

**SUPPORTING BEREAVED STUDENTS AND STAFF RETURNING TO  
SCHOOL FOLLOWING COVID-19 AND PUBLIC HEALTH  
RESTRICTIONS.**

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**Information Booklet for Schools**

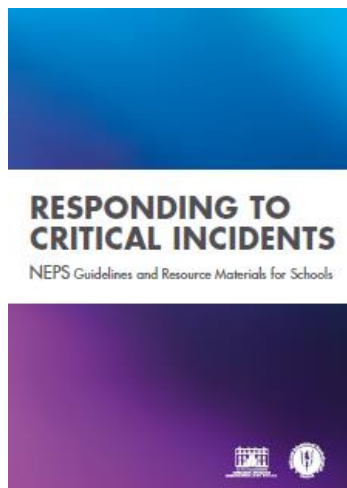


**An Roinn Oideachais**  
Department of Education

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Siceolaíochta Oideachais  
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

# Purpose of this booklet

Sadly, but inevitably, some members of the school community will have experienced the death of family or friends during the school closure period (both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related loss). The purpose of this booklet is to advise school staff how best to support bereaved students and colleagues on their return to school following COVID-19 restrictions. It should be read in conjunction with [Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools](#). Various sections and resources (R) from these guidelines are referenced throughout this booklet.



## Staff self-care and wellbeing

It is essential to recognise the importance of self-care for school personnel while they look after the wellbeing of others. Supporting a bereaved student or colleague may bring back painful memories of staff members' own past losses. Teachers who have been recently bereaved may find it particularly challenging to provide support and should, if at all possible, be supported by other available staff. See [here](#) for wellbeing tips for staff. Details of support services are available at the end of this booklet.

If any member of staff has been affected, please seek support, such as that provided by the **Employee Assistance Service, [www.Spectrum.Life](http://www.Spectrum.Life)** which provides a range of confidential counselling services to school personnel. Access to EAS Freephone number (1800 411 057), text and WhatsApp number (Text Hi to 087 369 0010), and email address ([eap@spectrum.life](mailto:eap@spectrum.life)).

# Advance Preparation

As part of the preparation for the school re-opening, it is recommended that the principal convenes their Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) in advance of their students' return in order to identify and plan for responding to students and staff who were bereaved during the school closure period. Schools may consider asking parents to inform them if their child has been bereaved or has experienced any significant difficulty during the school closure period.

It can help for a member of school staff to speak to the bereaved student and/or their family prior to their return to school. It is important to allow the grieving student the opportunity to input into how their return to school after the death is handled- whether they wish to tell their class mates about the death themselves, or would like for teachers to share the news, and if they would like the death acknowledged in class, etc. This not only helps the CIMT understand what support the student would like on their return, but also affords the student a greater sense of control over what might happen. See [R11 Reintegration of the Bereaved Student](#).

As well as those directly bereaved, bear in mind those who may be especially vulnerable to emotional distress, e.g. close friends or relatives of the deceased, those who have experienced previous losses, those with a history of mental health difficulties etc. (see *Responding to Critical Incidents*, p25: *Identifying Vulnerable Students*)

Useful resources for staff to familiarise themselves with in supporting bereaved students include this short video '[Listen with Your Eyes Ears and Heart](#)' as well as the following material from [Responding to Critical Incidents- NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools](#)':

- [Children's Understanding and Reaction to Death According to Age \(R6\)](#)
- [Stages of Grief \(R7\)](#)
- [How to Cope When Something Terrible Happens \(R8\)](#)
- [Reactions to A Critical Incident \(R9\)](#)
- [Grief After Suicide Or Suspected Suicide \(R10\)](#)
- [Reintegration of the Bereaved Child in School \(R11\)](#)
- [Ways To Help Your Child Through This Difficult Time \(R12\)](#)
- [A General Interview Guide for Guidance Counsellors, Chaplains, Other Designated Staff \(R13\)](#)
- [Checklist – Students at Risk \(R14\)](#)

# The First Few Days

## Reintegration of the bereaved student

- Communicate the wishes of the bereaved student to classmates and staff.
- It may be helpful to talk to the class about bereavement and how to support their bereaved classmate before their return to school.
- When the student returns, empathise with the bereaved student and acknowledge their loss, e.g. “I’m sorry that (name of deceased) died. I am here if you need help or support”. (In post-primary schools, check that this is done in the first class of the day and not in every class).
- It is important that teachers express their condolences privately once the general re-entry to class has been managed.
- Discreetly praise young people who make an effort to support a bereaved student.
- Link the student in with the Guidance Counsellor or Student Support Team for support if needed.
- Remember that a bereaved student may have difficulty concentrating, joining in class activities or completing homework and assignments. Show understanding, e.g. “If you are having difficulty doing your homework it is OK to do as much as you can for a while.”
- Allow the student to take a break from class to attend a specified, supervised space if necessary. You might suggest: “We can set up a signal for you to use if you need to leave the class at any time”.

