



Maghull High School Bereavement Policy

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1 Rationale

Maghull High School believes that bereavement and loss are an inevitable part of learning and growing. No matter how prepared we think we are, death is often traumatic and unexpected. Its unpredictability can severely unbalance a school whose normal working environment is one based on routine.

2 Policy

Maghull High School feels strongly about the way death is handled and discussed and as such believes that the school should endeavour to provide:

- an environment that is sensitive and compassionate to the needs of those wishing to grieve, whatever their cultural or religious beliefs
- a commitment to an education about death and the associated rituals and traditions of mourning
- opportunities for discussion that help lessen the stigma attached to death, reducing its status as a taboo subject.

3 Guidelines

- The school will respond in a planned and agreed manner, so that all staff know what is expected and can contribute their part in a way that is consistent with the ethos of the school
- The Headteacher will co-ordinate the school's response and be vital in creating an appropriate atmosphere. They will be the first point of contact and will liaise with all parties concerned and affected. They will allocate a specific person (usually the young person's Head of Year/Key Stage Director) to support the bereaved. This person would, in the later stages of bereavement, offer support and check on the progress of any students involved
- In addition, a small group of staff will be identified to keep in touch with the family so contact from the family's point of view is manageable but also does not come to an abrupt end after all the initial attention. This group would probably consist of the student's Head of Year/Key Stage Director or their representative, the student's form tutor, and or a member of staff particularly close to the student
- The Headteacher or their representative will inform all governors and staff as appropriate
- Students and parents or carers will be informed at the same time and as promptly as circumstances will allow. Students in school will be informed face to face, parents or carers by letter as soon as possible. Absentees from school will be noted to ensure that they are also informed on their return by their form tutor. Staff who are absent will be informed by their line manager
- Living in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, it is necessary to be aware of the differing cultural and religious traditions of grieving and mourning. The school should ensure that they do not deny young people the opportunity to grieve and mourn within the traditions of their own culture and religious beliefs
- The Headteacher will liaise with governors, stakeholders, the media and possibly the police as appropriate.

4 Managing the first day

- Upon hearing news of a death, members of staff should contact the Headteacher. If a parent, relative or close friend of a student has died, the Headteacher will decide (after speaking to the student's next-of-kin) who should approach the student
- A parent or relative coming into school to break the news, possibly with support from a member of staff, would normally be the best and usual approach. If no parents, relatives or carers are able to attend, the Headteacher will need to decide who is best suited/qualified to deal with the situation
- The Headteacher, supported by the senior leadership team and the student's Head of Year/Key Stage Director, should gather all details surrounding any death. It is vital to have all the facts. If the death/s have been particularly traumatic the media may be involved. It is essential that correct information is disseminated to all staff.

5 Multiple deaths, death in school

- In the event of multiple deaths, additional support and resources will probably be required. The senior leadership team should meet to agree a planned course of action and if the situation were deemed to be a critical incident, the Critical Incident Management Team would come into play
- There may be considerable media interest. The Headteacher will decide what information can and should be released. It is important that one individual, pre-selected and briefed by the senior leadership team, acts as spokesperson, relaying consistent information. Another consideration might be the setting up and running of an emergency school hotline and/or email account
- It may be necessary to retrieve the personal belongings of the deceased for their return to the next-of-kin. Information on the school's database, including references and addresses will need to be amended and updated. This also applies to notice boards, policies, staff information packs and school website and social media. The school may decide to write to parents to allow them to explain to their children the meaning and implications of an event.

6 Funerals, memorial services/student participation

- Before the bereaved student or member of staff returns to school there is likely to be a funeral. Students and staff may wish to attend, or take part in the service, but they should only do so with the agreement of the deceased's family or relatives' prior agreement, as well as the agreement of their own parents/carers. The Headteacher, and/or their representatives, may be the only person representing the school and in contact with the family/relatives, and will need to discuss funeral arrangements, as appropriate
- If the bereaved family wish students and staff to attend, the senior leadership team should be available to offer support before and after the service. If the family do not wish the school to attend, their wishes will be respected and the school will consider arranging an alternative
- Planning a memorial service, reading lessons, poems, or compiling a book of condolence/memories may all assist in the grieving process
- The tutor group most affected might like to write down their thoughts and feelings; these may be given to the bereaved family. It should be the role of the Head of Year/Key Stage Director to ensure that appropriate comments are made. After either the family or school based service, staff and students should be encouraged to meet and express their thoughts and feelings. Such services are important in initiating the mourning process
- The school may identify a venue on site for gatherings and quiet moments of reflection.

