

## Riverside School Bereavement and Loss Policy



The main focus of this policy came out of discussion groups that took place on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2009 at Riverside school as part of a staff inset day. This day was facilitated by Kathryn Stevenson (Educational Psychologist), Anna Harper (Educational Psychologist and Counsellor) and Sandra Taylor (Teacher). All staff attended the day and it is hoped that this policy reflects the views of all staff. The purpose of these discussion groups was to give staff an opportunity to think about strategies and support structures in place when pupils are very ill and when children at school die. These support structures should be for the child, their families, their peers and school staff.

Kathryn and Anna also interviewed a number of parents and grandparents of children with complex health needs who had died. Their views are also included as aspect of good practice within this document.

***All these strategies are examples of good practice and are guidelines only. The needs and wishes of individuals (children, parents, staff and peers) must guide the use of these strategies and are of utmost importance.***

### **1. Strategies and support when a pupil is very ill.**

When a pupil is very ill and in hospital/at home the family's wishes must be sought as to how, when and who they would like to visit. The family's privacy and wishes must be respected at all times. The class teacher is usually the best person to initiate contact with the parents to find out their wishes. However, on some occasions the child's key worker or a classroom assistant may be better placed, depending on their relationship with the parents. Parents may be contacted in a variety of ways and this will be decided at the initial contact e.g. texting may be less intrusive than constant phone calls and gives parents the choice of when they reply.

When the wishes of the family have been found out then staff are generally encouraged to visit the child (if this is what the family wants). Flexibility is very important at this time as it may be appropriate for staff to visit the child and parents during school time. In terms of who would visit the child in hospital this would generally be the person(s) who had the closest relationship with the child – this would usually be the current class team but may be a staff member who had worked closely with the child in a previous class.

Class staff should be open with the child's peers as to what is happening. The child should be referred to regularly and it should be explained to the child's peers that

they are in hospital and are unwell. Classmates should be encouraged to make cards and letters to send to the child to show that they are thinking of them. They should be encouraged to 'pray' or to think about the child if this is appropriate. This can be facilitated by looking at photographs or videos of the child. There is always the potential for some difficulties in terms of sharing information with peers if this conflicts with the family's desire for privacy.

Class staff should be very aware about the impact of the child's illness on other members of the class. Children may not be able to express their feelings and may show their distress and upset in other ways e.g. anger or crying.

The whole school should be made aware when a pupil is very ill. This could be done in the Monday briefing, by email or by a note in the pigeon holes.

## **2. Strategies and support when a child dies**

Following a child's death immediate staff and classmates will be told that day. This would ideally be done face to face, even if it means that a special meeting is called. The whole school should be told ASAP either through a morning or afternoon briefing/email or via the class pigeon holes. Care must be taken to ensure that all staff is told even those not directly involved with the pupil. It is often helpful for the class to do something completely different on the day the news is broken e.g. to out for a walk.

Within a week of a child's death there should be a short assembly to remember them. These assemblies should all follow a similar format – photos/videos of the child will be shown, music will be played and a poem/prayer will be read out. This assembly will be department based and any staff who have had close links with the child will be invited. The child's parents and close family should be invited to this. Some symbolic activity may take place after this assembly – this may take the form of a balloon release. It can be helpful for the child's class to make a book of photographs and memories to present to the child's family and this can be given to the parents at this assembly or at a different time.

Around this time there should be an entry made on the school's website to mark the child's death/life. This should include some writing and photographs.

As when a child is very ill, one person will make contact with the child's parents to find out their wishes about staff attending the funeral. It is up to the discretion of SLT as to who will attend the funeral but staff will be enabled to attend if this is appropriate. It is often helpful for class staff to offer special photographs/video clips of the child to be used at the funeral. Parents have found visits from school staff very useful after a child's death and have valued the opportunity to talk about their child. Some school staff would find a meeting like this uncomfortable and it is suggested that school staff visit with another member of staff for support. It is often helpful for parents for school staff to offer to liaise with other agencies to take the pressure off parents at this time.

About one month after the funeral another celebration will be held for the child. This idea has come out of meeting with bereaved parents who often need contact at this time after the funeral. Class staff will be free to decide the format of this celebration. Ideas suggested include a balloon release or making a memory box of the child. Parents will be invited along to this celebration and it is an opportunity for the school to pass on any school work done by the child, their photographs etc. It may be more appropriate for some parents to be visited at home instead.

### **3. Ongoing support for parents**

Memorials in school – After consultation with parents and staff and multi-agency colleagues, we have decided to celebrate the lives of pupils who died at Rectory Paddock School and Woodbrook School prior to September 2007 in the form of a single, engraved pebble. Individual pebbles will be engraved in memory of the students that attended Riverside School and have passed away since September 2007. The pebbles will be set in the sensory garden. There are two areas that appear appropriate for this memorial. One is to set the pebbles around the water feature and the other is to commission a piece of art work by staff and students which would be placed within the sensory garden, with the key focus of setting the pebbles within it. Future pebbles will be engraved and set appropriately when requested. This could be included as a symbolic act or celebration of the child's life with the child's family, peers and staff.

Anniversaries – It was suggested by the parents interviewed that a card could be sent by the school on the anniversary of the child's death. This needs to be organised by one person (perhaps the child's teacher or the Bereavement and Loss co-ordinator, Linda Duhig). This would be a good opportunity to ask how the parents are getting on and to signpost them to further services if required.

Sandra Taylor (March 2010)

