

DE LA SALLE COLLEGE



BEREAVEMENT POLICY

“BUT WE DO NOT WANT YOU TO BE UNINFORMED, BROTHERS, ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE ASLEEP, THAT YOU MAY NOT GRIEVE AS OTHERS DO WHO HAVE NO HOPE.”

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Compiled by: The College Director	Last Reviewed: June 2025
Policy Holder: Mr D. Sharrock	Next Revision date: June 2026
Oversight Governor: Nick Le Cornu	Verification date: Lent Term 2025

‘When a person is born, we rejoice,
and when they are married, we jubilate,
but when they die, we just pretend nothing has happened’
- Margaret Mead

Background statement

No matter how prepared we think we are, death or loss or separation is often traumatic and unexpected. Its unpredictability can severely unbalance a school whose normal working environment is one based on routine. Death, therefore, can be regarded as a potentially dis-unifying force that exists in an unpredictable world. Conversely; it can also be unifying; bringing people together in their grief.

Intervention is essential in managing and minimising any disruption. The aim should be to restore equilibrium between an individual’s environment and their perception of the world as a safe and predictable place.

A considered, planned and organised response to an event is much more effective than acting on impulse. It is vital that our school maintains a shared course of action. It is for this reason that our school has an Intervention Team for major incidents. This group will be ready and willing to work collaboratively. A similar team exists for emergencies.

The Team

The Intervention Team consists of:

1. The College Director – first point of contact, responsible for dealing with all parties. The Head teacher will allocate a personal mentor if needed (to act as a listener, time out of class, etc.) after consultation with the bereaved person.
2. The Deputy College Director or Assistant Headteacher (Safeguarding) who may deputise for the College Director in the running of routine tasks – assists above. Deputy College Director or Assistant Headteacher (Safeguarding) may also act as media spokesperson, liaising with media and police if needed – post to be determined at time of incident by the College Director.
3. Assistant Headteacher (Primary) or the Assistant Headteacher (Pastoral) – will be available to offer support to staff and pupils and to liaise with the College Director and staff with pastoral responsibilities.
4. A Governor – if available – to ensure that Governors are informed.
5. A class teacher or house tutor.
6. A member of the office staff to oversee administration needs and be responsible for conveying group decisions.
7. The School Based Counsellor will offer support and guidance to the team and the family as appropriate.

The team will be made up as needed and membership may well change.

The Head may also act as media spokesperson, liaising with media and police if needed – post to be determined at time of incident by the College Director.

The College Director will decide whether the whole team needs to be assembled. The death of a parent, although traumatic, would not normally warrant such action. The death of a pupil may well need a team response.

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Managing the first day

This plan will depend upon the unique circumstances of the bereavement.

Upon learning of a death, members of staff should contact the College Director – who will then decide on who should approach the family/child and arrange for the team or smaller group to meet.

A parent or relative coming into school to break the news would normally be seen by the Assistant Headteacher (Primary) or the Assistant Headteacher (Pastoral) . If no parents or relative come into school, the College Director will decide who is best suited to deal with the situation.

The College Director will gather the details surrounding the death – it is vital that the correct information is given to staff, therefore full facts are needed. The College Director will deal with the media and also liaise with Education. Advice will also be sought from Education's Media Management.

It will be necessary to decide at this stage whether the full team need to convene. In some cases, the whole matter can be dealt with by the College Director, working with one or two others.

Multiple Deaths/Death in School/or any other traumatic loss or separation

These instances may warrant assembling the whole team. The College Director will gather the facts as quickly as possible and the impact on the whole school is discussed. This is then dealt with appropriately – consideration to contacting supply teachers/telephone contact with parents. Effective communication channels are essential. Members of the team will need to assume roles as per the emergency planning.

In the case of the death of a child, whether at home or school, the College Director will, after consulting with the deceased's family or relatives, if possible, arrange for the news to be broken. If possible, a general staff meeting will be held to allow private grief before breaking the news to the whole school.

Confidentiality is essential. To avoid rumours, it is important to be open and honest wherever possible and not to make assumptions about the cause of death. It is important that all staff and pupils be informed as quickly as possible although consideration as to the correct procedure should be agreed first. A clear announcement, to the point, without misinterpretation should be made as above. Such news is often greeted with disbelief,

possibly panic and fear. Teachers should be prepared for a variety of responses. After a short assembly for the announcement, the matter should be dealt with within the confines of the classroom, allowing children the chance to share feelings. Prior to the assembly, the College Director should discuss with staff how they feel about this as some staff may not feel confident in handling such emotions and reactions. Extra support may be needed for these staff.