## Commemoration ceremony

- The CIMT may wish to consider holding a ceremony or ritual to acknowledge individual or collective losses experienced during COVID-19 restrictions. A short memorial service can provide a helpful opportunity to remember and celebrate the person who lived, as well as mourning their death. Participation can help those bereaved feel less isolated and more in control at a time of loss. When planning the format of the memorial, consider soliciting and incorporating ideas and inputs from students and members of the school community. Suggestions include:
- Playing soothing music as people enter; this sets the mood and maintains calm. School choirs and music can also be a calming addition to a ceremony as there is sense of connection and collectiveness in song.
- Members of the school community might be invited to read poems or reflections etc. (It is advised that students practice their readings in advance).
- Sharing memories of the person who died is a practical and important way to memorialise them. Spend time creating a book /memory box for the family consisting of letters, pictures, and recollections from members of the school community. A copy of the material might be kept as a store of memories for the students to explore over time. Winston’s Wish website includes the following [template](#) as a guide for prompting and structuring tributes.

# As Time Goes On: Showing Compassion and Understanding

## Understand that bereavement is a process

- Acknowledge, validate and normalise grief reactions. Provide reassurance that strong feelings are a normal part of grieving. It can help for the bereaved student to understand the process of grief, i.e. that at times it is normal to experience strong feelings of grief and at other times to want to get on with 'normal life' or have fun, and that this is natural, and nothing to feel guilty about.
- Encourage the student to express emotions rather than keeping them to themselves.
- Offer opportunities to share positive and happy memories of the deceased and to have a laugh.
- Be sensitive to special occasions, anniversaries and birthdays that may magnify the sense of loss and which could be especially difficult.
- Children often view school as a place where they can take a break from grief and sadness to just do 'normal things'. Carrying on with normal routines and approaches in predictable surroundings can create a sense of safety for bereaved children and young people.

## The importance of communication

- Make sure the bereaved child knows that they can talk to you: "*If you need to talk at any time, I am here to listen*".
- Listen when a bereaved student wants to talk. Ask 'open' questions which allow the child or young person to elaborate on their response, rather than questions that require yes/no answers; e.g. '*How are things going at home?/ 'I saw you at after school club, how are you finding that?'*' etc.
- Be prepared to listen as a bereaved student may need to tell their story many times or ask the same questions in an attempt to process what has happened.
- Be truthful and answer questions honestly. Using clear and unambiguous language and giving accurate factual information about the circumstances of the death helps children's understanding of death. It can be worth exploring what their current understanding is when addressing any questions they might have.
- Offer students opportunities to talk about their bereavement over the weeks and months after school resumes, not just in the first few days following their return: some students may take time to feel safe sharing their thoughts and feelings with others. Be there in the silence too as some individuals may not want to talk, but may feel held and supported regardless.

## As Time Goes On: Showing Compassion and Understanding Cont.

- Initiate or respond to potentially sensitive conversations when you have time to do so properly. Sometimes children disclose information at a time or place that is difficult to respond to in an attuned way and they pick up on cues that adults are not really paying attention to everything they want to tell them. If this happens, it may be more appropriate to say, *'thank you for sharing that with me, I know how important this is. Is it OK if I sit with you and talk about this in (five minutes) when I can listen properly?'*
- Always check back when talking to a bereaved student that you have actually heard them correctly by summarising the main points of what they have said.
- Staff working individually with students may find support materials in the NEPS guidelines useful (see [R13: A general interview guide for guidance counsellors, chaplains or other designated staff](#)).

### Time and space to grieve

- Allow students as much time as they need to grieve. Be sensitive to delayed grief responses and remember that there is no single timescale for coming to terms with loss. This is particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19 where usual funeral rituals and families coming together were restricted. Delayed memorial ceremonies/services may trigger another significant grief response.
- Students may worry that they will lose memories of their loved one. Creating a memory box can provide the link between the past, present and the future.
- Ensure that creative outlets are provided for expressing 'hurt'; e.g. in painting, writing and drama. Music can be helpful in helping distressed students relax.

### Additional supports and resources

It is normal for children and young people to be distressed following the death of a loved one. Most children and young people process their grief appropriately with the support of their family, friends and community. Some bereaved children and young people require additional support to normalise their grieving and to promote the development of normal coping strategies. It is important to link with local bereavement support organisations such as [Rainbows Ireland](#), [Barnardos](#), and [Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#) etc. who provide such services.

Warning signs that a child may need more help are available in [R14: Checklist - Students At Risk](#). Seek appropriate support via the child's G.P. should teachers or parents remain concerned about a child. NEPS psychologists are also available for consultation in this regard.

# Supporting Bereaved Staff Returning to School

## Supporting bereaved colleagues

The death of a loved one and the ensuing grief can be one of life's most difficult experiences. Often, when a grieving colleague returns to work, people don't know what to say, and end up saying nothing; however, staying silent can increase a bereaved colleague's sense of isolation. Even if you feel at a loss for words, small acts of kindness can go a long way. Treat your colleague as normally as possible and show kindness and empathy by being present, listening and supporting him/her. The following are some suggestions of ways you can support a grieving colleague.

