

# ACTIVITIES TO HELP SUPPORT A BEREAVED CHILD WITH SEND

**WINSTON'S**  
**WISH** **ww**

Giving hope to grieving children

# ACTIVITIES TO HELP SUPPORT A BEREAVED CHILD WITH SEND

This document is intended to be used alongside the Winston's Wish publication, *We All Grieve*, supporting bereaved children who have special educational needs and disabilities.

It is good practice to provide bereaved children with a wide range of supportive activities - activities that have different intentions and delivery styles. By doing this you will see which types the bereaved child gains the most benefit from as well as which ones they enjoy most.

There are six different types of activities within this document.

- **Physical activities** - that allow them to release their emotions physically
- **Reassurance activities** - that show the child that they are OK and that not everyone they know and love is suddenly going to die
- **Comforting activities** - which provide comfort and respite from the physical symptoms of grief
- **Therapeutic/holistic activities** - which draw on the arts and alternative approaches
- **Remembering activities** - which help the child to store memories about the person who died
- **Activities to develop understanding** - of death and grief

## Physical activities

Providing grieving children with physical outlets is an excellent way to give them a temporary release from the grieving process. It allows them to 'get away' from the deep feelings of bereavement. Physical activities also support the grieving process. Whilst engaged in the physical task, they will be able to release emotions physically and this can lead to emotions being expressed verbally (or through AAC, including body language which will be especially important for children who are non-verbal).

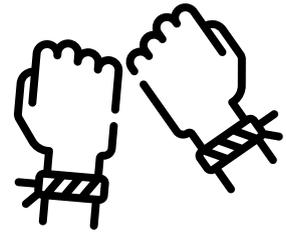
- running outside
- climbing
- for children who use a wheelchair being taken for an exhilarating fast walk or being pushed on a wheelchair swing
- throwing balls, beanbags etc. randomly or into/at targets
- creating a large graffiti style piece of art
- manipulating/pounding clay or play dough



## Reassurance activities

- Support the child to make a personal family tree (include friends and family), so that the child can see who they still have around them. This allows them to see who is alive and remind them that just because one person has died it doesn't mean everyone else in their life is going to die straight away too.
- Make a 'life story' book. Use pictures and photos to make a book telling the story of the child's life up until now. This includes who has died and when and how it happened. The child will be able to read and retell their life story and see how the death of their loved one is just a part of their whole life.
- If the child is able to, get them to tell you their top 5 worries and then together talk through these worries (there is a pre-made set of worry cards in the Widgit Bereavement and Loss Symbol Set <https://www.widgit.com/resources/lifeskills/personal-social/bereavement/index.htm>).

- Make friendship bracelets for each other, so the bereaved child can see on their wrist the number of friends and family that they still have around them. By making the friendship bracelet with a range of interesting materials it is also a comforting multi-sensory resource which they will be able to explore and feel.



## Comforting activities

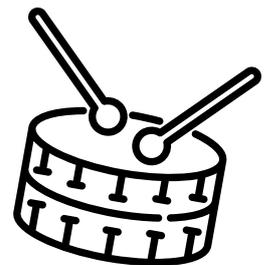
- Provide the child with a blanket to wrap up in or hide under. Some children may benefit from this being a weighted blanket (but check that this is appropriate for the individual child).
- A place or a space to be alone, this doesn't have to be a separate room it could even be a large box with cushions and blankets.
- Make a 'safe box' - put together a collection of things that help to make the child feel safe. This could include a treasured toy, a special book, photos etc.
- With the bereaved child create a special bag that they can access at anytime. The bag should contain a range of things to help the child smile (things that they typically enjoy e.g. bubbles, silly putty, twiddle toy, favourite music to listen to etc.).
- Have a hot water bottle or furry toy that they can cuddle in times of sadness or distress, including if they are experiencing somatic complaints such as a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. Somatic complaints are when unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort.



## Therapeutic/holistic activities

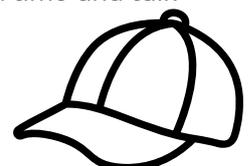
- Yoga and breath awareness work - teach the child how their body and breath can help them to release emotions. Introduce simple breath techniques to aid relaxation and lower anxiety, such as breathing in gently and regularly for a count of 4 and then, without pausing or holding, let the breath flow out gently, for a count of 4. Keep doing this for 2 to 5 minutes.
- Play therapy - through play explore the child's understanding of what has happened and support them to gain a greater awareness of the situation. Use whatever toys the child enjoys interacting with: puppets, small world play sets, building bricks, cars etc.
- Massage and aromatherapy - for children who struggle to release their emotions and/or who's bodies are more physically challenged massage and the use of different aromatherapy oils can help them to relax and open up. This is especially beneficial following a bereavement. (Always gain consent from the child's parents before using aromatherapy oils and check which oils are appropriate to use with the individual).
- Drama therapy - use role play to help the child explore what has happened and how life will be for them in the future.
- In house school support e.g. the bereaved child having sessions with an Emotional Learning Support Assistant (ELSA) or similar programme.

