

Preparing students for the return of a grieving classmate

When a classmate has experienced a death it is usual for children and young people of ages to be anxious about what they should say and how they should treat them. Class teachers are often themselves apprehensive about how to support all the children in their care.

Discuss the bereavement with the class before the student returns

Once it is known when the student is returning to school it is advisable to have a class discussion about death and how grief affects different people, even if there was a previous discussion when the news was first received. Naturally, this should be delivered in an age appropriate way but some points for discussion are:

- Encourage the sharing of feelings, possibly through thinking about other types of losses or deaths that students have experienced and what helped them cope.
- Explore what difficulties the student may experience when they return to school through thinking about how they might like others to treat them. Would they like to be left alone or want to talk about it? The idea that someone is likely to want both at different times or from different people can be introduced.
- Discuss how students might reach out to their classmate. Encourage them to think about this in the context of their friendship before the death. Would they want to offer to talk or make plans outside of school? Or would it be more appropriate for them to offer to help them catch up with school work?
- Make students aware that their classmate may act differently when they return. They may seem withdrawn and unfriendly or they may be aggressive and moody. They should understand that this is normal and nothing to do with them.
- Be aware that the bereavement may have an impact on other students, stirring up their own feelings of loss and separation. Close friends of the bereaved and his/her family may also need additional support to help them cope with feelings of helplessness or being 'shut out'.

