

# Bereavement Guidance Policy

RIDGEWAY EDUCATION TRUST

Approved: 15 October 2020

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# **Bereavement Guidance Policy**

## **General**

Schools within Ridgeway Education Trust aim to be prepared for challenging situations and respectful of every family's unique circumstance. Empathic understanding in the familiar and secure surroundings of our school may be all the support some pupils, staff and families require. Where the impact of grief is more complex, referral to specialist support may be needed. For added guidance there are flow charts at the foot of this document which detail suggested actions in the event of a child's bereavement, the death of a student or the death of a member of staff.

## **Rationale**

1 in 29 pupils aged five to sixteen-years olds has been bereaved of a parent or sibling – that is one in every class. Many more are bereaved of a grandparent, relative, friend or other significant person. Within a school community there will almost always be some pupils who are struggling with bereavement – or sometimes the entire school community is impacted by the death of a member of staff or a pupil.

## **Supporting the Staff**

It is important that staff members have support networks readily available and feel able to ask for help. Senior staff and governors need to be aware that these reactions may occur and should seek appropriate guidance from the school counsellor and outside agencies. It is important to remember that school staff, including teachers, student managers, and teaching assistants, are not trained counsellors. They are not expected to offer bereavement counselling. Students and staff should be referred to the school counsellor and external agencies (e.g. CAMHS, SeeSaw) contacted if necessary. Listening and being available for comfort are the main skills required. However, if a member of staff feels unable to offer support because of their own reactions, this should be acknowledged and accepted, and another colleague should be considered for the role.

## **Showing Grief**

Grief can be shown in different ways including:

- unusual tiredness;
- change in appearance, unkempt or a change in image;
- loss of appetite or comfort eating;
- frequent daydreaming;
- deterioration in work;
- shorter attention span, difficulty in concentrating and following a task through to completion;
- memory problems: short and long term;
- quieter and more withdrawn;
- more tearful, needing more adult reassurance than usual;
- more irritable or aggressive;

- more than usual fluctuation of mood (especially in adolescents);
- difficulty in coming to school: wishing to remain at home, complaining of minor illness, not wishing to leave parent or carer;
- reluctance to go home: wishing to remain in school, seeking out opportunities to remain with staff or friends at the end of the school day;
- fears, heightened anxieties about potential danger (swimming, going out on trips etc).

## **Adolescence**

The normal experience of being adolescent may intensify the conflicts of grief for older students. Emotions are powerful at this stage: these may lead the young person to question his or her own identity, the meaning of life etc. They may compensate for the pain by taking on the role of the lost parent or elder sibling. Denial can also be a feature at this age: a pushing back of feelings with a fear of expressing them and losing control or looking childish. They may dislike being the odd one out and tend to minimise or reject special treatment or being made to feel different. The natural feelings of grief (i.e. becoming more childlike) may seem at variance with the progression towards adulthood.

Staff need to help the young person's peers know how to react as the student experiencing trauma may feel isolated. The peer group can be a source both of support or rejection. There may also be the problem that natural, healthy grieving takes time and it cannot be hurried, nor should it be repressed or denied. This may conflict with the necessity to work hard or even to concentrate when important examinations are looming.

## **Contact with Media**

Any contact with the media should be made exclusively by the school's Headteacher who will liaise with the Chair of Governors. Staff and students should be requested not to communicate with the media.

## **How to Respond**

It is best to admit the limitations on knowledge on the illness or death rather than being tempted to make up details.

## **Listening and Talking with the Child or Young Person**

Talking is also an essential part of healthy grief: not mentioning the illness, loss or death can be counter-productive. It may be tempting to rationalise that 'it is for their benefit' not to talk about the situation but this reaction may convey more about the adult's feelings of sadness and possible inadequacy in dealing with a difficult situation. Children and young people should be reassured if any guilty misunderstandings emerge. It is also not good practice to tell the class "don't talk to him/her about it, as it may upset him/her".

It is helpful to provide a quiet, private place for the children and young people to come to whenever they need to be alone, or with a member of staff known to be trusted by them. Almost anything may trigger tears in some and it is important to help them to realise that grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss.

Anniversaries and birthdays may be difficult times. Where a parent has died, Mother's and Father's Days may be particularly distressing, especially if the rest of the class are making cards. Staff may wish to talk to the remaining parent about someone else that a card may be sent to. This is also pertinent for single parent families, and where children and young people have experienced the divorce or separation of their parents.

