

# Childhood Bereavement Network response to the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework 2019

## Executive summary

- The death of a parent, sibling or someone else close brings change and challenge into the life of a child, and can be devastating
- The majority of pupils will experience the death of someone close to them by the time they leave school
- Bereavement can disrupt children's learning and increase their risk of poor outcomes, particularly in situations of multiple disadvantage
- The Education Inspection Framework has the potential to drive improvements in the way schools support currently bereaved pupils as well as preparing all pupils for the almost inevitable experience of the death of someone close to them.

This response is from the Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN), the national hub for those working with bereaved children and young people. We underpin our 250+ members' work with essential support and representation. We are hosted by the National Children's Bureau. For more information about our work or this response, please contact Alison Penny, CBN Director at [apenny@ncb.org.uk](mailto:apenny@ncb.org.uk)

## Bereavement and childhood

1. 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 class<sup>i</sup>. 70% of primary schools have at least one recently bereaved pupil on roll<sup>ii</sup>. The majority of young people will be bereaved of someone close to them by the time they leave school.<sup>iii</sup>
2. The serious illness and death of a parent or sibling brings change and challenge into a child's life, and can be devastating, with implications for their health, relationships, learning and outcomes both in childhood and later life.
3. The Education Inspection Framework has the potential to drive improvements in
  - **Current support:** Ensuring schools promote the wellbeing and learning of pupils facing and following a death in the family
  - **Preparing for the future:** Ensuring schools help develop pupils' resilience to cope with an almost inevitable life experience.

## Bereavement and school

4. For those children and young people who are experiencing bereavement or whose family member is dying, schools play a key role in their network of support. Many children find that time at school offers them a respite from change and turmoil at home, but some struggle to get the support they need from staff and peers.
5. The terminal illness and death of a parent or sibling does not have a straightforward, causal relationship with children's learning and functioning at school. How a child responds, and how

this manifests at school is influenced by factors such as the nature of the death, pre-loss factors in the family including socio-economic disadvantage, how the rest of the family cope with their own grief and are able to support the child, and further changes that the family experiences. These include adjusting to a drastically reduced income, having to move house and possibly school, changing arrangements for childcare.

6. Some of the ways in which bereavement affects children and young people's life at school include<sup>iv</sup>:
  - **Attendance:** getting to school (on time, and at all) can be difficult if children are helping to care for someone, and takes on a different priority if children are spending time with someone before they die. Absences are expected around the death and funeral, and going back to school can be tough. Anniversaries or times of further change may also be difficult. Many children are very anxious that other people close to them will die too, and being separated from them during the school day can be a source of further stress.
  - **Learning:** children, parents and teachers report difficulties learning or concentrating in the early months following bereavement. However, some children and young people work hard at their studies as a way of making the person who died – or their surviving parent – proud of them.
  - **Attainment:** pupils bereaved of a parent or sibling underachieve at GCSE
  - **Relationships:** friendships can be strained if a child feels misunderstood, lonely or different following the death. Some report being bullied about their bereavement. Moving home and school because of the death can mean they lose the support of old friendships and have to build new relationships at a time of vulnerability. Some young people have suggested that the feelings of alienation and dislocation of bereavement can make some vulnerable to the appeal of gangs and the sense of belonging they can bring.
  - **Behaviour:** common difficulties in grief with sleeping, eating, emotions and communication can all result in changes in behaviour. These can manifest in a range of different ways in school including getting overwhelmed, becoming withdrawn, getting angry and taking risks.

### Risks of bereavement

7. 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<sup>v</sup>. 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<sup>vi</sup>, 3 times more likely to develop new-onset depression, if bereaved suddenly<sup>vii</sup>, more likely to report depressive symptoms at the age of 30 (women)<sup>viii</sup>, 1.7 times more likely to attempt suicide in young adulthood<sup>ix</sup> and more likely to be hospitalised for a psychiatric disorder<sup>x</sup>.

