

**Guidance for Educational Settings on Supporting Those  
Bereaved During Covid-19  
Salford and Tameside Educational Psychology Service  
April 2020**

The coronavirus pandemic is impacting on all our educational settings, families, communities and way of life. This is coupled with a collective raised level of anxiety due to uncertainty around the coronavirus crisis and the additional complication of the nationwide closure of schools and other educational settings. There is also an increased risk of unexpected bereavement and feelings of loss in the community.

The EPS continues to offer a critical incident response to leaders in settings to help them develop their community response. We recognise that leaders have the skills and experience to respond to critical incidents. Where there might be a need for external support, our role will be to enhance the setting's own support and coping strategies. The approach taken will focus on supporting the setting to promote a sense of safety, calm, self and community efficacy, connectedness and hope.

This guidance is designed to advise settings on preparing and responding to Covid-19 related bereavement issues that are impacting your setting and community. It is important to think about how to support children and members of staff before, during and after a bereavement. The guidance covers:

- General bereavement guidance
- Things to consider following a bereavement during Covid-19
- Things to do to prepare for bereavements during Covid-19
- The 3 levels of response, dependent upon the impact on your community
- Best practice at level 1
- Supporting key adults and leaders
- Responding at level 2 and 3
- Links for a range of useful websites, helplines and resources
- Example of letter to a bereaved child
- APPENDIX A: Outline of the support role offered by the EPS and contact details
- APPENDIX B: A conversation guide for first responders to bereavements

In this guidance we will use the term child/children in its broadest sense. Our intention is that the guidance is suitable for early years settings, schools and colleges.

#### The current context

Our daily lives have changed dramatically. Whilst huge efforts are being made to stay in regular contact with children, communities are likely to feel less connected whilst educational settings are closed or operating under restrictions. The effects of social distancing, isolating vulnerable individuals and disruption to our day-to-day routines will require a different approach to how settings support their communities.

## **General Bereavement Guidance**

Key points to support best practice following a bereavement:

- Remember that help and support for those impacted are best provided by a trusted, familiar adult.
- Be as honest and open as you can with children, appropriate to their developmental level.
- Remember that children are all different and they will all react to the loss, trauma and bereavement in their own unique way. The differences in their levels of awareness, understanding, age, emotional maturity, security and not least, their relationship with the deceased, will also have significant effects. For further information on children's developmental understanding of death, click onto the following link: <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents/childrens-understanding-of-death#keypoints> .
- When someone dies, use the words dead or died, not euphemisms like "passed away".
- Be guided by the family in terms of information they are happy to share and ensure these wishes are updated as things go along.
- Think about how the family can support children to share memories, perhaps through the creation of a memory box (see Winston's Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/help-bereaved-children-maintain-memories/>); the setting can support the family to do this.

## **Things to consider following a bereavement during Covid-19**

- Bereavements linked to Covid-19 are likely to be less expected and the family will have had little time to prepare.
- Family members of the person who has died may have particularly strong emotions around feelings of guilt as well as feelings of loss.
- They may have been socially isolated from the person who has died, and not had recent or usual levels of contact.
- The person may have died in hospital and the family may not have been able to say goodbye.
- There may have been restrictions on the funeral and so the bereaved may have had this healing ritual denied to them.
- There may also be other members of the family who have become ill and there may be fears about their health.
- The people and routines that usually support people following a bereavement e.g. friends and the routine of school or other educational setting may not be accessible whilst social distancing measures are in place.
- The bereaved may feel anger and blame, e.g. towards others who may not have self-isolated quickly.
- It may be difficult to avoid reminders such as the news.
- If there are many deaths linked to Covid-19, the bereaved may struggle with the lack of specialness that their loved one receives.

