

Relationships and sex education and health education guidance consultation

Questionnaire response from the Childhood Bereavement Network

Questions 1 to 9 are about the respondent.

10. Do you agree that the content of Relationships Education in paragraphs 50-57 of the guidance is age-appropriate for primary school pupils?

Yes, agree.

All of the content is appropriate for primary aged children, but it will need further elaboration to split it out by Key Stage or Year.

It is important to recognise that relationship education overlaps greatly with education about mental wellbeing. This is particularly relevant in relation to education about change and loss in relationships, including through separation, death and bereavement.

11. Do you agree that the content of Relationships Education as set out in paragraphs 50-57 of the guidance will provide primary school pupils with sufficient knowledge to help them have positive relationships?

70% of primary schools have at least one recently bereaved pupil on rollⁱ. Changes and losses are an inevitable part of relationships, and learning to live with these changes is a key skill for children's future relationships, health and wellbeing. We believe the curriculum content needs strengthening to acknowledge and address this.

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).

The general provision of education about loss and bereavement can help to dispel myths and taboosⁱⁱ. *'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)

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)

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'*ⁱⁱⁱ.

As well as preparing individual pupils for an experience which will 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.

Talking about death is an acknowledged taboo in society. Teachers often lack confidence to tackle issues of change, loss, death and bereavement, for reasons including worrying about

- managing their own feelings
- frightening children or opening up 'a can of worms'
- how to explain difficult and ineffable concepts, especially to groups of children whose families have a diversity of views about death eg the afterlife.

For these reasons, teachers often avoid teaching about these topics if they can. If they are to be taught, they do need explicit inclusion in the curriculum.

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?.'

Our recommendations for specific inclusions/insertions into the draft curriculum are

Para 51 after '...who can support them.' Suggest inserting 'Changes and losses are an inevitable part of relationships, and learning to live with these is a key skill for children's future relationships, health and wellbeing.'

Para 55 after 'circumstances' insert 'and how these change

Para 57 'Families and people who care for me'

- we recommend including a bullet point about change in families eg 'that families change over time, including as people are born and die'.
- After 'isolation and loneliness' we recommend inserting 'especially after a loss in their lives'

Under 'caring friendships' we recommend inserting 'changes and losses' after 'problems and difficulties'.

12. Do you agree that paragraphs 61-64 clearly set out the requirements on primary schools who choose to teach sex education?

N/A

13. Do you agree that the content of RSE in paragraphs 65-77 of the guidance is age-appropriate for secondary school pupils?

Yes, agree.

As pupils get older, the likelihood that they have themselves experienced bereavement grows. ¾ of 11-16 year olds have been bereaved of someone close to them^{iv}.

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.

14. Do you agree that the content of RSE as set out in paragraphs 65-77 of the guidance will provide secondary school pupils with sufficient knowledge to help them have positive relationships?

Agree.

Again, to ensure that topics of loss, change, death and bereavement are included, we recommend specific inclusions.

Para 69 At end, insert 'They should be taught about change and loss in relationships, and the impact these can have on health and wellbeing'.

Para 77 insert new bullet:

- how relationships and families change over time such as through birth, death, separation and new relationships

15. Do you agree that paragraphs 36-46 on the right to withdraw provide sufficient clarity and advice to schools in order for them to meet the legal requirements?

N/A

16. Do you agree that the content of physical health and wellbeing education in paragraphs 86-92 of the guidance is age-appropriate for primary schools pupils?

Agree

The content is appropriate for primary school pupils, though guidance would be welcomed on how to adapt schemes of work in order to deliver them in an age and stage appropriate way, building skills as well as knowledge.

17. Do you agree that the content of physical health and wellbeing education as set out in paragraphs 86-92 of the guidance will provide primary school pupils with sufficient knowledge to help them lead a healthy lifestyle?

Agree

Again, we recommend the explicit inclusion of change, loss, death and bereavement into the curriculum, to ensure these are taught. Specific recommended inclusions

Para 87 after 'normal range of emotions' insert '(both positive and negative)'. After 'situations' insert 'and changes'.

in para 92

- After 'experiences and situations' include 'changes and losses'
- After 'isolation and loneliness can affect children', insert 'especially after a loss in their lives'

18. Do you agree that the content of physical health and wellbeing education in paragraphs 93-99 of the guidance is age-appropriate for secondary school pupils?

Agree

19. Do you agree that the content of physical health and wellbeing education as set out in paragraphs 93-99 of the guidance will provide secondary school pupils with sufficient knowledge to help them lead a healthy lifestyle?

Agree.

In paragraph 97, there is a reference to 'adverse childhood experiences' (ACEs). It is crucial that the death of a parent or sibling is included in any guidance or definitions of ACEs: these are not included in some of the common checklists which is a major omission. If the term ACEs is to be used, this needs to be in its widest understanding.

Para 99 insert

- 'about common reactions to stress, change, loss and bereavement, including physical symptoms as well as feelings, thoughts and behaviours'

20. Do you agree with the approach outlined in paragraphs 36-46 on how schools should engage with parents on the subjects?

