

Changes to the teaching of Sex and Relationships Education and PSHE:

Response from the Childhood Bereavement Network

1. This briefing has been prepared by the Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN), the hub for those working with bereaved children and young people across the UK. CBN promotes the interests of bereaved children, young people and their families, and encourages the development of quality support for them. CBN is hosted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB).
2. Many CBN member organisations offer a range of services to local schools and other education settings. This includes training, staff support, 1:1 and group support for children, and resources. Their involvement often begins when a pupil is facing a death in the family, or has been bereaved, but many also have proactive contact with local schools.
3. Many have developed training sessions, assembly and lesson plans. Lesson plans are also available from national organisations including www.childbereavementuk.org, including Elephant's Tea Party, and from www.winstonswish.org.uk
4. For more information about this response or the work of the Childhood Bereavement Network, please contact Alison Penny, CBN Coordinator, apenny@ncb.org.uk

Death and bereavement in school

5. Around 1 in 29 school-age children and young people (5-16) have been bereaved at some point in their childhood of a parent or sibling – that is roughly one per classⁱ. ¾ of 11-16 year olds have been bereaved of someone close to themⁱⁱ. 70% of primary schools have at least one recently bereaved pupil on rollⁱⁱⁱ.
6. The death of a parent or sibling affects every aspect of children's lives. Often the impact is not just the death itself, but all the further changes that it brings – new working and childcare arrangements for the surviving parent, often moving house and school.
7. Grief affects emotional well being, long after the death. *'Family bereavement had continuous, cumulative effects on children's emotional and social well-being, long after the event happened'*.^{iv} Two years after their parent died, children and young people have significantly **lower self-esteem** than their peers, and feel **less able to effect change**^v.
8. Grief is not an illness, but it does increase the risk of mental health difficulties, both in childhood and later life. Around 1/3 of bereaved children reach clinical levels of emotional/behavioral difficulties in the two years following a parent's death^{vi}. Compared to their non-bereaved peers, children whose mother or father has died are around 1.5 times as likely as non-bereaved children to have a mental disorder^{vii}, 3 times more likely to develop new-onset depression, if bereaved suddenly^{viii}, more likely to report depressive symptoms at the age of 30 (women)^{ix}, 1.7 times more likely to attempt suicide in young adulthood^x and more likely to be hospitalised for a psychiatric disorder^{xi}.
9. Families and schools report bereaved children experiencing poor concentration, lack of interest, missing school, further losses through having to move school. A study found that the average GCSE score of parentally bereaved children was half a grade below that of their non-bereaved peers, and that of sibling-bereaved girls was nearly a grade lower.

Why learn about change, loss, death and bereavement?

10. Respondents to a 2018 survey conducted by the Childhood Bereavement gave reasons why they supported the teaching of these topics.
11. Given the numbers of children who will experience bereavement during childhood, there is a strong case for them to learn about some of the common feelings associated with loss. *'Crucial! All children will experience it at some point and they need opportunities to start to explore what it means before they are emotionally bound up in it.'* (SEND teacher).
12. The general provision of education about loss and bereavement can help to dispel myths and taboos^{xii}. *'It is very important to help children know what they are experiencing is 'normal' or to help them understand what a bereaved classmate is experiencing'* (Parent/carer)
13. This could reduce the bullying and isolation which bereaved children can experience, and encourage children to seek support for themselves or for friends if they are experiencing a bereavement. *'I taught this as part of social education and my teenage students found it amazingly helpful. It led to better understanding of their peers who had suffered loss, and were easier to help in the learning process'* (Secondary school teacher)
14. Evidence suggests that the majority of children think about death and dying and that *'children have a greater awareness of death than most adults would believe'*^{xiii}.
15. As well as preparing individual pupils for an experience which will sadly almost inevitably happen to them at some point in life, a school which teaches these topics is also likely to be better prepared if there is a death in the school community (eg a pupil, parent or staff member). Schools which have experienced a death in the school community often wish they had been better prepared.

Public support for teaching these topics

16. Children and young people are naturally interested in death and bereavement and often raise questions about this issue. Many young people – including those who haven't been bereaved – are keen for death and bereavement to be incorporated into the curriculum although they are clear that this needs to be handled sensitively.
17. Almost half of respondents to a Child Bereavement UK YouGov poll (48%) agreed that **topics on death and bereavement should be included in the compulsory primary school syllabus.**

Teaching about bereavement within a whole school approach

18. Meeting the needs of all learners on a topic such as bereavement goes beyond the content of the programme of study. Many children's first experience of death and bereavement will be a personal one: the death of a pet, family member or friend, and so lessons on these topics will speak directly to their own experience.
19. For this reason, curriculum development must be part of a whole school approach, involving proactive and flexible pastoral support, a system for managing and communicating important information about bereavements, staff training and support, and policy development.
20. Pupils in special schools are more likely than others to experience the death of a peer, and mainstream schools can learn from the expertise developed by special schools in supporting their communities.^{xiv}

21. Young people's suggestions to us about what could help to make school a good place to learn about death and bereavement included teachers checking with young people who have recently been bereaved whether they are happy to join in the lesson, no pressure to talk about personal experiences, somewhere quiet to go or someone to talk to after the lesson if they are feeling upset, telling them where they can get further help and support.

Responses to specific consultation questions

Thinking about relationships education in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices.

As change, loss, death and bereavement are a normal part of human relationships, there is a case for their inclusion as topics within the primary Relationships Education curriculum (not only in wider PSHE). At primary level, respondents to a 2018 CBN survey highlighted the following topics.

