pupil to come back to school. Ask how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after a death. Acknowledge that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general, bereaved students say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being 'over-nice' to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don't want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.
- Allow them access to a 'quiet room' where he/she can go to be alone and agree a way to communicate this (e.g. signal or exit card).
- When they return, acknowledge their loss "I'm sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad."

The Educational Psychologist can support you in the immediate aftermath of the incident and they will also be available to support with any later issues that arise.

If, after a period of time, there are members of the school community who are showing signs of continued distress signposting to further support may be needed including access to professional staff support agencies. This is an unprecedented situation and time of uncertainty and stress it is likely therefore that additional measures will be needed to ensure the wellbeing of all members of the school community.

Documents and websites to support schools in relation to current emergency



Child Death
Communication Protocol

1. *Child Death Communication Protocol*



Support for Educational Establishments Child Death

2. *Support for Educational Establishments Child Death*

3. Cruse Bereavement Care have published a helpful range of booklets for children young people and their carers that can be found here:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/parents/free-booklets-children-young-people-and-their-carers> e.g.



4. Organisations offering bereavement support and advice include the following:

For children and young people :

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus 0808 802 0021

Helpful guidance specific to coronavirus:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-schools-support-children-young-people/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-children-young-people-serious-illness/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-funerals-alternative-goodbyes/>

Seesaw www.facebook.com/SeeSawCharity 01865 744768

Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org 0800 028 8840

For adults :

Bereavement Care www.bereavementcareandsupport.co.uk 0208 427 5720

Cruse Bereavement Counselling www.cruse.org.uk 0808 808 1677

Note: as the situation and sources of information are developing, the above guidance may be updated (dated 2/4/20)

Oxfordshire Educational Psychology Service