

New study calls for inclusion of death education in school curriculum

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A new study is calling for a significant overhaul in the way education about human death is approached within schools, advocating for its inclusion as a vital component of the curriculum.

The [small-scale study](#) by the University of Portsmouth emphasizes the urgent need for better training and resources to support teachers in effectively addressing the needs of students who have experienced the bereavement of someone close to them.

The research highlights the profound impact of bereavement on [young individuals](#) and the importance of proactive measures in addressing the issue. According to data from Child Bereavement UK (2019), 90 percent of teachers report a lack of training in supporting bereaved children, despite 86 percent acknowledging the necessity of addressing bereavement within the school community.

"Teachers often lack the time or feel ill-equipped to address the complex needs of students dealing with the loss of a loved one. The reality is that, on average, there will be two children in every class dealing with a bereavement of this kind. By providing a supportive environment, children are more likely to feel safe and thrive emotionally and academically," says Dr. Sukhbinder Hamilton, Lead researcher from the University of Portsmouth

Published in [Mind, Brain and Education](#), the paper calls for integration of death education into the school curriculum, presenting it as a [proactive approach](#) to dealing with bereavement.

Dr. Hamilton adds, "By incorporating education about death into the curriculum, we can empower school communities to proactively address bereavement rather than reacting to it. We know from speaking to young people that this would be better for them as well as the teachers."

The study further highlights the detrimental impact of bereavement on young individuals, often leading to a loss of self-awareness and uncertainty about their future. With current strains on the health care system, accessing timely counseling for bereaved children poses

additional challenges.

To address these issues, the researchers conducted focus groups involving young people who had experienced [bereavement](#), followed by a conference for children and their caregivers. This platform enabled children to express their emotions, share experiences and envision a hopeful future.

Key findings of the study highlight the importance of providing safe spaces for children to articulate their feelings and share their stories. It also emphasized the significance of equipping educators with the necessary tools and training to support bereaved children effectively.

Dr. Hamilton explains some of the results: "Children reported that adults often said—'You will feel sad', or 'You need to be brave for your mum'. This isn't helpful; the reality of grief is that it's not constant, and it comes and goes. For children it is even more variable than adults."

"On the surface, children can seem fine, but when adults try to put expectations on them, it adds confusion and emotional turmoil. What we should be doing is saying things like—'it's ok to feel however you feel'. This way, the adult is giving the child the control and space to deal with their grief."

Dr. Hamilton recommends the need for ongoing professional development for teachers, particularly those in the early stages of their careers. By providing educators with the tools and language to support bereaved children, the aim is to encourage a supportive learning environment where all children can thrive.

More information: Sukhbinder Hamilton, "They Told me I Should

Feel Sad": Narrative and Personal Story Telling as a Sensemaking and Ownership Tool for Young People Who Have Experienced Bereavement, *Mind, Brain, and Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/mbe.12402](https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12402)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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