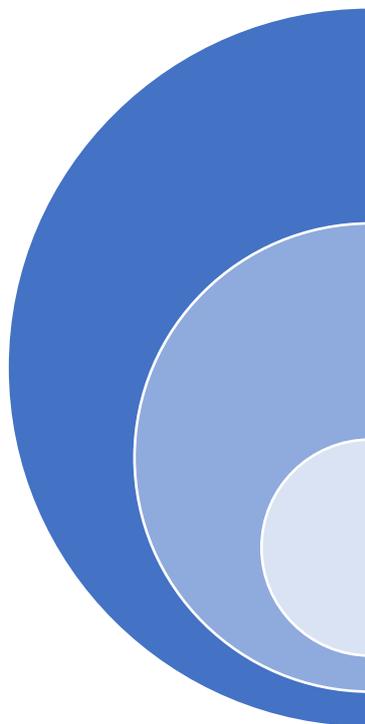
- It will be important to consider many of the points above in relation to any bereavement at this time.
- It is also important to be aware that staff themselves may have bereavement and loss of their own to process. This means that a team approach will be required. The guidance in this document should also be considered and applied when responding to staff bereavements.
- The key focus with families is to listen to their worries, exploring the impact on the various members of their family. Relatively small-sounding issues may be overwhelming. They might be wondering; Should they be doing anything differently now to protect other members of the family? Are any family members feeling in any way responsible? Are they dwelling on what they might have done differently, for example to protect the person who has died from infection?

### Things to do to prepare for bereavements during Covid-19

- Have a small team of **nominated leads** who can take responsibility for sharing key messages with staff about the principles of how to support children with loss and grief and co-ordinate responses to bereavements e.g. supporting members of staff who are acting as **key adults** when contacting bereaved families. This means there will always be a nominated lead available to oversee bereavement support work for families and staff if some of the nominated leads are affected by their own bereavements. The nominated leads can be supported by the EPS through group consultations. It is also suggested that **all school staff** take time to familiarise themselves with the information, advice and guidance provided on the Winston's wish website: (<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/>).
- Consider which staff members might take up a role as a **key adult** and point of contact for bereaved children and families; this would usually be the head teacher or someone that knows the family well. Guided by one of the nominated leads, a key adult should be prepared to support the family to make decisions about how best to support their child, including how to talk to them about the loss and mourning processes.
- Have a notice on your website or email to prepare parents for your bereavement protocol.
- Invite parents to let school know if they are impacted by a loss; explain how they can do so.
- Let families know what you will then do e.g. identify a key person to maintain contact with the family/ send the child a letter/ card/ let other members of the school community know who might be impacted or want to support the grieving child or family.
- Organise a virtual book of condolences for relevant school community members to sign.
- Plan a memorial assembly for when the children are back in school to remember lost loved ones.
- Make sure class teachers are made aware of children impacted by a loss so they can welcome them back to school appropriately when the time comes.

**Responding to bereavements during Covid-19**

Your setting’s response to Covid-19 related bereavement can be viewed as being at one of three levels, depending on the impact on your setting’s community:



<p><b>Level 3: Bereavement/s that impact the whole setting and wider community and where there are additional complexities and safeguarding concerns.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact Claire Jackson / Rona Taylor and EPS inbox (see pg. 11 for contact details)</li> <li>• EPS will be part of a multi-agency response</li> </ul>
<p><b>Level 2: Bereavement/s impacting a large proportion of the community around the setting. This is likely to be through a cluster of bereavement and loss issues.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact school EP and EPS inbox</li> <li>• Initial support over telephone and follow up virtual meeting</li> </ul>
<p><b>Level 1: Bereavement impacting a small number of people e.g. one family, one member of staff</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refer to Bereavement Guidance document for best practice guidelines</li> <li>• Contact school EP and EPS inbox if follow up required</li> </ul>

Following your preparation, we envisage that in most cases, settings will have the skills and experience to respond to bereavements at level 1 themselves. Best practice guidelines at level 1 are provided below. For further information about best practice at levels 2 and 3 and how the EPS can support you at each level, see Appendix.

**Best practice at level 1 is likely to include:**

- Selecting a familiar key adult who will be the main point of contact between the education setting and family or staff member; this would usually be the head teacher or someone that knows the family well. They may need to talk through their role with one of the nominated leads.
- The key adult should contact the family or staff member to acknowledge the death and pass on their condolences, initially by phone. You could ask how family members are and how they are coping. Consider recommending contacting Winston’s Wish (08088 020 021) or Child Bereavement UK helpline (0800 02 888 40) if they wanted to speak to somebody about their bereavement. Ask if there are other people school should share the news with;
- The key adult should support the family to talk to their child about loss and mourning processes.
- Support the family to make decisions about how best to support their child. Do this collaboratively, drawing on the family’s knowledge of their child and the unique circumstances of their family situation and your knowledge of general principles of supporting bereaved children.

