



HEALTHIER MINDS

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

**A Community Approach
to Supporting Bereavement,
Loss and Grief**



Curricular Resource: Practitioner Guidance

Background to the Curricular Resource

A recent study of the prevalence of childhood bereavement in Scotland revealed that over half (50.8%) of all children will have experienced the death of a close family member by the age of 8 and almost two thirds of children (62%) will have experienced a close family bereavement by the age of 10 (Paul and Vaswani, 2020). This is, however, an underestimate of the true extent of childhood bereavement.

For many people, talking about loss and death continues to be an extremely difficult subject. This is despite loss and death being something that everyone will experience at some point in their lives. We now know that even young children experience grief but yet there continues to be a reluctance to talk about it. Allowing children and young people the opportunity to understand and learn about bereavement can enhance their resilience, their coping skills and support them, now and in the future, when faced with this particular life event.

The aim of this guidance is to prepare practitioners for teaching a series of lessons based on the themes of bereavement, loss and grief to pupils from P1 through to S5.

About the Lessons

These lessons were developed by the East Renfrewshire Bereavement, Loss and Grief (BLG) Team from lessons written by teachers from Brighton & Hove and the childhood bereavement charity Winston's Wish. The Lesson content has been piloted by teachers from the BLG Team and discussed with students.

The lessons have been designed using theories of bereavement and our understanding of child bereavement so while the themes of the lessons remain the same, how they are tackled change through the CfE levels in accordance with the children's age and stage. As with all lessons it is advisable to go through the lessons with your students in mind and consider what, if any, differentiation will be required for individual students. We also suggest you refer to the guidance: [A Community Approach to Supporting Bereavement, Loss and Grief](#) particularly the sections related to **Grief Response by Stage of Development** (this is also included at the end of this guidance). This will help you to have an understanding of how the students in your class are likely to relate and respond to the themes of loss and death, and the kinds of questions they may ask.

The Lessons

Each stage will work through a set of 3 lessons:

Lesson 1: Learn

This first lesson aims to introduce some of the feelings which a loss, change or death can bring. Stories and film clips are used to generate discussion about how people can manage these feelings.

Lesson 2: Explore

The second lesson explores these themes in more detail. Through group discussions and interactive activities the pupils will consider what death means, what grief is, what people need when they are bereaved and how we can help others.

Lesson 3: Grow

The final lesson is focused on building resilience and promoting wellbeing through trying different creative and interactive strategies. This could be related to the themes of loss and grief such as making memory boxes or related to resilience more widely such as practicing gratitude or breathing techniques.

Include overview and link to CfE levels

Resources

Many of the lessons are based around a story or film clip. These are usually provided through a YouTube link, however, you may wish to purchase some books to allow you to read to the class yourself or to allow the students to return to the books at another time. You will find a list of suggested books for class libraries [here](#).

Delivering the Lessons

The 3 lessons can be delivered over the course of one to 3 weeks. It is not advisable to stretch the lessons over a longer period than 3 weeks as this will reduce retention of learning between lessons. Lessons should take no more than one hour and it is advised that the lesson ends after one hour even if not finished due to the content (please ensure time at the end to make sure all the students are ok and to do a nice activity or game if necessary). It is advisable to deliver the lessons prior to a break to allow the children to relax afterwards, however, support personnel should be on hand for any pupil who might need support during breaks.

Practitioner Training and Professional Development

The BLG team have developed lessons which we are confident all teachers will be able to deliver without specialist training. An ability to respond sensitively, patiently and empathically to the students' contributions and questions is all that is required. However, we understand that many teachers will not feel skilled or confident in this area and may benefit from additional support and training.

This resource from Winston's Wish may be helpful for answering some of those questions and concerns you might have about delivering the lessons:

https://www.winstonswish.org/wp-content/courses/pshe_elearning/index.html#/id/5ef07c876a21c6074e18e645

In some of the lessons we talk about growing around grief. This suggests that as time passes we don't get over a bereavement but rather our lives carry on, we grow and change but the grief is still there - there is just more space for it. This video explains this very well:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9rqJlbQDpk>

East Renfrewshire BLG Resource on Healthier Minds

The BLG resource on Healthier Minds has a wealth of information and resources which will help your understanding of child bereavement, the role of an adult in supporting children, young people and families, language to use and ways to support. Find this resource [here](#)

Child Bereavement Training

Child Bereavement UK, Winston's Wish and Creative Education offer a range of training courses for professionals which you can find here:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/training>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/professionals-and-training/>

<https://www.educare.co.uk/courses/dealing-with-bereavement-and-loss>

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/supporting-students-with-bereavement/>

East Renfrewshire BLG Team Support

The Bereavement, Loss and Grief Team are keen to support practitioners delivering these lessons and supporting children, young people, families and colleagues who have experienced a bereavement so we welcome any requests for support.

