Teaching about grief and loss: A whole school approach



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At the beginning of this academic year, I was asked by a primary school to lead a morning workshop on the subject of 'Grief and Loss'. This was to be part of the regular in-service training for the school staff, both teaching and non-teaching. The aim of the session was primarily to raise awareness of the issues involved and to focus particularly on death.

INEXPERIENCED STAFF

During the previous year, a number of pupils had experienced the death of someone close – parent, sibling, grandparents – and many of the staff felt unsure of how to speak to these children. The school also planned to incorporate teaching about grief and loss into the school's curriculum.

The session was led by myself and a colleague as we were aware that, for some staff, it could be personally painful to take part in the workshop. The first part of the morning was focused on the concept of loss – initially exploring feelings around the loss of something apparently quite trivial such as a favourite pen or ornament. This very quickly generated a long list of emotions that can be associated with loss, and a little time was spent thinking about how children may feel about losing toys and other possessions.

We then asked the group to work in twos or threes – or individually if they preferred – to look at the losses they had experienced. We adopted the 'time line' from *Good Grief* by Barbara Ward and Associates[1] and highlighted possible events that could trigger a feeling of loss, such as starting school or moving house. Meanwhile my colleague and I spent this interlude talking to one or two staff who were unable to take part in this activity because of their own unresolved feelings.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Staff often experience difficulties when facing death and bereavement within the school community. Here, Urbanowicz describes her constructive response to an invitation from one primary school (taking 4–11 year olds) to help them deal with these problems.

For most of the group, this exercise was felt to be very helpful in highlighting the type of events that can arouse very strong feelings of loss and grief, and they felt it enabled them to understand better how a child might feel if faced with the same type of situation. We then turned the focus from the staff themselves to their pupils.

A child's view of death

After a break, the next session was focused on death – specifically on a child's understanding of the concept of death, the developmental aspects and the range of behavioural responses normally seen. This session was aimed more at giving information rather than the exploration of personal experience.

In the final session, we looked at practical ideas for helping bereaved children, including looking at books for children and resources for teachers. The morning ended on a positive note with many of the staff commenting that they now felt much more confident about talking to and helping bereaved children and also about incorporating some of the issues into the curriculum.

FOLLOW-UP WORK

As I visit the school regularly, members of staff have been able to discuss issues as they have arisen. The school sets aside regular 'circle' time for topics, which are planned termly with other cross-curricular work. For each class, the plan was to include child protection, grief and loss, and equal opportunities. For example, a year 2 class (aged 6–7 years) studying the theme of movement could include the idea of death as a cessation of movement.

The school is also developing a policy on grief and loss so that all adults have a consistent approach to bereaved pupils, and the support systems are clearly described and available to both children and staff. Discussion with teachers suggests that they have found this approach very helpful and that the younger staff in particular have gained confidence in their own ability to support a child as the need arises.

Reference

1. Ward B and Associates. Good Grief (2). London: Jessica Kingsley, 2nd edn 1993; p122. Available from Cruse—Bereavement Care. £25 + £3.75 &p.