

---

THE  
LITTLE BOOK  
OF  
BEREAVEMENT  
FOR  
SCHOOLS

---



---

Ian Gilbert  
with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert

---



---

THE  
LITTLE BOOK  
OF  
BEREAVEMENT  
FOR  
SCHOOLS

---



---

Ian Gilbert  
with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert

---



Crown House Publishing Limited  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk) - [www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
6 Trowbridge Drive, Suite 5, Bethel, CT 06801, USA  
www.crownhousepublishing.com

© Ian Gilbert with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert 2010

The right of Ian Gilbert with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2010.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owners. Enquiries should be addressed to Crown House Publishing Limited.

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue entry for this book is available  
from the British Library.

**ISBN 978-184590464-7**

**LCCN 2010930995**

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

# Contents

## One

*As soon as the death is known to the school have a senior member of staff talk to the immediate classmates about what has happened. Stamp out any gossip and offer support for those who may be affected*

## Two

*Send a condolence card and encourage classmates to do the same. Saying 'I didn't know what to do' and doing nothing is a form of moral cowardice – and why should you be let off the hook? No one else knows what to do either*

## Three

*When the child comes back to school talk to them (but don't patronise them). Ask them how they would like their teachers to act*

## Four

*Teach other children to know what to say and how to handle things*

## Five

*School can be the place to escape from what is going on at home ('Home is home and school is school'). Respect that wish as much as possible*

## Six

*Grieving is mentally and physically exhausting*

## Seven

*Be tolerant of homework and other work commitments – evenings may well be spent grieving and talking, not working. Agree work commitments with the child, though, and be firm but caring as you try to ensure they don't get too far behind (and thereby add a feeling of failure to their grieving)*

## Eight

*Talk to the spouse if they come to the school. Show them you know and care and are there to help. Don't just ignore them because you don't know what to say. That is more moral cowardice*

## Nine

*Keep on talking to the child and letting them know you still remember, even just in small ways*

## Ten

*Remember the anniversaries*

## Eleven

*Be aware of areas you may cover in the curriculum that may bring back memories (Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, life after death in RE, areas that touch on any illness such as cancer or mental illness and so on)*

## Twelve

*When another parent dies in the school, make sure you are mindful of other children who have lost parents or indeed any loved one as it will bring many memories back*

## Thirteen

*Learn about helping children to cope with bereavement from the various agencies out there*

## Fourteen

*Time heals in bereavement as much as it does following an amputation. It is just what you go through to come to terms with things better*

## Fifteen

*And thank you for taking the time to read this.  
You can make a terrible situation a bit less stressful  
for a grieving family*

# Foreword

This is a little book about a big thing. A thing that most adults assume children do not have to experience – the landscape of profound loss and change that we hope will not confront them until adulthood.

I meet bereaved children and young people at St Nicholas Hospice through Nicky's Way. This is an open access service to bereaved youngsters in our local area of West Suffolk. We also provide consultation and training to schools and other agencies.

The single most important message of the *Little Book* is the importance of giving your full attention to bereaved children in your school. Don't think there won't be bereaved children in your class because there will; you just may not know it. Indeed it is important to remember that for some children, the privacy of their loss is of paramount importance. Ideally, you and your school will know about the death of a parent, grandparent, brother or sister or any other special person to a child in your care. The most important response to a bereaved child is attending to what they say or indicate (through behaviour) as to how they are living with that death and what helps them.

## The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools

Each child will grieve in a unique way, but knowing about grief and bereavement will help you help them – so please read this and anything else that gives you insight and courage. You will need courage, some knowledge and the backing of your colleagues to support a bereaved child in your class and school, but most of all you will need your humanity, tempered by professional skill.

This personal account gives you clear guidelines that will make a difference as to how a school supports a bereaved child in their midst and I want to thank Ian, William, Olivia and Phoebe for their courage in sharing so much. So be inspired by their courage and be brave and make death and bereavement in your school something that can be acknowledged and talked about. It would be really something if a child in your care could one day say, “When my Mum died, there was a teacher in my school who really helped me”.

*Yvonne Holman, Nicky’s Way, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk*

# Introduction

Of all the books I have written for teachers this one is the most personal. After a long illness, a mental illness (but that's a whole different book), my wife died on 11 June 2008. We had three children - my youngest daughter was then 9, my eldest daughter was 13 and for my son, the last time he saw his mother alive was on his eighteenth birthday, five days before she died.

This spread of ages meant that I was witness to the way that three entirely separate phases of educational institution tried and succeeded, tried and failed and sometimes didn't try at all to help my children come to terms with their loss.

Several months after their mother's death BBC's *Newsround* aired a brave and still controversial programme in which four children talked about their own losses. This prompted my children and me to sit down and think about how we could use the network of Independent Thinking schools to get across to teachers what they could do to help children who had lost a parent based on our own experiences. We did this by way of a fifteen-point PDF handout on one side of A4.

## The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools

It was well received, including a request to translate it into Welsh for a conference later that year for teachers, social workers, school nurses and others who may be involved with children facing bereavement. I mentioned to the organisers that I would be prepared to come along and speak at the conference for free. My daughters volunteered to join me. One aspect of serious illness and bereavement is trying to make sense of it when there is, actually, no sense to be had. Drawing on your experiences to help others helps you with finding some sort of purpose to the chaos and awfulness.

The responses at this conference – ‘We know we get it wrong at our school but we don’t learn and then, when it happens again, we get it wrong all over again’ – and the response to the e-mailshot of our resource from across the UK and further afield, prompted me to suggest to Crown House that maybe it would be worthwhile elaborating on the initial handout and producing a simple book for schools under Independent Thinking’s *Little Book* series.

Which is what you now have in your hands.

Like I say, this time it’s personal. It isn’t other people’s research. It isn’t based on years of extensive study. Maybe what my children say they would have liked is not what everyone would want in a similar situation. We are all different. (Except that, when it comes to grieving, we all follow a fairly ubiquitous pattern of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, according to thanatologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.) You can do the research on grieving yourself. And because it’s personal, the main thrust of this

## Introduction

book is from the perspective of a child who has lost a parent. That said, it may be that the suggestions can help a child dealing with any sort of serious loss. I just hope – my children and I just hope – that you will find advice in this book to help those children that little bit more. Their world has just fallen apart. The least you can do is read this.

## THE LITTLE BOOK OF BEREAVEMENT FOR SCHOOLS

Written by bestselling author Ian Gilbert together with his three children, this is a very personal account of the way educational institutions tried and succeeded, tried and failed and sometimes didn't try at all to help William, Olivia and Phoebe come to terms with the death of their mother.

Several months after their mother's death BBC's Newsround aired a brave and still controversial programme in which four children talked about their losses. This prompted Ian and his children to sit down and think about their own experiences and draw up a list of dos and don'ts that could help steer schools - and indeed all professionals working with children - towards a better understanding of what is needed from them at such a difficult time.

The warmth of the reception of this initial fifteen-point handout led the family to expand their advice and suggestions into what has now become *The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools*, the proceeds of which will go to Nicky's Way in Suffolk.

*'... be inspired by their courage and be brave and make death and bereavement in your school something that can be acknowledged and talked about. It would be really something if a child in your care could one day say, "When my Mum died, there was a teacher in my school who really helped me".'*

From the foreword by Yvonne Holman, Nicky's Way

Education Care and counselling of students



Crown House Publishing Limited

[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

ISBN 978-184590464-7



9 781845 904647