- **Differences and changes in families.** The death of a family member is only one of the differences in family make-up which children will be aware of. Acquiring an understanding of diversity and change in families is important in helping children contextualise death and bereavement. Children's natural questions in this area include *'Why do I have a dad but x doesn't? What will happen when x dies?'*
- **Lifecycles and understanding death.** Understanding death is complex, and involves the recognition of five key biological facts: inevitability, universality, irreversibility, cessation of all physical and psychological functions, causality^{xv}. These concepts are understood at different times and at different rates. This indicates a spiral approach to teaching and learning. However, these biological concepts are not the only aspects: children also need to acquire an understanding of cultural and familial understandings eg of the afterlife, and of ways in which relationships are maintained with someone even after they have died. Primary age children's natural questions in this area include *'What does dead mean? Why do people die? What happens when someone dies? Where do they go? Will I see them again?'*
- **Understanding and managing feelings, and seeking help.** Coping with death and bereavement includes dealing with a range of feelings which might include sadness, anger, fear, relief. Being able to recognise and describe feelings is an important first step to being able to manage them, and to empathise with others. Children may also learn about somatic symptoms and behaviours, and how these are linked to feelings, and about what to do when feelings are difficult or unmanageable.

Thinking about relationships and sex education in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices.

As pupils get older, the likelihood that they have themselves experienced bereavement grows. As said above, a spiral curriculum is indicated which allows pupils to explore issues at increasing depth, and with more likelihood of reflection on their own personal experiences. They are likely to have questions about fairness/justice, different beliefs around death and bereavement, supporting themselves and others with overwhelming feelings, finding appropriate support including outside the family.

Are there important aspects of ensuring safe online relationships that would not otherwise be covered in wider Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education, or as part of the computing curriculum?

N/A

How should schools effectively consult parents so they can make informed decisions that meet the needs of their child, including on the right to withdraw? For example, how often, on what issues and by what means?

As well as consultation with parents, schools should consider how to consult with pupils who have themselves been bereaved about how they would like to be involved in the lesson. Particularly at secondary level, teachers may not be aware of the experiences that young people have had, so some form of advance notice or warning is sensible.

This also requires a sensitive and flexible pastoral support system, as described above, and taking account of the suggestions young people have made about what could help make lessons manageable for those who have been bereaved.

Thinking about PSHE in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please include your reasons for choosing each subject area or evidence to support your suggestions.

Please see our response to Q1. Although we would like to see these topics taught in R(S)E, they could also be taught in PSHE.

Thinking about PSHE in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please also include your reasons for choosing each subject or evidence to support your suggestions.

Please see our response to Q2. Although we would like to see these topics taught in R(S)E, they could also be taught in PSHE.

How much flexibility do you think schools should have to meet the needs of individual pupils and to reflect the diversity of local communities and wider society in the content of PSHE lessons in schools?

Please see our response to Q4. In addition, all schools will need to consider the diverse ways in which death and bereavement are understood and managed in their local community. Inviting visiting speakers who are involved in supporting families around a death (eg hospices, funeral directors, places of worship, support organisations) and collaborating on projects with them can bring opportunities for pupils to learn about different ways of managing the impact of death.

Because of the anxieties and sensitivities around including death and bereavement in the curriculum, many schools do not address it^{xvi}. Making PSHE statutory would help schools to prioritise this work and seek the training and support which will help to increase staff confidence in tackling difficult subjects.

ⁱ Fauth, B., Thompson, M. and Penny, A. (2009) Associations between childhood bereavement and children's background, experiences and outcomes. Secondary analysis of the 2004 Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain data, London: NCB.

ⁱⁱ Harrison, L. and Harrington, R. (2001). 'Adolescents' bereavement experiences. Prevalence, association with depressive symptoms, and use of services'. *Journal of Adolescents*, 24, 159-169.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holland, J. (1993). 'Child bereavement in Humberside Primary Schools'. *Educational Research*, 35 (3), 289-297.

^{iv} Jones, E., Gutman, L., & Platt, L. (2013). Family stressors and children's outcomes.

^v Worden, WJ (1996) *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York: Guilford Press.

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- ^{vi} Worden, WJ (1996) *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York: Guilford Press.
- ^{vii} Fauth, B, Thompson, M and Penny, A (2009) *Associations Between Childhood Bereavement and Children's Background, Experiences and Outcomes: Secondary Analysis of the 2004 Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain Data*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- ^{viii} Melhem, NM and others (2008) 'Antecedents and sequelae of sudden parental death in offspring and surviving caregivers', *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 162(5), 403–410.
- ^{ix} Parsons, S (2011) *Long-term Impact of Childhood Bereavement: Preliminary Analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*. London: Child Well-being Research Centre.
- ^x Jakobsen, IS and Christiansen, E (2011) 'Young people's risk of suicide attempts in relation to parental death: A population-based register study.', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 52(2), 176–183.
- ^{xi} Wilcox, HC and others (2010) 'Psychiatric morbidity, violent crime, and suicide among children and adolescents exposed to parental death', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(5), 514–523.
- ^{xii} Rowling, L (2003) *Grief in School Communities* Buckingham: OUP
- ^{xiii} Bowie 2000: 24 in Ribbens McCarthy, J (2005) *ibid*
- ^{xiv} <https://childbereavementuk.org/about-us/why-we-are-needed-statistics/>
- ^{xv} Panagiotaki et al (2018) Children's and adults' understanding of death: cognitive, parental and experiential influences *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 166 (96-115)
- ^{xvi} Ribbens McCarthy, J (2005) *Young People, Bereavement and Loss: disruptive transitions?* London: NCB