### Continued impact – revisiting grief

8. There is increasing evidence for a 'late effect' of bereavement, leading researchers to conclude that '*family bereavement had continuous, cumulative effects on children's emotional and social well-being, long after the event happened*' (Jones et al 2013). Children and young people often revisit their grief as they get older and face further changes or develop their awareness of what the loss means for them. This can be disconcerting for the adults around them, particularly in school if staff are not aware of the bereavement. Even in a context where staff do know what happened, children often report support falling away over time. One boy commented to us '*you*

*have to explain to them that it's not OK, you're still upset, it doesn't just go away after a month or a couple of weeks or something'.*

## What is needed

9. The Childhood Bereavement Network believes that all children have the right to information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives. We believe that this support should be viewed as part of a continuous learning process for the child, contributing to the development of the child's knowledge and understanding as they grow into adulthood.
10. To play their part, each school should have:
  - **sensitive and flexible pastoral support systems** that provide support and information for pupils and staff when someone is dying or has died. This includes
    - checking with the child and family how they would like support to be provided, and how they would like information to be shared with the rest of the class
    - a system for managing and communicating important information about a bereavement, including across transitions from one class or school to another.
    - bereavement being included in relevant plans and policies
    - staff training and support to increase their awareness and confidence, helping them understand how to respond helpfully, and where to get extra support
    - swift and appropriate referral to a range of specialist provision.
  - **opportunities to learn about death and bereavement as part of life.** This involves a spiral curriculum approach, covering
    - changes and differences in families
    - lifecycles and understanding death
    - managing feelings and seeking help.
11. The Education Inspection Framework can help ensure that pupils get good support if they are bereaved while at school, and that they are well prepared to face loss in adulthood.

## How the Education Inspection Framework can support this provision

12. We welcome the direction of travel outlined in the draft Education Inspection Framework. We believe that this will enable and incentivise schools to spend more time meeting the needs and supporting the learning and development of vulnerable pupils, including those who have been bereaved.
13. We believe there are some simple ways in which the Framework could be strengthened in pupils' interests. We have organised these around the four key judgements for the proposed new framework, making specific suggestions in relation to the research summary, the draft framework and the draft handbook where appropriate.

## Quality of education

14. No specific comments

## Behaviour and attitudes

15. Overall, this section could be strengthened by greater reference to the Department for Education's guidance on mental health and behaviour in school.
16. **Underlying influences on behaviour and attendance.** In particular, we would like to see greater acknowledgement that circumstances (including family illness and bereavement) can have an impact on children's behaviour and attendance as outlined above, and that changes in these areas are an opportunity for schools to spot and respond to children's need for support.
17. **Absence and bereavement.** Schools need permission to make reasonable adjustments to pupils' attendance records when their absences are due to family caring responsibilities and bereavement. They should be encouraged to have proactive contact with families following a bereavement to make a shared plan for the child's return to school.

### Recommendations for the research summary

- No specific comments

### Recommendations for the draft framework

- include further bullet points (suggested by Young Minds and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and the Partnership for Well-being and Mental Health in Schools)
  - *'the provider is equipped to identify when learners' behaviour is indicative of health needs or underlying issues, and to coordinate appropriate support'*.
  - *'the provider should work closely with parents and carers to promote their child's behaviour and positive attitudes to learning'*.
- elaborate 'are resilient to setbacks' to be clear that this includes setbacks in life rather than solely setbacks in education and progress

### Recommendations for the handbook

- In relation to the 'good' judgement, insert 'learners are supported to have high attendance'.

## Personal development

18. **Self-belief and self-concept.** The research summary is useful on the direction of causal links between self-concept and learning. It would be helpful to look at some of the risk factors for self-concept. One of these is bereavement: two years after the death of a parent, children have significantly lower self-esteem than their non-bereaved peers, and also feel less able to effect change (Worden 1996). Schools have a role to play in protecting and developing these aspects of bereaved children's lives.
19. **Mastery and competence.** There is some evidence that having an area of competence (eg academic attainment, sports, music) can have benefits for children and young people's wider outcomes, including after difficult experiences such as parental bereavement (Brewer and Sparkes 2013). The framework could make greater mention of these benefits.
20. **Curriculum development and coverage.** The new curricula for Health Education, Relationships Education and Sex and Relationships Education provide many opportunities for learning about change, loss and bereavement. However, these are implicit rather than explicit, and there are concerns that teachers will avoid teaching these sensitive subjects if they can. We believe that

schools need to be specifically inspected on the quality and coverage of these subjects and how they relate to pupils' wellbeing and mental health.

