

SCHOOL ALLOCATIONS

CBN POLICY BRIEFING

THE ISSUE

Changing schools can be challenging for children at any time; for bereaved children – and for those facing bereavement - there can be particular difficulties and additional pressures in moving school.

BACKGROUND

Bereaved children face many challenges as the life that is left after someone dies adjusts to the future. For some, bereavement can bring additional changes, for example, a move closer to grandparents may mean a change of school, out of school activities, new friendship groups. Standard transition stages from infant to junior, junior to secondary and secondary to college, university or workplace bring a range of adjustments and losses to all children that can be particularly heightened for those who have been bereaved or are anticipating the death of a parent or sibling. This is particularly true of the transition from junior school to secondary school which, in most parts of the country, will involve choices about which school to apply to, anxiety over selection, entrance examinations and so on. Many pupils are not allocated their first choices of schools and this can lead to increased difficulty for these children and young people.

CURRENT POSITION

What follows is the situation in England, as set out by the Department of Education. Responsibility for education in the other three nations is devolved, although very similar procedures apply.

Parents who are unsuccessful in gaining a place for their child at their preferred school/s, in the first instance, need to question the decision with their local education authority who may be able to make a change. The next step is to use the right of appeal to the independent Admissions Panel, arranged by the admissions part of the local education authority or, in some cases, by the school concerned. The Admissions Code can be found here <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/school%20admission%20appeals%20code%201%20february%202012.pdf>. At this stage, parents can submit evidence on why a particular school is preferred for their child – there is no official guidance that bereavement or serious illness in the family should merit special consideration for granting preference but, on a case by case basis, it may be taken into consideration. It is likely to be one of the very few exceptions where an appeal can be made twice (i.e. if a parent or sibling had died or been diagnosed with a terminal illness after the first appeal had been made).

Key points that can be used in an appeal include:

- ➔ children and young people need as much continuity as possible following the death of a parent or sibling. Stressful changes and disruptions which accompany or follow a death (such as moving house or school, changed household routines and childcare arrangements) are associated with worse mental health (Haine et al 2008)
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- ➔ this is also true when children and young people are facing the anticipated death of a parent or sibling
- ➔ the longer these changes persist, the greater the detrimental effect on children and young people's behaviour (Worden, 1996)
- ➔ the importance of access to friends who know what has happened/is happening and can continue to provide support and understanding in the future. It can be hard, if not impossible, to explain to new groups of people how one's parent or sibling died (especially if, for example, the death was by suicide), or about a terminal illness or why particular days or memories can trigger emotional responses
- ➔ children who are bereaved or facing the death of someone close may face educational challenges and require high quality education and pastoral support at a school with a 'good' or 'outstanding' OFSTED report
- ➔ parents may face overwhelming challenges if they have a partner or child requiring end of life care or if they need to return to work following the death of a partner and the allocated school is not convenient to their workplace or to out-of-school arrangements for the child.

There may be additional points based on individual circumstances

- ➔ for example, a child may want to attend the same school as the parent/sibling who died or is ill
- ➔ or they may specifically want to avoid the same school as the parent/sibling who died or is ill
- ➔ they may wish to pursue a subject (e.g. music, Latin) that links them to their parent/sibling that is only offered at a particular school
- ➔ there may be a particular link between a parent/sibling and a specific school (e.g. if the parent had been a teacher there).

WHAT CBN IS DOING

At CBN we are compiling evidence of the importance of school choice for bereaved children and those facing the expected death of someone close. In addition, we are working to ensure that all members of the children's workforce are trained to support children who have been bereaved and that awareness of the challenges facing young people who have been bereaved is raised throughout all stages of education. Our members have developed many helpful resources for schools; see, for example, packs for schools on the websites of Seesaw (www.seesaw.org.uk), Winston's Wish (www.winstonswish.org.uk/schools) and the Child Bereavement UK (<http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/For/ForSchools>). Please also see the resources listed here (<http://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/publications.htm>)

We have responded to the Department for Education's recent consultation on revisions to the Admissions Code, arguing that it should be amended to take into account the needs of children and young people who have been bereaved of a parent or sibling, or who are anticipating the death of a parent or sibling during their time at the school. There has already been some movement over extending special consideration to looked-after children and children of military families which we will use to support our call for change.

WHAT CBN MEMBERS CAN DO

Services are sometimes contacted by parents who are concerned that not being able to attend a school with friends, or a school that is convenient for the workplace of the surviving parent, for example, will increase the distress of a bereaved child. Some services have written statements in support of a bereaved young person attending a specific school. The information above could be used in any such application. The Coram Children's Legal Centre can help parents with information and guidance over admissions and appeals (01206 877910 www.clc.org.uk), including appeals against school exclusion.

Please let us know if you have ever written such an appeal and if so, what information you used to support it and whether it was successful. We will treat any such information as confidential but it will really help us to build up a picture of what is actually happening in this area. Please send this to dstubbs@ncb.org.uk.

If you have any questions or would like more information, do get in touch.