

WHAT ARE COMPASSIONATE SCHOOLS?

Compassionate Schools are places that recognise serious illness, caregiving, death, loss and grief as inherent aspects of life in schools. They pay attention to such experiences through a variety of activities aimed at changing attitudes and increasing knowledge and skills of both students and staff, so they are better equipped to support themselves and each other during times of hardship.

WHY DO WE NEED COMPASSIONATE SCHOOLS?

- By age ten, over half of all children have experienced a bereavement.
- About 1 in 5 adolescents care for a sick family member.
- These experiences can impact the overall wellbeing of a child or young person, including their ability to attend and follow classes.
- Death and loss are topics that often struggle to find a place in our daily social interactions.
- Children and young people are often shielded from or misinformed about death which hinders preparing them for such situations.
- Most teachers lack training to address serious illness, caregiving, death and grief.
- Paying attention to these topics enhances resilience when death and grief are encountered later in life.
- Schools play a key role in educating and preparing students for life and this should include a life that recognises death and grief.

TIPS

1. **Consider the whole school experience:** Think about activities in the context of staff and student wellbeing, the curriculum, policies and procedures, the physical space, the cultural environment, training, and wider community. Doing so broadens the range of activities available and is more likely to lead to cohesive and sustained change.
2. **Not every colleague will want to participate:** Be aware that everyone has a different grief history and may not feel ready or willing to take part in activities. Respect this.
3. **Be Attentive:** Grief affects people differently. Most children will manage without specialist help but be vigilant to signs of prolonged or problematic grief reactions: check in at regular intervals and seek help from support services if needed.
4. **Talk with those affected by a death:** Acknowledge what has happened and allow people space to express how they wish to shape the commemoration within the school in a way that reflects their individual and sociocultural background.
5. **Avoid euphemisms:** Be consistent in conveying that death is final and that the deceased cannot return. Children may otherwise adopt a different perception of death as reality ("Grandma is on a trip").
6. **Keep in touch:** If someone is absent due to illness, caregiving or bereavement, call to check in and offer support. Would they like you to inform colleagues or students? Arrange a return-to-school meeting to discuss what challenges they may face in returning and what accommodations can be made. Discuss with the team and provide guidance on responding appropriately when they return.
7. **Pay attention:** Special days like religious holidays and festivals, birthdays, mothers' day, fathers' day or graduations can evoke a strong sense of loss after a death. Be alert to these occasions.



COMPASSIONATE SCHOOLS

A How-to Guide

FOR ANYONE WILLING TO DEVELOP EDUCATION AND SUPPORT AROUND SERIOUS ILLNESS, CAREGIVING, DEATH, DYING AND BEREAVEMENT IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION



COMPASSIONATE
COMMUNITIES
CENTRE OF EXPERTISE



This guide was developed in collaboration with the European Learning Network Compassionate Schools.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

First steps ...

Creating schools where serious illness, caregiving, death, dying, loss and grief are as normal as discussing holidays or hobbies is not something that can be achieved overnight. However, there are steps you can take to work towards developing a Compassionate School environment.

1. Talk with your headteacher and explain why you believe this is important. Ask for their support and a mandate.
2. Are other teachers, school staff or students interested in joining you? Great! Involve them in the development or activity design.
3. Identify previous loss experiences that took place in school. What did your school do well? What could be improved? Ask people's opinions.
4. Uncover what is currently happening in the school and use it as an anchor point to work with.
5. Look for partners that can help: a nursing home, an artist who works with children and young people around death, a bereavement service who will provide training or advice if you feel unsure ...
6. Connect learning opportunities with the existing curriculum.
7. Get started. It is fine if the activities are not perfect, just begin, improve and build from there.



DEVELOPING ACTIVITIES!

There are no boundaries or rules

that define what activities should look like.

If the activities change attitudes, raise awareness, increase knowledge, build skill or improve experiences,

you are on the right path!

Activities can be organised at any moment and shouldn't only happen when a death occurs or on specific days when the dead are remembered.

Activities can be aimed at students, staff or the wider school community. They can relate to learning (e.g. curricula, training), policies, the environment (e.g. facilities, resources), or local neighbourhood.

Start small. Don't be overly ambitious. Look for partners who can help.

Connect activities with the school curriculum. Build on existing wellbeing policies and practices.

Do one activity and evaluate how it went. Adjust, continue and expand from there.

Look at some of the ideas on the next page and see what inspires you!

INVITE AN EXPERT

Organise a workshop for your colleagues to educate them on serious illness, death, loss and grief in children and young people.

USE ART

Let students draw about someone or something they lost and miss. Facilitate conversations about their experiences.

READ A STORY

Gather books that facilitate conversations about death and grief. Talk with your local library, perhaps they already have books or are willing to buy them.

TEACH ABOUT DEATH AS PART OF THE LIFESPAN

We all encounter death at some point in our lives. Death is part of life and we need to acknowledge that.

ACTIVITY IDEAS

VISIT A NURSING HOME

Prepare questions for discussion between the residents and students. Conversations between people with different experiences of loss may lead to interesting discussions!

IDENTIFY SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

Make sure you know which support organisations are available to you. They may even come to the school to talk about the topics they work on.

DEVELOP SCHOOL POLICY

Develop a policy that shows the long-term commitment of your school.

PREPARE AN SOS DOCUMENT

What will you do in an emergency situation? For example, if a child dies, how will you communicate this to the other students and parents? Will your school send a card to the family? Preparing for such situations will make you more confident when they take place.

CREATE A PLACE TO GRIEVE AND COMMEMORATE

Involve students to design and develop a place to grieve or commemorate people who have died.