It is essential to allow children to articulate their thoughts and feelings and to support them. Sharing their grief in a supportive environment can help facilitate the grieving process. It must be recognised that some pupils may not wish to share their feelings immediately.

Where it is thought necessary, we will engage a professional bereavement counsellor to work with staff or children.

If dealing with media is needed, it is important that one person is nominated. This should be the College Director or in his absence the Vice Headteacher or Assistant Headteacher (Safeguarding) may cover. An emergency phone hotline may be needed – this may be manned by a member of the office staff if needed. A letter to all parents may be needed.

Later, it will be necessary to retrieve personal belongings and plan their return to the family. Information on the school's computer system should be removed as soon as possible, likewise other school and class records.

The team has to tread a difficult path between achieving its desired objectives of returning the school to normal but in doing so, making decisions that may appear insensitive.

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Funerals, Memorial Services

Before the bereaved pupil or member of staff returns to school there is likely to be a funeral. If other pupils or staff wish to attend there should be agreement with the deceased's family. If appropriate, the College Director would represent the school.

If it is likely that others will attend, especially pupils, then counselling should be available before and after the service as this could be a traumatic experience for children. A school memorial service would probably be a better alternative – with children reading out memories, poems, etc. The School Chaplain will be available to organise the service.

The class affected may like to write their feelings down and this could be copied and shared with the grieving family. The College Director would check these before sending them out to the family.

The First Week/Return

The first part of the team's work is proactive but at a later stage this becomes reactive. The situation will need to be monitored by the team (or those handling the situation). Before returning to school the College Director would make a home visit or phone call to be as fully briefed as possible to determine the manner of return and outstanding worries the bereaved may have regarding their reintegration.

Most will want to return to normal as quickly as possible. Staff should be aware of this need. In the interests of the bereaved, staff should endeavour to foster an environment that is

compassionate, yet disciplined. Getting the balance right can be difficult, but we must remember that school may be seen as an important safe haven.

As time progresses, the needs of the bereaved continue – especially at anniversaries.

It may be possible to consult and liaise with external agencies that can offer further counselling and advice – in or outside school e.g., Hospice, CAMHS, and Education.

It is important that all staff are recognised as having their own needs, as handling such matters may indeed bring back some painful memories. This plan should show that the school is aware that each case, whilst different, should be approached in a similar manner.

Returning to School

Before the child returns, make sure that all teaching and ancillary staff are aware what has happened.

Many children and young people find going back to school a very hard thing to do, but it may also be a welcome refuge of normality after the chaos of emotion at home.

As soon as possible, talk to the child to acknowledge what has happened. If the child starts to cry reassure them that it is natural and okay to do so. There may be no reaction at all. The child may wish to push the whole thing to the back of their mind in an attempt to be 'normal'.

Give the child the name of an adult they can talk to should they feel like doing so and if possible, somewhere quiet to go. Ask a close friend to support them.

Be aware and sensitive to the child, but without making them the centre of attention. Normality is the best approach, but at the same time, make allowances. The grieving process for any adult or child is very demanding physically and emotionally and the effects will be felt for many months.

Long Term Considerations

A bereaved child will find school very tiring.

They will find it difficult to concentrate, may think more slowly, lack initiative and need more help than usual. It may help to allow them to work in smaller groups than normal and ease up on homework. Work rate can be affected for as long as a year or more.

Bereaved children may feel different and not 'normal'. They may well be teased by others. Try to keep an ear to the ground for signs of this and deal with it promptly.

Consider curriculum subjects which may be distressing for the child. Perhaps you could prepare the child by discussing how he feels about a topic before starting it with the class.

Be aware that Christmas, birthdays, Mother's or Father's Day and special events can be especially difficult for the child. Again, ask the child how they feel about it.

Watch out for changes in behaviour. These may surface many months afterwards.

Aggression in the playground may be a way of letting out feelings of anger or anxiety. Be equally alert for a child who is uncharacteristically quiet.

Keep up contact with the family, especially if you suspect the child is having difficulties. Let them know if the child is causing you concern.

Always inform new teachers of the circumstances.

Young People's Understanding (Ten to Adolescence)

Young people's understanding

It is at this age that young people are able to think abstractly about death. They can think hypothetically about its many aspects – its long-term consequences, its justice or injustice, its inevitability and perhaps their own mortality. Some may become interested in the occult; others may want information about the afterlife.

Grief Reactions

Adolescence is a time of loss and separation, loss of childhood and the care and safety this brings and a striving for independence and identity. Any bereavement at this time complicates this transition.