Yes

Parents and carers may be concerned about what and how their children will learn about loss, change, death and bereavement and it is helpful to set out how schools are expected to engage with them. In particular, parents and carers may be concerned about

- whether the messages the school teaches will be compatible with their family's religious and spiritual beliefs about death and bereavement and the way they explain these concepts to children
- how the teaching will avoid scaring or upsetting their child
- how the teaching will be sensitive to their family's own experiences of bereavement.

21. Paragraphs 108-109 in the guidance describe the flexibility that schools would have to determine how they teach the content of their Relationships Education/RSE/Health Education. Do you agree with the outlined approach?

Yes.

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 specific lessons. 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.

Young people's suggestions to us about what could help to make school a safe 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.

22. Do you agree that paragraph 44 of the guidance provides clear advice on how head teachers in the exceptional circumstances will want to take the child's SEND into account when making this decision?

N/A

23. Do you agree that paragraphs 30-32 of the guidance provide sufficient detail about how schools can adapt the teaching and design of the subjects to make them accessible for those with SEND?

The guidance could be strengthened with references throughout to make the curriculum appropriate for those with SEND, including mental health difficulties.

Children and young people in special schools are more likely to be bereaved of a peer than those in mainstream, and so the benefits of appropriately tailored education on loss, change, death and bereavement are particularly significant for this group.

Particular care will be needed in situations where children themselves have a life-limiting or life-threatening illness.

Euphemisms are commonly used in conversation about death and bereavement, but this is unhelpful for children who have a concrete understanding of terminology, including those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

24. Do you have any further views on the draft statutory guidance that you would like to share with the department? Do you think that the expectations of schools are clear? Please include this information in the text box below.

As shown above, the majority of pupils will have personal experience of the death of a close relative or friend by the time they leave school

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.

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'. 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 .

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 . 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 , 3 times more likely to develop new-onset depression, if bereaved suddenly , more likely to report depressive symptoms at the age of 30 (women) , 1.7 times more likely to attempt suicide in young adulthood and more likely to be hospitalised for a psychiatric disorder .

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.

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.

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.

25. Do you agree that more is required on financial education for post-16 pupils?

N/A

26. The department believes that primary schools should be able to access appropriate resources and training in order to teach effectively. Do you agree that the resources and support currently available to primary schools will be sufficient to enable them to teach the new subjects?

Disagree

If you disagree or strongly disagree, please rank the options below to indicate the most useful type of support we could provide to enable primary schools to teach the new subjects. Please briefly explain in the text box below if you think other support options are needed. (5 = most useful, 1 = least useful).

Provision of, or signposting to, curriculum planning resources	4
Provision of, or signposting to, teacher guides or training in the new subject knowledge	3
Provision of, or signposting to, teacher guides or training in pedagogy for the new subject	5
Guidance or training in how to select appropriate teaching resources for Relationships Education and Health Education	2
Guidance on how to select appropriate training	1

Many local childhood bereavement organisations member 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. Services can be found at www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk or at the local hospice.

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

Teaching of topics such as loss, change and bereavement is likely to be emotionally demanding and challenging for teachers, and is likely to touch on their own experiences. They need training and support, including about how to manage involving concerns and disclosures from pupils around their own mental health. 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.

Staff need to know where to get extra support for bereaved pupils. This could include their local child bereavement service or national services, listed at www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk and, in some areas, the new mental health in schools teams.

It is crucial that if pupils are taught to seek extra help if they are struggling, that this is available to them.

27. The department believes that secondary schools should be able to access appropriate resources and training in order to teach effectively. Do you agree that the resources and support currently available to secondary schools will be sufficient to enable them to teach the new subjects?

Disagree

If you disagree or strongly disagree, please rank the options below to indicate the most useful type of support we could provide to enable primary schools to teach the new subjects. Please briefly explain in the text box below if you think other support options are needed. (5 = most useful, 1 = least useful).

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Draft Regulations

28. Do you agree that the draft regulations clearly set out the requirements on schools to teach the new subjects of Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education?

29. We are required to set out in the regulations the circumstances in which a pupil (or a pupil below a specified age) is to be excused from receiving RSE or specified elements of it. The draft regulations provide that parents have a right to request that their child be withdrawn from sex education in RSE and that this request should be granted unless, or to the extent that the headteacher considers that it should not be.

Taking into account the advice to schools on how headteachers should take this decision, in paragraphs 41-46 of the guidance, do you agree that this is an appropriate and workable option?

30. Do you have any other views on the draft regulations that you would like to share with the department? Please include this information in the text box below.

Regulatory Impact Assessment

31. Tables (6-8) in section F of the draft assessment set out the assumptions we have made in estimating the cost burden for schools to implement the new requirements. Do you agree with our assumptions and the estimated additional costs to schools?
32. Are there any other cost burdens on schools, which you believe should be included in the regulatory impact assessment?
33. Please state in the text box below if you have any further comments on the regulatory impact assessment.

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

ⁱⁱ Rowling, L (2003) *Grief in School Communities* Buckingham: OUP

ⁱⁱⁱ Bowie 2000: 24 in Ribbens McCarthy, J (2005) *ibid*

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