- It is important for staff to individually acknowledge a colleague's loss, regardless of how daunting this can be for any individual. Keep your condolences simple and reflective of how you feel: *'I'm very sorry to hear about your father'* or even *'I'm not sure what to say but I want you to know that I'm thinking of you'*. Avoid platitudes such as *'We all have to go sometime /It's for the best/ Time heals/ You need to stay busy'* etc.
- Respect the need for space but make it clear you are there if needed.
- Make time to listen. *'How are you today?'* is better than *'How are you?'* and is more likely to allow people to answer honestly.
- Empathise, but avoid saying you 'know how they feel': one can never truly know how someone else feels.
- Recognise that people grieve differently. Some people want to talk about their loss, while others are more private. Be aware also that grief can manifest in a myriad of emotions such as irritability, confusion, relief, anger or guilt which are all just as much a part of grieving as are feeling sad or lonely.
- Be specific in your willingness to help; e.g. *'I'm not sure what to do but I would really like to support you; perhaps you can tell me how I might do this'*. Offer assistance with work tasks where appropriate. Practical suggestions such as an invitation to coffee or for a walk or doing their shopping can be appreciated.
- Check on your colleague as time passes and months go by. Your colleague will appreciate your support and presence in the weeks and months following their loss when many others have withdrawn.

# Supporting Bereaved Staff Returning to School contd.

## Supporting school staff as a principal/manager

- A manager's compassionate communication goes a long way towards reassuring their bereaved employee that they are valued and supported.
- Acknowledge their loss, check what information they want to share and inform colleagues appropriately.
- Know what the bereaved worker's entitlements are, including leave options (paid/unpaid). Share this information with them openly.
- Attend funeral rituals and allow colleagues to do the same, where possible, bearing in mind COVID-19 restrictions.
- Encourage social, practical and emotional support for the bereaved colleague.
- Despite the best of intentions, it may be unrealistic for managers to commit to checking in with their bereaved colleague as often as they might want or need. Delegating this responsibility to another member of the management team or to a close colleague of the bereaved may sometimes be more appropriate (who in turn can appraise the manager, as necessary).
- Sensitivity and understanding is required, given that grief can impact on concentration, energy levels and productivity of a bereaved colleague.
- A small number of individuals experience complicated/prolonged grief, where the reduction of grief over time does not happen. The Irish Hospice Foundation provide information on complicated grief and advice on further support [here](#).
- If any member of staff has been affected, please seek support, such as that provided by the **Employee Assistance Service, [www.Spectrum.Life](http://www.Spectrum.Life)** which provides a range of confidential counselling services to school personnel. Access to EAS Freephone number (1800 411 057), text and WhatsApp number (Text Hi to 087 369 0010), and email address ([eap@spectrum.life](mailto:eap@spectrum.life)).

## Further resources for staff

- Anyone affected by grief during the COVID 19 pandemic can contact the Irish Hospice Foundation Bereavement Support Line free on 1800 80 70 77, Monday to Friday 10am to 1pm.
- Further information on managing grief in the workplace by the Irish Hospice Foundation is available [here](#).



# Resources

- [\*\*\*Barnardos\*\*\*](#) provide a wide-ranging service to families including support regarding bereavement. Downloadable e-books for both parents and children are available on [their website as well as links to various services](#). Barnardos also provide a [children's bereavement helpline service](#) with information and support in relation to bereavement. Telephone **01 473 2110** (from 10am to 12pm, Monday to Thursday)
- [\*\*\*The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network\*\*\*](#) provides families, professionals and schools with information, guidance and support. It also organises courses for professionals to develop their skillset in supporting bereavement.
- [\*\*\*Winston's Wish\*\*\*](#) is a British childhood bereavement charity with a [comprehensive website](#). Their [COVID-19 page has useful resources, such as 'How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible' and 'Managing grief in isolation'](#).
- [\*\*\*The Irish Hospice Foundation\*\*\*](#) have developed practical and easily accessible materials for the Irish context. There are also [topic specific resources addressing issues such as \*Grieving in exceptional times\*](#).
- [\*\*\*Mencap\*\*\*](#) has materials for explaining loss and death to people with learning disabilities and includes resources on specific topics such as '*What can I do to feel better*' and '*Going to a funeral*'.

## Supports for younger people

people up to the age of 18. Freephone **1800 666 666** (any time, day or night). Text **50101** (from 10am to 4pm every day). Chat online at [www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie) (from 10am to 4pm every day).

- The [YourMentalHealth.ie](http://YourMentalHealth.ie) website has information on all mental health supports and services available nationally & locally from the HSE and its funded partners. Freephone **1800 111 888** (24 hours) for details of supports and services.

## Further resources for staff

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- Further information on managing grief in the workplace by the Irish Hospice Foundation is available [here](#).

NEPS respond to critical incidents on request from affected schools.

School authorities seeking support should contact their [local NEPS office](#) during working hours, Monday – Friday.