In general, an adolescence's reaction to a bereavement is similar to adults, with grief reactions such as; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and lack of acceptance all being common, (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Denial is often the first reaction to loss; the bereaved person appearing to carry on as if nothing had happened. Due to the enormity of the event, young people will need to make large cognitive and emotional adaptations to the changes. This takes time and emotional energy; denial serves as a protective reaction and is quite normal early on in adjustment. This disappears after a few days and may change to anger. This can be expressed in different ways – sometimes openly at the remaining family members, sometimes at the hospital and doctors that cared for the deceased, or alternatively at the deceased themselves for deserting the bereaved. Finally, the bereaved person may feel angry with himself or herself for letting the death happen, self-recriminations and guilt are often experienced. Then comes the bargaining stage, where the bereaved attempts to preserve the belief in the world being a just place. They will try to find a reason for the death to restore their belief in the equity of life.

Eventually, however, the bereaved acknowledges the injustice and unpredictability of life events and their own lack of control over them. These feelings can lead to a stage of depression. This stage, although unpleasant, is functional in allowing them to face the reality of the loss and come to terms with it.

Finally, the bereaved moves to an acceptance of their loss, internalising the memory of the deceased and moving on to make new relationships and a new life. At this stage, they begin to look towards the future with some optimism. Kubler-Ross acknowledges that these stages of grief can occur in a different sequence and are not fixed; some bereaved may well revisit previous stages. For example, returning to anger if new information or facts are discovered about the death or if new situations trigger feelings of loss not experienced before.

With adolescents, the above grief reactions can be further complicated by issues that are common to their age group. These might include: resistance to communicating with adults, over concern about the acceptability of their responses to their peers, and other developmental tasks like separation versus dependency, adult identity and developing sexuality. These development tasks may compromise or complicate mourning, delaying it, or causing it to occur intermittently.

Some adolescents may begin acting out their anger with aggressive and anti-social behaviour, both at home and in the community. Others may develop disorders linked to their own health or developing sexuality, including eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders and self-harming behaviours. Here, young people attempt to gain some feelings of control over the situation or to punish themselves or others for the death. Alternatively, some may show pseudo adult behaviour by taking on the role or identity of the deceased, thus not allowing themselves to grieve or move through the normal identity development stage of adolescence. Some adolescents may slip into pathological depression, where they are unable to eat, are morose and unresponsive to social stimuli. They may even become so depressed they attempt suicide, although this is rare.

For some young people, however, bereavement may provide an opportunity for growth and development. Increased self-reflection and their inevitable role change often has an effect on their developing maturity, as they learn new and more adaptable ways of coping with adversity and change. (Offer 1963).

Death of a Member of Staff

Children generally believe that teachers and ancillary staff leave their positions for other posts or simply retire. For many, it is quite inconceivable that they might die whilst still being employed by the school. 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 the children. In our opinion, such an event warrants an occasion when the whole class or school should become involved in the grieving process.

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 before announcing the news to the rest of the school, is something that should be considered.

Generally, such news is broken in assembly, in a space where everyone can be told simultaneously. Later in class, children should be allowed the opportunity to express their grief individually with the support of the class teacher. As we mentioned earlier, some pupils 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 and beliefs of the school, is normally a good idea. The coming together of the whole school collectively for one purpose helps each individual come to terms with their 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. The School Chaplain would take the lead in arranging the service.

It is at times like these when members of the staff often feel insecure of their own abilities, finding it difficult to cope. Without encroaching on their privacy, staff might keep an eye on those teachers particularly affected by the death of a close associate. Ideally, a member of staff trained in bereavement counselling should provide support.

Points to Consider

- Keep classes informed of changes in daily routine.
- Decide how long the school may need for a settling down period.
This must be flexible, as it may need to be revised.
- Have support available for staff and students
- Be aware of children who over react.

School life has to continue and appear to be normal, to keep it the safe haven it should be. Momentarily this may be shaken, but bringing things gently back to normality will help to increase the feeling of safety within the school for everyone.

Death of a Pupil

The death of a fellow pupil is probably the most demanding situation a child could be forced to face whilst at 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 College Director should endeavour to inform the deceased parents/guardians/next of kin as soon as possible, thus enabling compliance with any of their wishes.

The deceased's immediate class friends and siblings 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.

Additional support from fellow teaching colleagues may well be required as well as the assistance of the **bereavement counsellor**.

To avoid rumours, an announcement should be made to the whole of the school as soon as practically possible.