- Mindfulness colouring (or any other activity that means the child is totally present in an enjoyable pursuit) - an adult sitting with the child and both taking part in a mindful task such as colouring. By being involved in a shared activity the child will feel reassured and supported, and as the child relaxes into the task they may feel able to talk about how they are feeling.
- All arts sessions whether it is painting, drawing, sculpture, music, drama etc. are a great way of supporting the grieving process as they allow the child to relax and be lost in the moment - it can be respite from the overwhelming emotions of grief, but at the same time the artistic activity allows them to express grief without needing words. This can be particularly important for children with SEND who may struggle with communication skills.
- Peer supports - some children may find it easier to talk to someone of a similar age over a shared interest e.g. Lego, playing a board game etc. If there is an appropriate child to act as a peer support you will first need to do a little bit of preparation with them e.g. explain what has happened to the bereaved child and that their role is to be their supportive friend who allows them to share how they are feeling.
- If your school has a PAT (Pets As Therapy) animal encourage the bereaved child to spend time with the animal. Children can sometimes open up and share more with an animal than they do with a person. Also spending time with an animal, watching and stroking them can be immensely relaxing for individuals.
- Emotion stones - have three stones: one jagged, one round and one shiny. Use these three stones to express different emotions and ways of feeling. The round stone = normal everyday feelings, jagged = difficult emotions, shiny = special times. Ask the children to choose the stone that they are feeling and if possible to express why they are feeling this way. Even if the child is unable to verbalise how they are feeling by selecting the stone relevant to how they are feeling allows them to share their emotions. Also the opportunity to handle and explore the stone can often be an enjoyable sensory and therapeutic activity for the child.
- Music therapy sessions. Music therapy is not only educational, enjoyable and relaxing for children, but it also allows them to be expressive in a different way. It allows them to release their thoughts and emotions about the death in a musical manner rather than with the need for words.



## Remembering activities

- Have a collection of photographs of the person who has died. Look at them one at a time and talk about what is going on in each of the photos, this may encourage the child to share their thoughts and emotions about the person who has died.
- Listen to music that the person who died enjoyed or that relates to them. This may elicit responses and thoughts from the child or may just provide a very happy and reflective session.
- Create a memory project with the grieving child: a memory box containing items related to the deceased person, a photo album, an item of clothing, their favourite toy, a pillow made from an item of the persons clothing etc.



- Laminate photos of the person that has died so that the child can have them in their bag, classroom tray, locker, at home etc. They will then be able to look at them whenever they need to.
- Make a memory lantern with the child - decorate a glass jar with pieces of different coloured tissue paper. With each piece of paper that is stuck to the jar the child shares a memory of the person who has died. Place an electric candle into the completed memory lantern.
- Use objects related to the individual who has died (e.g. an item of their clothing, a favourite toy or book etc.) to help the child talk about the person and share how they are feeling.

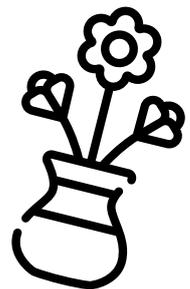
## For deaths that affect the school community

- As a class, write a story about the person that has died.
- In small groups visit a special happy place that reminds the children of the person that has died e.g. the park or beach and carry out an activity that the deceased child loved to do there - playing cricket, exploring the rock pools etc.
- Create a 'stone pile' – every time you share a memory of the person that died add a stone to a decorative bowl. You could write a few words on each stone. This activity could also be done by adding leaves to a decorative tree, flowers into a garden display or whatever other imagery fits for the person who has died and supports the grieving children's relationship with them.
- Choose an activity/routine that the class really identified with the person that has died e.g. playing a certain game, laying the table for snack time (as this was the child's favourite job to do in class) etc. As you lead this activity, intentionally talk about the person that has died and how they used to do this task. It can often be much easier to talk about a person who has died when you are actively engaged in doing something that they enjoyed.

## Activities to develop an understanding of death & grief

You may find some of the activities below a little strange, but they will help to demonstrate what death is to a child.

