

# Supporting a bereaved child at school



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Children spend a great deal of time in school so it's unsurprising that teachers and support staff, as familiar and trusted adults, can play an important role in supporting a bereaved child. A bereaved child might display a whole range of emotions or, alternatively, very few. Among the issues that may arise are:

- A change in behaviour – becoming withdrawn or exhibiting anger and aggression
- Bullying or being bullied
- Increased anxiety which may show itself as the child getting very upset at a seemingly trivial incident
- Difficulty in concentrating or being forgetful which could affect academic performance
- Complaining of illnesses such as headaches or stomach aches
- Separation anxiety – worrying about the people they are close to when they are away from them

Up to 70 per cent of schools have a bereaved pupil on their roll at any given time. Schools are well placed to provide young people with the support they need to help them get through this difficult time in their lives. The routine and familiarity of a normal school day can be of great comfort to a grieving young person.

Children may be anxious about the thought of returning to school. Good communication between the school and the family will help make things go as smoothly as possible. It may be helpful to appoint a member of staff who can liaise with the family both before and after the child's return, although it is important that anyone working closely with a family experiencing a very difficult or emotional time is also often support.

Fully involve the child and family in discussions about how the return to school should be handled. Involving the child in any decisions that are to be made about them will help them to feel more in control, during what may be a fairly chaotic time in their lives. Reassure the pupil about the support that will be available to them as they settle back in to school life.

In circumstances when other pupils are to be told of the death, discuss with the family about what is to be said. Explain to other pupils how a bereaved child might be feeling and encourage them to be supportive. Even if the peers of the bereaved child had no connection to the deceased, it may be useful to discuss with them how they should react or behave when their friend returns to school. Their friend is still the same person, they may get sad or emotional and that is ok. Encourage them to speak to the allocated staff member if they are really worried about their friend.

Ensure that staff members are made aware of the circumstances surrounding the death. Have somewhere a grieving child can go for a "time out" should the bustling school environment become a bit too much. Show flexibility and understanding should a child's schoolwork fall below usual standards.

Have a selection of resources on bereavement. Stories are an excellent way of helping to explain the concept of death, particularly to younger children.



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# Books for an adult to share with a bereaved child

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## **Goodbye Mousie - Robie H. Harris, illustrated by Jan Ormerod**

One morning a boy finds that his pet, Mousie, won't wake up. The truth is Mousie has died. At first the boy doesn't believe it. He gets very mad at Mousie for dying, and then he feels very sad. But talking about Mousie, burying Mousie in a special box, and saying good-bye helps this boy begin to feel better about the loss of his beloved pet.

## **I Miss You (a First Look at Death) - Pat Thomas**

Written by a trained psychotherapist, journalist and parent, this reassuring picture book explores the difficult issue of death for young children. Children's feelings and questions about this sensitive subject are looked at in a simple but realistic way. This book helps them to understand their loss and come to terms with it.

## **Missing Mummy - Rebecca Cobb**

Written and illustrated by an award-winning author-illustrator, Missing Mummy deals with the loss of a parent from a child's point of view. The text and artwork explore the many emotions a bereaved child may experience, from anger to guilt and from sadness to bewilderment. Importantly, the book also focuses on the positive - the recognition that the child is still part of a family, and that his memories of his mother are to be treasured.

## **Always and Forever - Alan Durant, illustrated by Debi Gliori**

When Fox dies the rest of his family are absolutely distraught. How will Mole, Otter and Hare go on without their beloved friend? But, months later, Squirrel reminds them all of how funny Fox used to be, and they realise that Fox is still there in their hearts and memories.

## **Badger's Parting Gift - Susan Varley**

Badger knows he will die soon, so he does his best to prepare his friends. When he finally passes away, they are grief-stricken, but one by one they remember the special things he taught them during his life. By sharing their memories, his friends realise that although Badger is no longer with them physically, he lives on through their memories.

## **Granpa - John Burningham**

Granpa nurses his granddaughter's dolls, mistakes her strawberry-flavoured pretend ice-cream for chocolate, takes her tobogganing in the snow, and falls in with her imaginary plans to captain a ship to Africa, like all good Granpas should. It's a friendship that children who read this book will long remember.

## **The Huge Bag of Worries - Virginia Ironside**

Wherever Jenny goes, her worries follow her - in a big blue bag. They are there when she goes swimming, when she is watching TV, and even when she is in the loo. Jenny decides they will have to go. But who can help her? Written by one of Britain's leading agony aunt's, The Huge Bag of Worries can be used as a conversation starter for whatever is making a child anxious.

## **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death - Laurie Krasny Brown**

No one can really understand death, but to children the death of a loved one can be especially perplexing and troublesome. Using very wise dinosaurs, this guide helps dispel negative connotations associated with death and provides answers to some of the most asked questions children may have.



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## **All Kinds of Feelings - Emma Brownjohn**

How do you feel? Do you ever feel angry, or sad, or excited, or jealous? This lift-the-flap book prompts young children to learn about the different feelings everyone has, and open up about the emotions they are feeling. It includes a 'Feelings Game' with a spinner and wipe-clean board in the image of a blank face for exploring feelings

## **Books to support adults helping a bereaved child**

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### **A Child's Grief: Supporting a Child When Someone in Their Family Has Died - Julie Stokes**

A very useful and informative introduction for any adult supporting a child through bereavement. It covers a variety of issues that may affect a child when a person close to them dies, both immediately and in the longer term. There are practical suggestions and ideas for activities to do together, as well as additional support suggestions.

### **What Does Dead Mean? A Book for Young Children to help Explain Death and Dying - Caroline Jay and Jenny Thomas**

This beautifully illustrated book guides children gently through the 'big' questions they often ask about death and dying. Questions such as 'Is being dead like sleeping?' and 'Where do dead people go?' are answered simply and truthfully to help adults explain to children what happens when someone dies. Suitable for children aged 4+.



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