In the event of a child becoming terminally ill, their wishes and those of their parents/guardians should always be respected. Should the child wish to attend school, the class teacher may need to inform the class of the child's condition. Occasionally, the child may wish to talk to their fellow classmates about their predicament themselves. Honesty about death and dying we feel is the best line of approach. Sometimes, there is just no other way.

Children who are constantly in and out of hospital, welcome attending school as an opportunity to have some normality in their lives. Continuing to take part in school routines as much as possible can give a feeling of achievement, with the emphasis on living rather than dying. It can also give back a sense of identity as a person, rather than a patient.

Classmates who have had the situation explained to them are usually supportive. It often helps to involve them by giving jobs such as wheelchair pushing. Try to ensure these tasks are shared and do not become the responsibility of just one child.

The school and family, including the sick child, need to decide together how to share the news that a pupil is terminally ill. Is it not easy, but an open and honest approach is usually the best way. However, much adults try to hide what is happening, children instinctively know something is wrong and will often have worked out that a class member is dying before being officially told. Telling only the immediate peer group may seem like a good

idea, but the grapevine will take over, resulting in gossip and half-truths throughout the rest of the school.

If the child is receiving treatment from a local hospice or hospital, there is often a nurse or social worker whose job includes visiting schools to explain to pupils about a friend's illness and treatments involved. This should help alleviate any worries that fellow pupils may have. It is helpful for the school to at least identify the key professional responsible for the ill child and how to contact them for advice and support.

Children deal with difficult situations much better when truthful explanations are given regarding absences, changing appearance, lack of energy, treatments and exclusion from activities such as sport. Being naturally curious, classmates will ask questions, these should be answered sensitively but factually. Seriously ill children are often extremely knowledgeable about their illness and may well be happy to provide the answers themselves.

A sense of normality is further maintained by continuing to expect usual standards of behaviour within the child's limitations. This helps to reduce feelings of favouritism amongst other children.

Other parents and carers at the school may have concerns surrounding their own children being upset or made anxious by a classmate who is seriously ill. Reassurance that children and young people will have fewer anxieties if presented with the truth, rather than having to make up what is happening, may help. With consent from the family of the sick child, information on the illness and treatments will help other parents and carers to understand and feel informed. The realisation that their children are contributing to an increased quality of life for the sick child may create a more positive approach. Offer information on what to say to children when someone is dying.

Memorials

The need to ceremonialise death appears to be something that is central to human nature and is shared universally. There is an irrepressible desire in most of us to live forever, if only in memory. Memories are what we bequeath, pass on and eventually leave behind. They are the part of us which lives on, possibly affecting the thoughts and actions of others long after we have departed.

It is important that we respect the recently deceased by carefully considering how they might wish to be remembered. When deliberating memorials, it is necessary to consider everyone's thoughts and ideas. Schools might like to ask pupils and staff to write down suitable suggestions. Size and cost should be unimportant. What is important is that the memorial helps bring to mind the departed. It should be individualistic, benefit the school and reflect the personality of the deceased.

Supporting the Family

Parents and carers often feel that teachers are experts on their children. They may invariably therefore 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.

Teachers need not be experts on the subject (although training would be a distinct advantage), but they do need to use sensitivity and their skills in understanding children's development and emotional needs.

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; in fact, 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 child. To support the child, 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 child, to protect themselves from more distress. Some adults will deny the bereaved child is grieving, as it will be too distressing for them to acknowledge the child'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 child may regress in behaviour, becoming clingy, difficult or withdrawn. Their schoolwork may suffer. These changes will be partly due to grief but also to the disruption and changes within the family, causing the child to feel confused and unsafe. Even the simple withdrawal of attention from the child can lead to problems; the child may feel resentment, jealousy or guilt towards the dead person or child. 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 child and the family become more stable and settled.
- Parents and carers need to be informed of the benefits that a child gains in being involved in the ceremonies and rituals that follow the death. An explanation as to how mourning practices help children 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.

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 are worth bearing 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 backgrounds. 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.

Key Points for Counselling the Bereaved

- Offer to support, but don't be obtrusive.
- Share grief.
- Allow discussion.
- Allow expression.
- Talk openly but honestly about the person who had died.
- Be aware of other peoples' beliefs and values.
- Reassure those who feel that they are in some way to blame.
- Be honest with explanations.
- Be compassionate but firm.
- Be prepared to ask for additional help if needed.
- Expect regressions.
- Never avoid the bereaved.
- Never pretend life will be the same.
- Never put a time limit on how long you expect the grieving period to last.
- Be honest.