- Check with the family that it would be okay to send a letter to the child. Due to guidance related to physical distancing, restrictions on movement and concerns that people might have about sending and receiving post at this time, a letter emailed as an attachment would be recommended. An example is provided on page 8 of this document. The letter should be personal and should cover:
  - Acknowledging the death of the relative;
  - Acknowledging how the child might be feeling;
  - Telling the child that you (the key person) and other staff are thinking about them;
  - Offering to check-in with them by phone.
- Check-in/s by phone. The key adult could ask how the family is doing since the bereavement and check if they have been able to access helpful information from any of the specialist websites. When speaking to the child, the key adult could ask for an update as to how the child is and listen to any thoughts and feelings they would like to share. The key adult could also ask about whether the child has had contact with their friends and if the setting could support with this. You could ask permission to share information with their friends.
- Consider the impact of ‘trolling’ on social media. It may be helpful to check in with young people to see if they have received any negative comments.
- Prepare other children and staff for the return of a grieving child or staff member. Ensure class teachers are aware of children impacted by a loss so they can welcome them back to school appropriately when the time comes. This might be overseen by one of the nominated leads.

### **Supporting leaders, nominated leads and key adults**

- People who have been bereaved may need reassurance that their response is ‘normal’. One of the helpful things that leaders, nominated leads and key adults can do is to listen to the bereaved speaking about painful issues. Those staff in direct contact with bereaved families or staff will need support around them to debrief and process their own feelings and may experience bereavement themselves. As a result, leaders and nominated leads will be holding and containing levels of anxiety from across different parts of their community and will need to think about where they get their own emotional support. You may wish to contact the EPS to support with this.
- If you would like support from the EPS to think together about developing your setting’s response to bereavements due to Covid-19 please contact both your school EP and the EPS inbox (EPS@salford.gov.uk).

### **Responding at level 2 and 3**

Level 2 is likely to be a cluster of bereavement and loss issues. It’s important that there is containment through structure and that the welfare of individuals who are likely to be triggered are monitored in enhanced ways following further triggering news. Level 3 would be when the whole school community is impacted by bereavement issues that may have led to challenges to cohesion that need a broader multi-agency response. Further details of best practice and how the EPS will support you can be found in the Appendix.

## Resources

### Helpline telephone numbers:

**Winston's Wish**  
(08088 020 021)

**Child Bereavement UK**  
(0800 02 888 40)

### Websites with information and guidance for schools and families to support bereaved children:

#### **Winston's Wish**

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/>

Coronavirus: information and guidance for supporting bereaved children and young people.

<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/>  
Information and scripts to use if someone the child knows has died from Covid-19.

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-funerals-alternative-goodbyes/>  
Saying goodbye when children cannot attend the funeral.

#### **Grief Encounter**

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/professionals-schools/>

Support for bereaved children and their families. Includes downloadable documents at the bottom of the webpage on the following:

- Children's concepts of death by age
- Supporting a Grieving Child in the Classroom
- Informing the School Community of a Death
- Download grieftalk Posters
- Preparing Students for the Return of Grieving Classmate

#### **Child Bereavement UK**

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bc9f3d7d-7b43-421a-8ed4-4335f9c23b35>

Downloadable information sheet with tips for supporting bereaved children through difficult times.

Child Bereavement UK also have a drop-in facility for families and professionals in the Salford Royal Hospital on the fourth Thursday of each month. However, these have been suspended and online support is instead available.

[https://directory.childbereavementuk.org/?keyword=Salford&organisation\\_name=&category\\_term=all&postcode=&radius=5](https://directory.childbereavementuk.org/?keyword=Salford&organisation_name=&category_term=all&postcode=&radius=5)

## **CRUSE**

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

Support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies. There's a section for schools <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-schools>

## **Gaddum**

Gaddum provides a needs-led therapeutic service for Manchester and Salford children and families. The Gaddum Centre offers Children's Bereavement Counselling and works with individuals following a bereavement. Initially it has to be a young person who is referred. Once that referral has been accepted, they can also provide support to the adults who are caring for the child or young person.

