***“WHEN SOMEBODY DIES”***

**CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

Talking to any child or young person about death is often felt by adults to be a very difficult situation and even more so when the child or young person has special educational needs. However, grief is a universal emotion and applies to all human beings regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Each person’s reaction will be unique to them.

Children with special educational needs, like all other children, are individuals in their own right and will deal with death in many different ways. Some will bounce back as though nothing has happened and adjust to their new life circumstances well, while others will find it extremely difficult to cope.

When bereavement has occurred, all children need to have their questions answered; be listened to; be given appropriate information; helped to feel safe and have people they trust to support them. When a death occurs in a main-stream school setting, care must be taken to ensure that children with special educational needs are supported professionally and sensitively according to their developmental ability. Indeed, in all settings, when bereavement has occurred, although all staff need to be informed, those who know the individual child best will need to adopt and adapt the known specific strategies that aid understanding.

Children with additional needs require those who support them to use clear language with unambiguous meaning. The language they use when talking about the end of life needs to be clear and consistent e.g. using the words ‘death’, ‘dead’ and ‘dying’ are more appropriate than ‘asleep’, ‘gone away’ and ‘lost’. Equally, phrases such as ‘sorry you’ve ‘lost’ your mother’ or ‘gone to sleep’ or ‘past away’, while often intended to help the child, are more likely to further complicate understanding and ultimately adjustment. References to sleep often lead to difficulties with bed time routines and fears of going to sleep.

A full understanding of death and its implications depends on recognising that: death is universal and that everyone dies eventually; that death is an inevitable part of life; that death is permanent and that death is irreversible. Many children and young people may never reach this level of understanding but will still experience the full emotions of grief while having great difficulty in expressing or communicating their feelings.

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**Children and young people with special educational needs who have experienced a significant loss in their lives need to be:**

* Given information appropriate to their understanding
* Listened to with sensitivity and empathy
* Helped to feel safe *(often school feels a safe and secure place)*
* Able to speak with people they trust
* Supported by the use of clear, unambiguous language
* Given appropriate explanations of ‘death’ words e.g. funeral; dead; coffin; grave
* Enabled to develop their own understanding through the use of known specific teaching strategies
* Offered time to have questions repeatedly answered and explanations given until they can be processed and understood
* Secure in the knowledge of clear boundaries, rules and routines
* Supported over an extended period of time and at significant times e.g. anniversaries, Christmas, Fathers’ Day / Mothers’ Day
* Helped to understand and cope with their ‘new’ emotions and the ‘new’ emotions of others
* Reassured of any changes in practical arrangements e.g. home to school transport, new family routines
* Encouraged to know that it is okay to be happy and have fun
* Helped to understand that death is a natural part of life and often not as seen on TV or computer games

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We trust these brief notes are of assistance to you when used in conjunction with the policy and procedures of your school for ***“When Somebody Dies”.***

Rainbows Bereavement Support GB, along with other bereavement charities and agencies, is able to offer schools more detailed advice and support.

Operating in over 700 schools throughout Great Britain, the Rainbows twelve week structured and age related programmes, offer proven long term positive impact for those who grieve.

For further information please contact Sue McDermott, National Director of Rainbows Bereavement Support GB at [sue.rainbowsgb@btconnect.com](mailto:sue.rainbowsgb@btconnect.com) or refer to our website [www.rainbowsgb.org](http://www.rainbowsgb.org)