### Recommendations for the research summary

- Include mention of the risks that bereavement brings to self-belief and self-concept (Worden 1996) and the implications this has for their learning.
- Include findings from research on the benefits of mastery or having an area of competence on children's wider outcomes following difficult experiences such as bereavement (eg Brewer and Sparkes).

### Recommendations for the draft framework

- Elaborate second bullet point to read
  - *'the curriculum and the provider's wider work support learners to develop their character – including their resilience, confidence and independence – and help them know how to keep physically and mentally healthy in the face of change and loss'*
- Insert new bullet point on the content of the health and relationships curricula and how these support pupils to overcome changes and challenges

### Recommendations for the handbook

- Elaborate dimension in para 202 to read
  - *'developing pupils' confidence, resilience and knowledge so that they can keep themselves mentally healthy – and support others - in the face of change and loss'*

## Leadership and management

21. **Whole school approaches.** Pastoral support for individual pupils facing bereavement is best embedded within a whole school approach which includes partnerships with and support for parents and carers; staff training and support; curriculum development and partnership with external agencies. The benefits of these approaches are well-outlined in the Research Summary and the framework and handbook should be strengthened to promote this approach.
22. **Early help.** The draft framework references 'early help' under the bullet point relating to safeguarding but this could usefully be elaborated
23. **Critical incident planning.** Schools faced with a crisis – a death in the school community, a critical incident in the area – often wished they had been better prepared. Dealing with distressed pupils, staff and parents; fielding media queries and planning how to acknowledge a death and memorialise the person who has died are huge challenges for school leaders, who often describe these as career-defining moments. Having a clear plan in place can ensure that the school responds positively, swiftly and sensitively.
24. **Support for staff wellbeing.** Staff will have their own experiences of bereavement, both in their earlier life and often while they are employed. This will impact on their wellbeing at work, and also on their support for bereaved pupils and capacity and confidence to teach these topics. Supportive bereavement policies for staff as well as pupils will help them manage this experience at work.

### Recommendations for the research summary

- Include findings from research into national whole-school approaches to supporting bereaved pupils from Australia (Rowling and Holland 2000) and Denmark (Lytje 2017).

## Recommendations for the draft framework

- Insert new bullet point (suggested by Young Minds and the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition and the Partnership for Well-being and Mental Health in Schools)
  - *‘the provider creates a whole school culture and positive learning environment, which fosters resilience, wellbeing, and healthy development for both learners and professionals’*
- Insert new bullet point:
  - *‘the provider has made adequate preparations for a death or other critical incident in (or affecting a member of) the school community, so that learners and professionals know what to do and where to get additional support if needed’.*
- Elaborate bullet point on safeguarding, to read
  - *the provider has a culture of safeguarding that facilitates effective arrangements to: identify learners who may need early help **in response to family changes and challenges** or who are at risk of neglect, abuse, grooming or exploitation; help learners reduce their risk of harm by securing the support they need, or referring in a timely way to those who have the expertise to help; and manage safe recruitment and allegations about adults who may be a risk to learners and vulnerable adults.*

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> Holland, J. (1993). ‘Child bereavement in Humberside Primary Schools’. *Educational Research*, 35 (3), 289-297.

<sup>iii</sup> Harrison, L. and Harrington, R. (2001). ‘Adolescents’ bereavement experiences. Prevalence, association with depressive symptoms, and use of services’. *Journal of Adolescents*, 24, 159-169.

<sup>iv</sup> See Penny A and Stubbs D (2015) *Bereavement in childhood: what do we know in 2015?* London: National Children’s Bureau.

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

<sup>vi</sup> 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.

<sup>vii</sup> 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.

<sup>viii</sup> Parsons, S (2011) *Long-term Impact of Childhood Bereavement: Preliminary Analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*. London: Child Well-being Research Centre.

<sup>ix</sup> 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.

<sup>x</sup> 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.