<https://www.gaddumcentre.co.uk/> - Online services are only being provided at present.

*With thanks to Bradford EPS and Camden EPS whose critical incident advice supplemented our own.*

**Example letter to send to a child**

*It is helpful to include the four points noted on page 5. Please note, it will be important that the letter is personalised based on your knowledge of the child, family and context.*

Dear Bobby,

I am so sorry that your grandma has died.

I am wondering how you are feeling. It might be a strange and confusing time for you. All feelings are normal and OK. There is no right way to feel when someone has died.

I am thinking about you. Mr Fish, Miss Dean and Mrs Kazemi are thinking about you too. I will be thinking about your kindness, because I've noticed how caring and helpful you are to the younger children on the playground. I will also be thinking about your wonderful singing voice. At the moment, you might feel like singing sometimes, and sometimes you might not. I am looking forward to hearing you singing in assembly when we are all back together in school.

I plan to phone you and your family, to find out more about how you are doing. You can choose whether you would like to speak to me.

I hope to speak to you soon.

Best wishes,

Miss Carter

Turpin Road Primary School

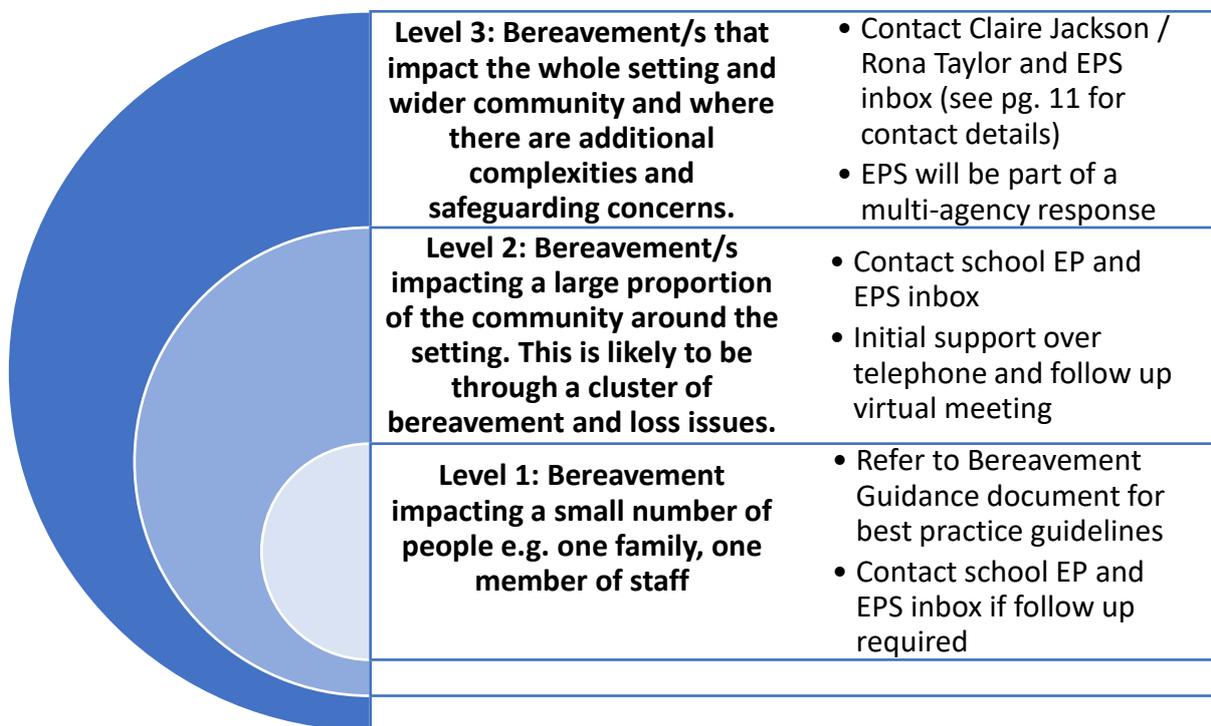
**APPENDIX A**

**EPS Critical Incident Team: Response to bereavements during Covid-19**

A graduated approach to providing support

We will continue to offer a graduated response to bereavement and critical incidents in relation to their impact on the setting and wider community. Our role is to support you to support your community.