### **Changes in Behaviour**

It is important for staff not to misinterpret the changed behaviour because attention seeking is common. This attention seeking may alienate others, especially when everyone in the family is bereaved and may be feeling needy too. This is a dilemma, and it may be difficult to know whether to be tolerant or understanding or whether to be firm because of the underlying needs of the child or young person, and also the needs of the rest of the class and the school.

There is evidence that survivors of suicidal deaths have unique and very difficult times handling their grief. Shame, guilt, anger and fear of their own self-destructive impulse may exist in the survivors.

### **Acknowledging the Death or Loss**

It may be appropriate for the school community to acknowledge the death of a student, parent, teacher or governor after discussions with relatives. Schools have typically responded in ways such as holding a special assembly or putting in place some form of memorial plaque, bench, or tree; there are many different possibilities. The Headteacher will have overall responsibility under the guidance of the Executive Headteacher and will communicate with families.

The Headteacher will liaise with other members of staff regarding their unique role in supporting the family – e.g. tutor, SENCO, Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Any news will be shared with the school community only after discussion with the families involved in any bereavement. Staff will be notified via email or staff briefings to avoid staff hearing news via social media.

A script will be prepared prior to sharing any news with pupils which has been agreed by the family and all staff.

Timings for sharing and follow up work will be agreed among all staff

### **To help someone who is suffering after the loss of a loved one you SHOULD:**

- let your genuine concern and caring show;
- be available – to listen or to help with whatever else seems needed at the time;
- say you are sorry about what happened and about their pain;
- allow them to express as much unhappiness as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share;
- encourage them to be patient with themselves, not to expect too much of themselves and not to impose any 'shoulds' on themselves;
- allow them to talk about their loss as much and as often as they want to; • talk about the special, endearing qualities of who they have lost; • reassure them that they did everything they could.

**Individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one said that the following when asked what they found HELPFUL to them:**

- “People sent letters and cards”;
- “People being there for me”;
- “I was allowed to be left alone”;
- “I was allowed to feel the way I did”;
- “I was listened to”;
- “A friend allowed me to talk as often and as long as I needed to”;
- “I was surprised to find humour helped when it was appropriately used”;
- “People were infinitely patient with me”.

**To help someone who is suffering after the loss of a loved one you SHOULD NOT:**

- let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out;
- avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided adds pain to an already painful experience);
- say you know how they feel (unless you’ve experienced their loss yourself you probably don’t know how they feel);
- say “you ought to be feeling better by now” or anything else which implies a judgement about their feelings;
- tell them what they should feel or do;
- avoid mentioning their loss out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they haven’t forgotten it);
- try to find something positive (e.g. a moral lesson, closer family ties etc) about their loss; point out that at least they have their other children;
- make any comments which in any way suggest that their loss was their fault (there will be enough feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from friends).

**Individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one said that the following when asked what they found UNHELPFUL to them:**

- “People giving me advice”;
- “People ignoring me or not speaking about the loss”;
- “Being told to cheer up”;
- “Being expected to return to normal after a week or two”;
- “Being told not to cry and upset myself (it probably means “don’t cry and upset me!”).

**Dealing with the Funeral**

The funeral is a means of acknowledging a death: a chance to say goodbye. Nowadays it is usually felt to be helpful for children and young people to be given the choice about whether to attend. The company of a trusted relative, friend or member of staff might be helpful in case the child has questions or wishes to leave at any point. Again, each person is different and school staff should be mindful of culture, religion and family views.

## **Summary**

The overall message in helping children and young people suffering from loss is:

- although there are recognisable “stages of grief” there needs to be an understanding that these are emotional states that individuals may go in and out of- grief does not complete it assimilates- “we learn to live with it”.
- listen attentively
- be sensitive, reassuring and calm
- maintain feelings of security and of being cared for
- keep to normal routines whenever possible
- maintain all the necessary practical care
- continue to communicate
- be honest: do not pretend to believe what you do not believe
- try to understand the child’s feelings and to reassure them wherever possible
- say ‘I don’t know’ to the unanswerable and do not convey that everything relating to death, illness and loss can be explained or understood

## **Review**

This guidance will be reviewed every 3 years or sooner if circumstances dictate.