Please contact the BLG team – Ainsley.mcgoldrick@eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

Winston's Wish Helpline

Winston's Wish also has a helpline for any questions related to supporting a child or young person who has been bereaved <https://www.winstonswish.org/helpline/> or call 08088 020 021 (Mon-Fri 9-5)

Delivering the Lessons

Prior to delivering the lessons

Self-Reflection

It is really important to take time to reflect on the potential impact facilitating these lessons may have on you as an individual and how this in turn could impact on the students in your class. If you have suffered a bereavement or are struggling for any reason you may feel unable to deliver these lessons. Seek support from SLT and consider alternatives such as team teaching or a different teacher taking the lessons. Children and young people look to the adults around them to help them develop their responses and feelings in difficult situations. It is important that teachers feel comfortable in normalising emotional responses to loss. If the teacher identifies and models that some of the discussion makes them feel sad or upset too, this will help the children see that it is OK to express these feelings and explore ways to manage them appropriately. Try to have your own examples ready, however, avoid sharing very personal or detailed experiences of loss. If you feel yourself becoming upset let the children know that you are ok but feeling sad and seek support from another adult who can help deliver the lesson.

Inform parents and carers

It is important to inform all parents and carers prior to the lessons. This allows parents to inform the school of any issues that could arise in discussing the topic with their child, of any loss or bereavement that the school may not already know about and it also prepares parents to respond to questions that may arise following the lessons. Some parents may prefer that their child does not take part in the lessons. This is their choice and should be respected, however, where possible through discussion with parents their child's participation should be encouraged. Parents and carers can be reassured that the materials do not focus on any specific religious beliefs, but rather around handling the feelings related to loss and bereavement.

We have produced an information document for parents and carers. You may wish to seek consent from parents and carers prior to starting the lessons.

Know your class

It will be important to reflect on the needs and experiences of children and young people in the class for whom the content of the lesson may be a trigger for difficult memories. Consider the needs of children who have experienced a death of a friend or relative, are refugees, have a friend or relative with a serious or life limiting illness and children with additional support needs. The lessons may not be appropriate for all students and any considerations should be discussed with the child, ASN Coordinators, SLT and parent and carers as appropriate.

Options to support these students may include:

- Allowing them to see the resources before the lesson.
- Time out card allowing them to leave if necessary – avoid a student leaving alone and where possible have another adult available to accompany and monitor any student who needs to leave the class
- Check-in before and after the lesson
- Differentiation of materials

You may not know if a child has suffered a bereavement so regularly checking in with all pupils, keeping an eye on their responses and noticing any changes in behaviour is important throughout the lesson. While the lessons do not specifically cover religions and religious beliefs, this may come up during discussions so being aware of different religious beliefs in the class can help to ensure all beliefs are considered and included.

Pre Questionnaire

The pre questionnaire is designed to allow the students to share any worries or concerns they might have about discussing this topic. They may have experienced a bereavement and worry that the lessons will be too difficult. It may also allow you to prepare for questions which can arise. How the questionnaire is completed should be down to teacher judgement. It can be completed:

- electronically or on paper
- as a whole class, small groups with support or individually
- some children will require support to read and answer the questions
- if you anticipate that some children may find this topic difficult due to any loss (this does not need to be a recent death) it is preferable to support the child to complete this separately to encourage them to be as honest as possible about their concerns

Telling the Students about the Lessons and the Questionnaire

Suggested script for primary aged pupils (can be amended to suit the needs of the students)

We are going to be doing 3 lessons over next couple of weeks about quite a tricky topic – loss, change and death. We all experience loss and change throughout our lives. Can anyone think of a change or loss that someone might go through? (Examples – change of school or house, change of friends, loss of toys, death of a pet, grandparent, family member). We all had a big change during the Covid 19 restrictions when we had to stay at home and we couldn't see our friends so much. That was a change and a loss. These things can make us feel lots of different emotions and can be really difficult to cope with which is really normal. We will spend some time thinking about what we can do to help ourselves and others when we experience these feelings. We will listen to stories and do some activities to help us talk about loss, change and death but it might be hard sometimes so I want to make sure you are all ok before we start and give you the chance to tell me about any worries you have about these lessons. It's important to know who you can talk to if you are upset about the lessons so you can talk to me or someone in your family. Is

there anyone else you would talk to if you are upset? Does anyone not know who they would talk to?