The EPS response to support settings at the three different levels can be seen in the diagram below.



**Level 1: Bereavement that impacts on a small number of people e.g. one family** – Settings are encouraged to consider the main document, ‘Guidance for Educational Settings on Supporting Those Bereaved During Covid-19’ when preparing their setting’s response. Additional support for preparation and response will be offered through EP planning meetings. We will also be offering a series of group virtual meetings for staff from settings to learn about responding to bereavement. If settings would like the opportunity to think together about the unique circumstances with an EP they may wish to contact their allocated EP and the EPS inbox.

**Level 2: Bereavement/s that impact on large proportion of the community around the setting** – Settings can contact their school EP and the EPS inbox. We will contact you to offer initial support over the phone followed by a virtual meeting with the allocated EP and a member of the critical incident team to think together about the unique circumstances.

The response will depend upon the setting's individual needs and context; however, it will generally follow the framework of **Communication**, **Support** and **Monitoring**. It will also be important throughout your response to use ways to promote a sense of safety, calm, self and community efficacy, connectedness and hope.

### Communication

We will think together about:

- Clarifying the facts – what is known, what are the perceived or potential narratives in the community, including social media.
- How and when to communicate the key information to children and staff.
- Communicating with parents – language, messaging, listening and asking questions.
- For those most impacted (e.g. a family), what are their views on what can be shared/what they want to be shared.
- Managing social media and the press.

### Support

We will think together about:

- Identifying vulnerable individuals who may be affected.
- Individuals in need of support might be those children and families who have been bereaved through during Covid-19, whether by the virus or due to other causes, staff members who have been bereaved during Covid-19, children and staff with previous experience of loss, children and staff who may be vulnerable for other reasons, e.g. because of their mental health.
- Planning support for those identified.
- Support for staff and pupils both within school and externally regarding their own wellbeing.
- Reducing anxiety and de-escalating panic responses – families, children, staff.

### Monitoring

We will think together about:

- Monitoring the wellbeing of those identified above, e.g. by using the monitoring matrix. In some cases, it may help to involve children in monitoring their own wellbeing.
- Be alert to further news which is likely to be triggering to those who are already bereaved by Covid-19.
- Monitoring social/general media. It might be useful to identify specific staff to take on this role.

**Level 3: Bereavement/s that impact on whole setting and wider community and where there are additional complexities and safeguarding concerns** – The response will depend on the unique characteristics of the context and your setting's individual needs. The EPS would usually be part of a multi-agency response. In addition to best practice at level 2, level 3 may include providing key representatives from the setting to attend regular Team Around the Setting meetings. Please contact Claire Jackson (Principal EP), Rona Taylor (Senior EP, Critical Incidents) and the EPS inbox. Alternatively, another agency may have already alerted the EPS and we will make contact with the leadership team to discuss what support is needed.

**Contact Us:**

Please copy in the EPS inbox with any communications via e-mail and when contacting your school/allocated EP.

**EPS**

e-mail: [EPS@salford.gov.uk](mailto:EPS@salford.gov.uk)

Telephone: 0161 778 0476

**Claire Jackson (Principal EP)**

e-mail: [C.Jackson@salford.gov.uk](mailto:C.Jackson@salford.gov.uk)

**Rona Taylor (Senior EP, Critical Incidents)**

e-mail: [Rona.Taylor@salford.gov.uk](mailto:Rona.Taylor@salford.gov.uk)

## APPENDIX B: A conversation guide for first responders to bereavements, tragic news and critical incidents

This document provides some additional guidance for those who may be responding to bereavements, tragic news and critical incidents, either in person or by other methods of communication (e.g. by telephone). This document should be read alongside the 'Guidance for Educational Settings on Supporting Those Bereaved During Covid-19, Salford and Tameside Educational Psychology Service' that has been circulated to educational settings.