## **COVID 19- Annex**

- Circumstances globally may result in a higher number of both students and staff suffering bereavement
- Coping with bereavement during lockdown and away from the familiar is especially challenging
- All families have been contacted by the schools’ Pastoral Team in regard to their personal COVID 19 experiences and how they feel about returning to school
- All staff have been contacted by the Senior Leadership Team in regard to their personal COVID 19 experiences and how they feel about returning to school
- Staff have been offered training about mental health awareness at both secondary schools and all staff have been provided with training from the DAP Education Psychologist about supporting young people on return to school and staff managing their own emotions about this
- Staff and student wellbeing and support for bereavement and loss has been at the centre of RET planning in regards to the Trust schools opening again in September to all students.

## **Further Resources**

### **Grief support for the young in Oxfordshire**

See Saw (Only available to Oxfordshire families)

Tel: 01865 744768 and 01865 742803

**CRUISE Children's Service**

Helpline: 0808 808 1677

COVID 19 specific bereavement support to be found at

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

**Anna Freud- Health and Wellbeing resources**

<https://www.annafreud.org/>

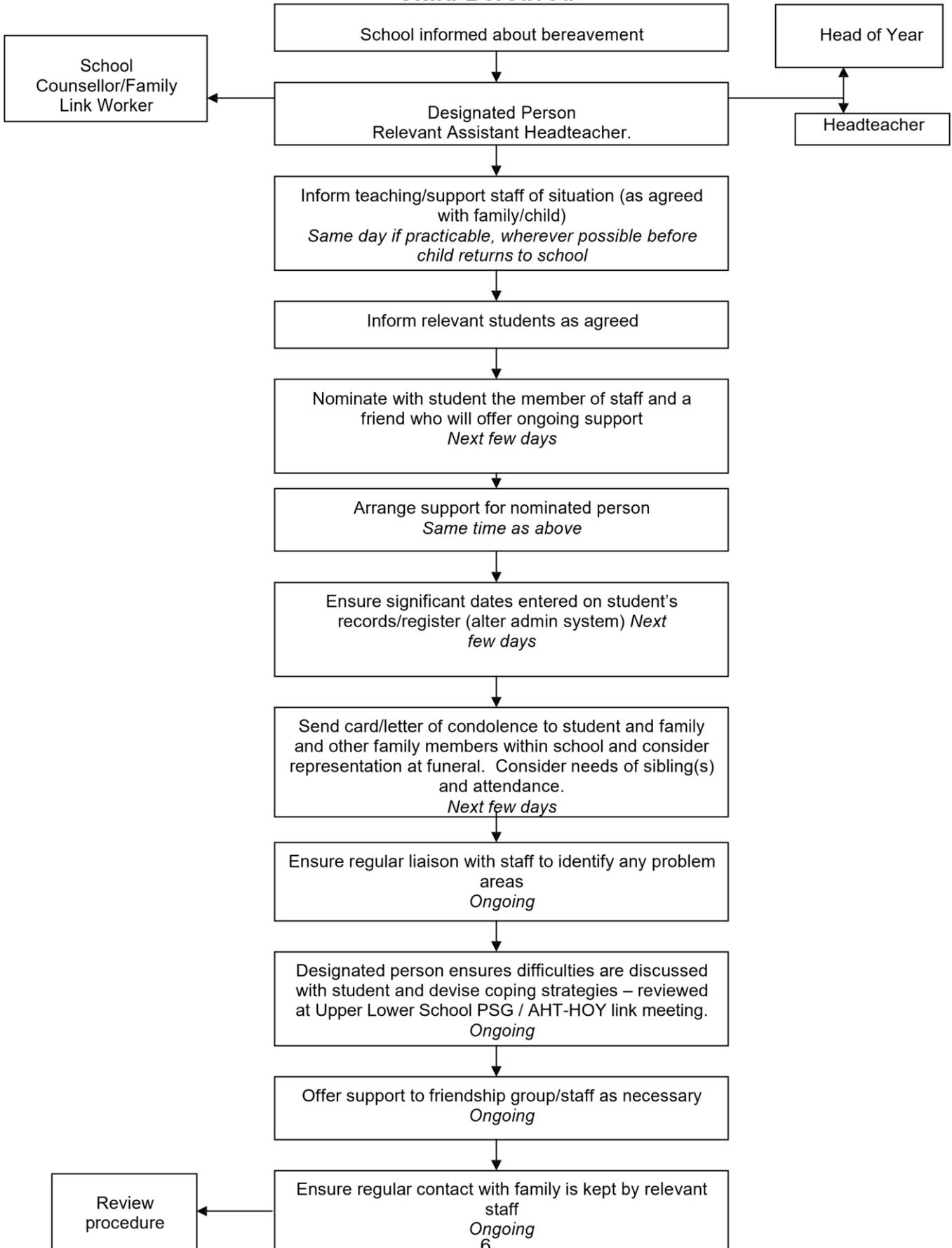
**Death and Bereavement in schools- a policy document**

