ENFIELD Educational Psychology Service

Guidance for meeting emotional needs and promoting recovery following a sad or traumatic event

Telling children and young people sad news

Sharing sad news requires care and preparation. The aim is to provide clear, accurate information, acknowledge uncertainty and help children and young people understand where they can find support.

Before sharing the news

- **Agree what information can be shared.** Senior leaders should establish the confirmed facts and agree a consistent message, taking account of the family's wishes, privacy, safeguarding considerations and any police involvement.
- **Plan who will tell children, when and where.** Consider which children may need to hear the news individually or in a smaller group, particularly those closely affected.
- **Prepare staff.** Provide agreed wording, clarify how to respond to questions and ensure staff know where to seek advice.
- **Consider individual needs.** Adapt the language, pace and format to children's ages, understanding, communication needs and cultural or religious backgrounds.
- **Arrange support afterwards.** Identify trusted adults and suitable spaces for children who need additional time or support.

When sharing the news

- **Begin clearly and gently.** For example: "I have some sad news to share with you."
- **Use simple, factual language.** Share confirmed information without unnecessary or distressing detail. Explain what is not yet known rather than speculating.
- **When someone has died, use the words "died" or "dead".** Avoid expressions such as "gone to sleep" or "lost", which can cause confusion. A simple explanation may be: "Their body has stopped working, and they cannot come back." Clear, direct language is recommended.
- **Allow time for understanding.** Pause, check understanding sensitively and recognise that some children may need information repeated.
- **Acknowledge different responses.** Explain that children may feel sad, worried, angry, confused or unsure what they feel. Some may show little outward reaction. There is no expected way to respond.
- **Offer opportunities for questions without requiring participation.** Children can listen quietly, ask questions later or speak privately with a trusted adult.

- **Be honest about uncertainty.** It is appropriate to say: “I don’t know,” or “That is not something we can share.” Record questions that need follow-up without promising that every question can be answered.
- **Respect different beliefs.** Distinguish factual explanations of death from beliefs about what happens afterwards. Avoid presenting one belief as shared by everyone.
- **Offer realistic reassurance.** Explain what adults are doing to provide care and support. Avoid promises such as “This will never happen again.”
- **Allow time for decisions.** Do not make immediate commitments about belongings, seating, memorials or tributes. Explain that suggestions will be considered with the relevant people, including the family.

If the death is a suspected suicide

Seek specialist advice on the wording before sharing information about the cause of death. Do not present an unconfirmed cause as fact, speculate about reasons, describe the method or share details of a suicide note. Avoid language that glorifies, romanticises or attributes the death to a single event.

Bringing the conversation to a close

Thank children for listening and remind them that they can ask questions or seek support later. Explain:

- What will happen next and any changes to the usual day.
- Which adults they can speak to.
- Where they can go if they need support.
- That familiar activities will continue, with flexibility for those who need it.

For example:
“Thank you for listening. You may have questions now or later, or you may not want to talk. We will let you know who you can speak to and where you can get support. I will explain what we are doing for the rest of today.”

Continue to notice children’s needs after the initial conversation, including those who show little outward distress.

Approaches to avoid

- Minimising feelings: “Don’t get upset” or “It could be worse.”
- Promising a particular outcome: “Everything will be fine.”
- Telling children how they should feel or how quickly they should recover.
- Pressuring children to speak, describe their experiences or comfort others.
- Shifting the focus to an adult’s own experiences of loss.

- Sharing speculation, graphic details or private family information.
- Removing all ordinary expectations rather than offering sensitive, individual adjustments.