We are going to fill in these questions and it's important to be as honest as you can be.

Create a safe learning environment for teaching about loss and bereavement

Due to the nature of the content of these lessons it is important to reflect on practices to establish a safe learning environment for students and practitioners. It is especially important to be mindful of how to keep everyone safe before, during and after the lesson. The use of ground rules or agreements and regular check-ins will help. Stories, film clips, visual and interactive activities are utilised to create a distance from the topic which supports a developmental understanding of loss, change and death.

During the Lessons

Develop, revisit and remind about ground rules

Develop and regularly revisit rules or agreements to keep everyone safe. These might include:

- Respect that we all have different reactions, experiences and beliefs about loss and death.
- Listen to everyone
- Ask questions if you are unsure
- Ensure everyone has their chance to speak and avoid comments that may be harmful to others
- Be respectful both in the lesson, but also outside of this lesson, especially to anyone who has shared thoughts and feelings.
- Students do not need to share anything you don't want to

Manage questions and disclosures

Children and young people are naturally very curious about death and are likely to ask a lot of questions. Encourage the children to ask questions throughout the lessons. A question box can help some less confident children. You will not be able to anticipate or plan for every question but preparing some scripts will help you with more common questions or contributions. Always aim to be as clear as possible in your answer. Avoid euphemisms like 'gone to sleep'; 'gone away'; 'lost'. Use clear words like 'death', 'dead' or 'dying'.

This Winston's Wish clip considers how to answer questions children have about death:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh8WHeEEhVE>

Common Questions or Contributions	Example Script

General Questions	
Any detailed or personal experience	Thank you for sharing that with us. That must have been really difficult for you (If you feel it necessary follow this up with the pupil after the lesson).
Any question that you feel unable to answer or uncomfortable answering	That's a good question, I am going to think about how to answer that and come back to you. That's a great question, I will need to have a think about it. What do you think? Does anyone else have any thoughts? That's a really good question. I wonder who we could talk to help us answer that.
Any question that involves blood, injury, body parts, graphic details	That's a really big and difficult question. Is that something that you've been thinking about or worrying about? I don't think I can answer that but maybe you and I can have a think about it later.
Repetitive questions	Keep the information the same, clear and consistent. Younger children will often repeat the same questions in their attempt to understand what has happened.
Questions related to death in general	
What happens after someone dies?	When someone dies, their body stops working, their heart stops beating, they can't feel, hear see or touch anymore.
Do you believe in Heaven?	That's a very interesting question; what do you believe? People have many different beliefs about what happens when someone dies, this can depend on your family's religion, or culture, or individual belief. What does your family believe? What we do know is that people can't tell us what happens once they have died and so no one can say that a person's belief is wrong.
Does dying hurt?	No, it doesn't hurt to die and it doesn't hurt to be dead. When someone is very unwell the doctor will give them medicine to ease any pain they feel.
Will I see dad/pet/friend again?	When someone dies, we know that they can't come back to life for us to see them or play with them again. We can still talk about them, we can talk to them, and we will always have our memories of them. Some people believe they will see their loved ones again; what do your family think?
Why do we have to die?	It doesn't seem fair, does it? But everything that is alive will die one day. Most of the time, it is because they are very or very unwell. Sometimes, they have an accident or an illness that means their body stops working.

