

RESPONDING TO PUPILS' QUESTIONS FOLLOWING A SUDDEN DEATH

INFORMATION FOR STAFF

1. It can be very difficult to respond to questions from children following a sudden death especially when the member of staff is also shocked and bereaved. Many factors will influence a pupil's idea of death - their developmental stage, their experiences, their ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, and their personal way of seeing things.
2. It is useful to agree a 'script' for all staff. The advantages of this are that staff will have a form of words to use so they are not caught unawares and that pupils get to hear a reassuring message over and over again. This is particularly reassuring and helpful to young pupils or pupils with special needs when processing the information.
3. Some questions will reveal that children feel insecure about whether the adults in their lives will be around to look after them. Reassure them that even though nobody knows the future, they can be sure that there will always be reliable adults to look after them.
4. It is not unusual for young children to ask the same question again and again. Repeating questions and getting answers helps the child understand and adjust to the loss of someone loved.
5. Sometimes children become very interested in physical details. Keep the reply very simple and factual. Repeat it as often as necessary and do not be drawn into giving further details. Be careful not to use euphemisms such as 'sleep' or 'went way' for death. Keep it simple, factual and clear. Younger children find it difficult to understand the permanence of death. Euphemisms will only make it worse.
6. When answering questions about death tell a pupil only what he or she is capable of understanding. There is no need to be evasive, but modify explanations to what the pupil can comprehend; use language the pupil can understand; and what is said is important, but the manner in which it is said has even greater significance. Be aware of voice tone. Try to answer the questions in a matter-of-fact way without too much emotion.

Suggested Answers to Certain Questions

Question: Why did _____ die?

Answer: "There are some things we understand and some things we don't understand. We do/don't know exactly why _____ died. The doctors have told us the reason was _____."

Question: Why Do People Die?

Answer: Dying is a natural part of life. All living things like plants, animals, and people are special parts of the natural world. Nature almost always gives us long, healthy lives. Like all things in nature, after many years people grow old and reach the end of life. This is called death.

Question: Is Death Like Sleeping?

Answer: No. Dying is not like sleeping at all. People sleep to rest and stay healthy. Sleep gives hard working parts of our body time to build up strength again. Think of how good you feel after you sleep. You feel so good because your body is rested and ready for another day. When someone dies, their body stops working. It is not resting anymore. Its job is over.