- This conversation requires a calm, steady, quiet and sensitive approach. It will be important to allow the person to tell their story, and to listen.
- You might want time to take a breath and steady yourself. It is okay to ask for a pause, for example to get something to note down contact details and important information.
- Demonstrate that you are listening through occasional gentle responses. These could be empathetic sounds or short phrases like “Oh I’m so sorry”, “I’m listening”, “Take your time”.
- Leave pauses so that the caller does not feel hurried and has time to gather their thoughts.
- Allow the caller to tell their story in their words and in their own time and avoid asking questions.
- You can check that you have heard and understood by paraphrasing back, for example “You said that he died at home last night, is that right?” and again leave pauses so that the caller can correct you.
- When the conversation reaches a natural break, explain that you need to take clear notes of the important information.
- It may become apparent that there are additional complexities and/or that there is likely to be an impact on the wider community. Therefore, it might be important to obtain as much **accurate, factual information** about the critical incident as possible. Bear in mind that it is very easy for rumours to spread. Uncertainty or misinformation can greatly add to distress levels, create confusion and will take time and effort to correct.
- Before ending the call, check that you have collected sufficient factual information and the personal and contact details of the person you are talking to. The table on page 2 may provide a guide for the sort of information it might be helpful for first responders to gather.
- After alerting others it is important that you give yourself time to process the information and your own thoughts and feelings before getting back to work. It may be helpful to share your reaction with a colleague. Please refer to the checklist on page 3 for suggested steps to take to meet your own needs after responding.

**Gathering information as a first responder**

It will be important for the first responder to be sensitive and genuine and the conversation should feel as natural as possible; however, the below table might provide an idea of what sort of information it will be helpful to gather.

Table 1. Template for gathering information when responding to tragic news.

<p>Who has called?</p>	<p>First or given name:</p> <p>Surname:</p> <p>Position:</p> <p>Relationship with the person or family affected:</p> <p>Contact details for getting in touch later:</p>
<p>What happened?</p> <p>What is the nature of the incident?</p> <p>When did it happen?</p>	
<p>Who has been affected?</p> <p>For example, note the names and ages of children attending the school</p>	
<p>Who else has been contacted?</p> <p>Who else is offering support?</p>	
<p>Ask the caller “what else is it important for you to tell us?”</p>	

### **Self-care checklist**

This is for anyone who is responding to bereavements, critical incidents, or tragic news, whether directly or indirectly e.g. office staff, family, friends. During the safety talk when flying, we are urged to put on our own oxygen mask before we help others; it is important for us all to consider our own needs in order to respond effectively and safely to others.

#### **Immediate:**

- Ideally find someone to talk to (colleague, friend, partner) within the first 12 hours. If there is no one, sit quietly and go over the events in as much detail as possible. Carry out your own debrief in drawn/written form.
- Ask yourself/a colleague 'am I best placed to support, might I be significantly affected by the news and unable to respond effectively?'
- Ask 'do I need someone to pick up other tasks or duties for me?'
- Tell a partner/family about your involvement because you may not feel sociable or you may feel upset or angry; be mindful that they might not feel able to be willing listeners.

#### **Short Term:**

- Share your experience with colleagues. Participate in personal/team discussion both for support and sharing of experiences.
- Be aware that you may experience physical and emotional effects such as fatigue, anxiety, depression, irritability, aggression, anger, etc. which are normal reactions.
- Consider setting up a 'buddy' system so that everyone is able to support each other.

#### **Long Term:**

- Be gentle with yourself! Remember that we can't 'fix' everything and we are bound to feel helpless at times. Caring and being there are sometimes more important than doing.
- Give support, encouragement and praise to peers and to colleagues. Learn to accept it in return.
- At the end of each day, focus on a positive thing that occurred during the day.
- Take time to care for yourself and engage in hobbies or relaxing activities.
- If you feel you are continuing to have intrusive thoughts about the event and these feelings are not lessening after a few weeks, you may need some more support. Your GP may be able to signpost you to relevant help and you may wish to contact the EPS to support with this.

*With thanks to Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service whose critical incident advice was drawn upon to produce this appended document.*