How would I know if someone/something has died?	We can tell when a person or animal dies because their body stops working; their heart stops beating, their lungs stop breathing and their brain stops thinking. Let's think about plants - how do you think we could tell if a plant had died?
What happens to a dead person's body?	After someone has died, their body no longer works. There are many customs that people follow to respect the body of someone who has died; the most common ones are called 'burial' when the person's body is placed in a hole in the ground and covered with soft soil or 'cremation' when the person's body is turned into soft ash in a fire. Remember, the body can't feel any pain.
When will I die?	Well, most people die in old age, when they are very old. I expect you will be well over 100!
Why are some people cremated and some people buried?	All around the world, different faiths and cultures have different practices when a person dies. Families also have traditions and choices about what happens to the body after someone has died.
Questions often asked following a death	
Where has mummy/aunt/the pet/brother gone?	It's very sad that ** has died. It's not the same as going to another house or another place. Her body stopped working and she died.
Did my dog die because I was naughty?	No. Animals die because their body stops working the way it should. This happens because their body has grown very old, or there is an accident, or an illness causes the body to stop working. It has nothing to do with anything you did or didn't do.
Will this sadness ever go away?	There will probably always be some times when you feel this sad but, hopefully, there will be many, many more times when you feel happy.
I want to go to the funeral but mum won't let me	I am sorry you are upset about this, but perhaps mum has good reasons. Have you been able to talk with your family about how this feels to you? <i>If appropriate it might be an idea for you to follow this up with the parent.</i>
I am being forced to go to the funeral, I don't want to go	I am sorry you are upset about this, but perhaps mum has good reasons. Have you been able to talk with your family about how this feels to you? <i>If appropriate it might be an idea for you to follow this up with the parent.</i>

Why couldn't they make my sister better?	Even though all the doctors worked very hard, there are times when a person's illness can't be cured or their body can't be made better with the medicines or operations.
I wished them dead, is it my fault?	No, it isn't. Nothing you said, did or thought made them die – nor anything you didn't say or didn't do. But it can be hard to feel like that now and also natural to have felt like that before.
Why can't I go and see dad's body?	There might be lots of reasons for this. Have you talked to your grown-up about this? What would it mean to you to go to see their body? <i>If appropriate it might be an idea for you to follow this up with the parent.</i>
I find it hard to concentrate at school, sometimes I don't come to school, other times I get into trouble as I'm not keeping up or staying focused.	I'm not surprised, considering what you have been going through. Let's think of some ways we can help you with that...
I can't talk to my parent, I don't want to upset them/worry them/put more on them.	I wonder if your parent is feeling the same thing? Maybe we could think about how to share how you are feeling with them? Is there anyone else you could talk to?
Questions from Parents	
If a parent asks you to pass on information to their child	<p>I understand how hard this is for you. I think it would be really important for them to hear this from you but let's have a think together how that can best happen...</p> <p><i>Refer to the resources on Healthier Minds</i> https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/bereavement-loss-and-grief/</p> <p>Be prepared to refer on any concerns to your designated child protection lead in line with your safeguarding policy.</p>

At the End of the Lesson

Check-in with the students to make sure everyone is ok. Remind the pupils who they can talk to if they are feeling upset at any point. It can often be helpful to finish with a brief fun or relaxing game or activity or a funny YouTube clip.

Check-in with yourself. How are you feeling? Do you need to speak to a colleague or family member? Build in some self-care even when you are busy.

Grief Response by Stage of Development

From **A Community Approach to Bereavement, Loss and Grief** available at <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/bereavement-loss-and-grief/>






Understanding of death and responses to bereavement and loss will differ depending on the child or young person's developmental stage. It is necessary to consider the child or young person's developmental stage rather than chronological age when considering how the child or young person might react to a loss and the most appropriate form of support. This section explains what to expect at each stage and what supports should be considered. It is important to remember that children and young people do not move abruptly from one stage of development to the next and the characteristics from each stage may overlap.

Infants (birth to 2 years)

At this stage of development children are not able to understand death, but will experience the loss as a separation from someone to whom they may have an attachment. Due to limited ability to communicate verbally, children may express this loss in other ways, such as becoming withdrawn or crying more frequently. The emotional state of people around them may also have an adverse effect, and normality and routine are very important.

Key Points

Children from birth to 2 years:









-  have no understanding of death
-  are aware of separation and will grieve the absence of a parent or carer
-  may respond with increased crying, decreased responsiveness, and changes in eating or sleeping
-  may keep looking or asking for a missing parent or carer and wait for him or her to return
-  are most affected by the sadness of surviving family members

Preschool-age children (2-5 years old)

At this stage of development children believe that death is reversible or temporary. They may also be convinced that it was something that they said or did which caused the person to die. Abstract concepts are not easily grasped, and so it is important that the child is spoken to in very concrete terms. In order to make sense of what has happened children at this age may often ask the same questions over and over again.