7 Death of a member of staff

- When such an event occurs it is usually extremely traumatic, especially for members of staff forced to deal with their own grief as well as comforting students. Planning how a school manages such an event is important. To avoid rumours it is advisable that the news is broken as soon as possible. A gathering together of staff to allow them to grieve in private will take place before announcing the news to the rest of the school
- Generally such news is broken in assembly by the Headteacher, in a space where everyone may be told simultaneously. Later in class students should be allowed the opportunity to express their grief individually with the support of the form tutor. Some students may have already experienced death and their way of coping with such events is sometimes observed in emotional outbursts. Some may express feelings of anger, panic or relief. It is important to try to remember that this is a time when everyone is hurting
- For a community as close knit as a school, a memorial service in keeping with the ethos, values and beliefs of Maghull High School is normally a good idea. The coming together of the whole school collectively for one purpose helps each individual come to terms with his/her own grief in a shared experience – i.e. helping to initiate the grieving process. Such services also offer the opportunity for those who may have been unable to attend the funeral to express themselves through drama, poems and letters. It is at times like these when

members of the staff may feel insecure of their own abilities, finding it difficult to cope. Without encroaching on their privacy staff will consider the mental health and wellbeing of teachers who are particularly affected by the death of a close colleague.

8 Death of a student

- The death of a fellow student is probably the most demanding situation a young person might be forced to face whilst in school. Comprehending and coming to terms with such an event is going to be equally difficult and will require great emotional support from the school staff
- If faced with a sudden death the Headteacher should contact the deceased parents/carers/next of kin as soon as possible to thus enable compliance with any of their wishes. The immediate class friends and siblings of the deceased should be gathered and the news, if not already known, be broken before an announcement is made to the rest of the school, thus allowing private grief. The announcement should be made to the whole of the school as soon as practically possible. Additional support from fellow teaching colleagues may well be required as well as the assistance of the school's learning mentors in the Phoenix Centre
- In the event of a young person becoming terminally ill their wishes and those of their parents or carers should always be respected. Should the young person wish to attend school, pastoral staff may need to inform students of the young person's condition. Occasionally the student may wish to talk to their fellow classmates about their predicament themselves. Honest and open communication about death and dying, in a supportive and safe environment, we feel is the best line of approach.

9 Supporting the family

Parents and carers often turn to the school for advice and information, especially on matters of bereavement. It is important to remember that the family, friends and the immediate community often best support those suffering from bereavement, as is the case with other stressful life events. The following are some points that may be helpful to bear in mind when talking to parents and carers:

- A death in the family will disrupt the family for many months; the family will never be the same again. Family members are grieving, relationships alter, and members may take on new roles. Sometimes there is a change of carer, house or school, all of which add to the disruption and distress experienced by the young person. To support the young person it is helpful to minimise, if possible, changes and disruptions in their normal daily routine and life in school
- The bereaved family members may emotionally and physically withdraw from the young person, to protect themselves from more distress. Some adults will deny the bereaved person is grieving, at it will be distressing for them to acknowledge the young person's pain. This may cause distress and confusion, causing grief reactions of anger, withdrawal or psychosomatic behaviours such as, headaches, stomach ache or sickness
- The bereaved young person may regress in behaviour, becoming clingy, difficult or withdrawn. His/her schoolwork may suffer. These changes will be partly due to grief but also to the disruption and changes within the family, causing the young person to feel confused and unsafe. Even the simple withdrawal of attention from the young person can lead to problems; the young person may feel resentment, jealousy or guilt towards the dead person. The expression of this verbally can cause the remaining family members distress and shock. Parents and carers need to know this is normal and will decrease as the young person and the family become more stable and settled
- Parents and carers need to be informed of the benefits that a young person gains in being involved in the ceremonies and rituals that follow the death. An explanation as to how mourning practices help young people to express their feelings and come to terms with and accept the reality of their loss can be very beneficial
- Finally, teachers need to remember that parents and carers will often use them as role models, counsellors or extended family; looking to them for support for themselves as well as finding appropriate ways of supporting and talking with their children. Teachers therefore may require their own support structures, so they too can turn to others for emotional support, advice and information if needed. Supporting bereaved families, whilst rewarding, can also be emotionally draining.

10 Self-care for those working with the bereaved

It's easy to overlook the stresses and anxieties placed on those dealing with the bereaved. In many instances these can be quite exacting and yet because our sympathy and attention naturally rests with those grieving we can easily forget the emotional weight resting on the shoulders of those offering support. To assist, the following points we think are important to bear in mind:

- Anticipate possible reactions you may experience with grief and loss. Each one of us is likely to react differently depending on our age, personality, cultural and religious background. If you are ever unsure about how you should react to others' grief, honesty is always the best line of approach
- Try to accept that you may experience emotional reactions yourself. Such an event might trigger thoughts of your own past grief experiences. You may even find yourself doubting your own abilities. It is not unusual to experience existential thoughts and find yourself querying life's injustices, questioning perhaps your own beliefs. Panic attacks and worries about death – your own, or perhaps that of your family may also become a preoccupation
- Try to accept that giving such support can affect you in perhaps ways you had not considered. Normally these reactions will subside after a few days or weeks but if they persist do not be afraid to ask for professional support. Never take on too much. If you find that you are having difficulty in managing to cope, look to others to offer support – a partner, friend, or colleague
- It is important to remember that you alone cannot carry other peoples' grief.

11 Resources

Child Bereavement UK

Cruse Bereavement Care

Winston's Wish

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Mental Health and behaviour in schools DfE November 2018

12 Related Policies

Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy

Critical Incident Policy

Wellbeing Policy