- Have a vase of flowers and watch them gradually wilt and die, and then compare these flowers to a vase of living flowers. The child will see that the dead flowers will not come back to life, however much water and sunlight is given to them.
- Have a live fish in a bowl of water for the children to observe and look after. Then buy a small fish from a fishmonger. Let the children look at the dead fish and then place it in a bowl of water. The children will see that even when the dead fish is placed in the bowl of water, it does not come back to life.
- To help students begin to understand what a funeral is hold a funeral for the dead fish used in the above activity (or for any school pet that dies). Replicate a real funeral as much as possible by having music, hymns/songs, readings and so on (each chosen by the children). Bury the fish/animal in the school grounds and mark the burial spot. The children could also make a decorative coffin for the fish/animal and a marker for the grave.



As you do the above activities, take photographs and videos so that you have visual resources and reminders to use in the future. You can also make a book of the photographs so that you can revisit it with the children, along with the videos.

- Help to develop the child's understanding of the range of emotions we can experience by using a mirror and photographs of people displaying different emotions. With the child talk about what you think the person in the photo is doing and how and why they may feel the way they do. With the child you can also practice making the different faces in the mirror.

## A curriculum to support the issues of bereavement and grief

**Children naturally ask questions about life and death.**

**Children are never too young to talk about life and death.**



- The tree that has died in the playground
- The chicks that have hatched
- Seeing the cut flowers change over time from a beautiful bouquet to dead flowers
- The birth of a baby brother
- A badger on the side of the road

All schools should have a curriculum that embeds the teaching of life, death, grief and loss across its subjects and across all year groups. Children need to develop an understanding of what life and death is before they can accept and manage their own feelings of loss and grief.

Having a curriculum that covers life and death will not only build the students understanding of what it means to be alive and dead, but it will also help them to cope with bereavements when they occur.

Below are examples of how this could look in a school's curriculum.

With all of these examples it important that the information is presented at the child's developmental level of understanding (see page 8 of *We All Grieve*), using their preferred mode(s) of communication (see page 26 of *We All Grieve*).

### **PSHE** (Personal, Social and Health Education)

- When learning about our body and how it works, emphasise what the key signs of life are and that when these are no longer present a person is no longer living; they are dead.
- Teach what different emotions look and feel like, including the physical impact they can have on our body e.g. when we cry a lot we can get very hot and tired.
- When learning about emotions, include the emotions associated with grief. At an early age this can be a child's emotional reaction to the death of a pet, their favourite tree in the park dying, flowers dying in the garden in winter etc.
- Explore the feeling and emotions related to when we loss something special to us or when it breaks/stops working e.g. favourite toy, special bag, jewellery, mobile phone etc.

## **PE**

- During PE lessons talk about the breath and heart rate. When the children experience their heart rate increasing ask them to put their hand on their chest to feel their heart beating and when they feel out of breath to put their hand in front of their mouth to feel the movement of air. Explain that all of these things mean we are alive. When we stop breathing, when our heart stops beating, we are no longer alive, we are dead.

## **English**

- When reading works of fiction and non-fiction and someone or something (animal, plant etc.) dies, do not gloss over this. Use it as a discussion point for what alive and dead is. Reinforce that when someone dies they cannot be brought back. Stories that talk of monsters coming back to life are just that - stories, fiction, make believe and children need to know that this cannot happen when a person dies in real life.
- Within English lessons, when the topic of death occurs talk and write about the emotions that are felt by the people/characters in the stories, poems, news articles etc.
- Read poems and stories (and encourage children to write their own) about how you feel when you lose something special. When your best friend moves away, you break up with your girlfriend, you lose your best jacket or your laptop breaks etc.
- Explore the language of death, grief and loss - look at condolence cards, death announcements in newspapers etc. Make a list of the different words and phrases that are used and think about whether we feel these are the best words to use. If euphemisms are used in the cards make it clear to the children what these really mean and come up with your own simpler and clearer phrases.

## **Science**

- When learning about the life cycles of animals, insects and plants etc. look at and discuss what they each look like and how they behave when they are alive and also when they are dead.
- Build on the PE lessons (mentioned above) by teaching the children how our bodies work - what they look and feel like when they are working well and what happens when they aren't working so well. Talk about when we are ill and that we may need help from doctors, nurses and hospitals etc. Sensitively reference that sometimes ill health or an accident can mean that a person's body is 'broken' to a point that even though the doctors and nurses do all that they can to help, they are unable to make the person better and they sadly die.

## History

- When different historical figures are covered in history lessons, you can also talk about how and when they died so that children realise that these 'big names in history' don't have super powers that allow them to go on living forever; they are humans just like us.

## Making the most of incidental learning opportunities

As well as having planned lessons that cover life, death, grief and loss, educators can also make the most of any incidental learning opportunities that arise. For example:

**When a child comes into school and says they have a new baby cousin.**

**When a student tells you that their favourite character in a TV show has been killed.**

**When there is a natural disaster in the news.**

**When the school pet dies.**