Angela Jones and Margaret Wysling

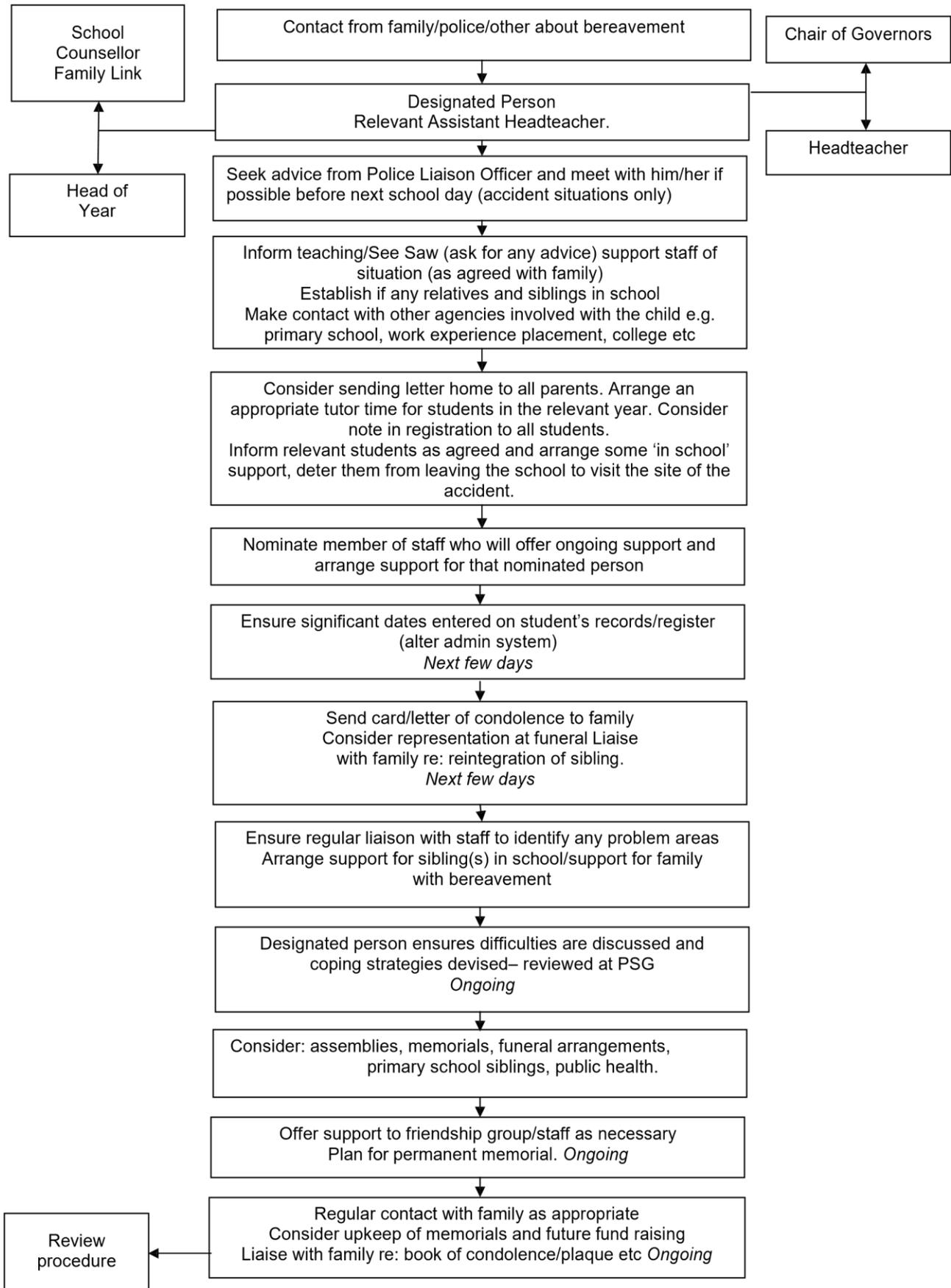
**Managing Loss, Trauma and Crisis**

Hillingdon Education Services

## Child Bereaved



# Death of a Student



## Death of a Member of Staff