Key Points

Children from 2 - 5 years:








-  are curious about death and believe death is temporary or reversible
-  are naturally egocentric and see themselves as the cause of events around them so may feel responsible for the death
-  may see death as the person is sleeping
-  understand the world as a mix of reality and fantasy
-  may think that they can make the deceased come back if they are good enough
-  will worry about who will take care of them and about being abandoned
-  are still greatly affected by the sadness of surviving family members
-  cannot put their feelings into words and instead react to loss through behaviours such as irritability, aggression, physical symptoms, difficulty sleeping, or regression (such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking)

Primary school-age children (six to 12 years)




Children begin to develop the understanding that death is irreversible and something that happens eventually to all living things. Death may be regarded as something that is a bit 'spooky', and they may display what seems to be an unhealthy curiosity in the more morbid aspects of the death. Children at this age may complain of headaches, a sore tummy or other ailments. These are referred to as 'somatic' complaints and are generally physical manifestations of emotional pain. Behaviour may change, but it is important to encourage children at this age to express their feelings and understand that what they are feeling is perfectly natural.

Key Points

Children from 6 - 9 years:

-  understand that death is final, but see it as something that happens only to other people
-  may think of death as a person or a spirit, like a ghost, angel, or a skeleton
-  are often interested in the specific details of death and what happens to the body after death
-  may experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness
-  continue to have difficulty expressing their feelings and may react through behaviours such as school phobia, poor performance in school, aggression, physical symptoms, withdrawal from friends, and regression
-  still worry about who will take care of them and will likely experience insecurity, clinginess, and fear of abandonment
-  may still worry that they are to blame for the death

Children from 10 – 12 years:

-  by age 10 children understand that death is universal, unavoidable, and will happen to them
-  will experience a range of emotions and will start to worry about their own death
-  are likely to ask a lot of questions








Adolescents and Adults

This is a crucial stage in the development of identity when young people are developing

their own ideas about who they are and what is important to them in their lives. They are more aware of their future. Death may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings. As adults our job is to let them know that we are there if they need to talk, or that we can find someone else to help if necessary. Although the grieving process at this age is much like adults, teenagers are still developing emotionally. Teenagers are much more aware of the finality of death and will feel the personal impact deeply. Teenagers can reflect on the longer term impact of their loss; that future milestones will not be shared with the person who has died. Relationships with others are becoming increasingly important, and any loss can lead to feelings of anger or severe distress. Older children may take on caring roles within the family which can limit the opportunity to grieve. A loss of confidence may result from bereavement and it is important to support the young person to build resilience and remember the positive aspects of their life.



Key Points

Adolescents and Adults





-  have an adult understanding of the concept of death, but do not have the experiences, coping skills or behaviour of an adult
-  may 'act out' in anger or show impulsive or reckless behaviours, such as substance misuse or fighting in school
-  may experience a wide range of emotions, but not know how to handle them or feel comfortable expressing them
-  the reality of death contradicts a teenager's view of himself or herself as invincible, and teenagers may question their faith or their understanding of the world
-  developmental issues of independence and separation from parents can interfere with the ability to receive support from adult family members
-  coping strategies may create tension with family members, as adolescents may cope by spending more time with friends or by withdrawing from the family to be alone
-  boys, particularly in teenage years, are likely to experience academic difficulties in the early months following parental death

Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs

While a child or young person with Additional Support Needs may require additional consideration and planning as to how to provide the best support, the principles remain the same:

-  provide as much routine and normality as possible
-  be honest and use clear and simple language



-  encourage the child or young person to communicate feelings using the communication style which is appropriate for the child's age, developmental stage, level of understanding and additional support needs
-  use visuals to support the child's understanding of what has happened and to prepare them for ceremonies such as funerals or memorials
-  communicate closely with parents/carers to ensure a consistent response
-  observe closely for changes to behaviour which may be an expression of their confusion and loss

Children with additional support needs may become very anxious by any changes to their routine, family or school life which can affect behaviour. Prepare the child for things that might be different. Be clear about routine changes such as who will collect the child from school.

Be careful about the language you use, especially if the child is literal in their understanding and interpretation. For example, if you describe death as "like going to sleep" you may make the child or young person terrified of going to sleep at night. The child or young person may not understand the concept of death and instead will require the personal impact to be explicitly stated e.g. **"you will not see Grandma again"**.

A child or young person with an additional support need may not respond at all to a death even of someone very close or may focus on very practical issues such as who will make their dinner or take them to swimming lessons. This can be hard for others to hear and accept but is a reflection of the child's understanding of death (Coehler, 2016). Alternatively a child or young person's response may be delayed and behaviour change may not present for weeks or months after the death.