



Dr Sarah James

addressed, in schools, would be under the new subject heading of 'Health Education' - which will become statutory in both primary and secondary schools.

"The Government is making it mandatory to teach children how life begins – why not how it ends?"

Abi Pattenden, President of the National Association of Funeral Directors

The NAFD will be submitting a consultation response and urges members to do the same. The consultation closes in November,

In her introduction to the event, President Abi shared her professional and personal experience of bereavement among young people, articulating her regret that she and her classmates simply hadn't known how to support a friend who had lost her father suddenly at 12. She shared her view that schools (and parents) should enable children to talk and be curious about death, loss, and bereavement - before they experience it at first hand - to help build "a more resilient, open and unafraid society."

Attendees included Fergus Crow, Chief Executive of Winston's Wish, and representatives from Cruse Bereavement Care and Penhaligon's Friends.

NAFD members in attendance included Austin Williams from Bristol Funeral Services, who is an NAFD Board of Education member; Andrew Judd, representing Dignity plc and the NAFD Western Counties Area Federation; Immediate Past President Alison Crake, of Crake & Mallon Funeral Service in Stockton on Tees; First Vice-President David Barrington, of Barrington's Funeral Services; Funeral Partners, Anne Beckett-Allen of Rosedale Funeral Home in East Anglia and Hasina Zaman of Compassionate Funerals in London.

The group also benefited from the academic expertise of Dr Sarah James, a lecturer in education at the University of Hull, who specialises in this area, and Johnny Hunt a sex and relationships education consultant who has developed curricular resources for schools across Warwickshire and the Midlands which deliver age-appropriate sex and relationships education from the age of four upwards.

NAFD hosts death in education round table

In September, the National Association of Funeral Directors, in partnership with child bereavement charity Winston's Wish, hosted a unique round-table to discuss whether issues connected to death, bereavement and funerals should be taught to UK primary school pupils, to help build a more resilient, open and unafraid society when it comes to talking about death.

The cover story for August's edition of this magazine saw President Abi Pattenden sharing some of her thinking on this topic - it having been a passion of hers for some time. In the article she articulated her belief that there is a need to help prepare young people, in advance and in age or ability-appropriate ways, for the loss that children and young people may face when they are still of school age, and that which every adult will face in their lifetime.

"This will not just help them as young people, but help them as adults too - both in terms of their own emotional wellbeing, and also in their understanding of, and willingness to talk more openly about, the end of life," she said. "This, I believe, could help to make the significant shift in Britons' willingness to address and prepare for the end of life that we know would be so beneficial to society."

The timing of the event was extremely important, as the Government is currently consulting on draft guidance which seeks to "make sure education prepares young people for life in the modern world" - proposing content designed to build resilience and address mental health and wellbeing issues. It was acknowledged during the round-table that this represents a significant opportunity to highlight that the best place for bereavement or loss to be



President Abi shares a story from her schooldays

Bereaved children are invisible

Sharing some of the forthcoming results of their study into the long term impact on adults of childhood bereavement, Fergus Crow of Winston's Wish revealed that one of the biggest challenges is the invisibility of bereaved children. He revealed that we don't even know how many children are bereaved of a parent or sibling each year, as the death registration process only gathers information about partners and spouses. Their best estimate, based on all available data, though, is that 45,000 children lose an immediate family member every year. And connected to those children, experiencing loss whilst at school, are all the children around them who will be affected by the experience of that death happening, whether it's close friends who aren't sure what to say or classmates who become anxious that the same thing may happen in their families.

In addition, many will also lose a grandparent, another close family member or a friend, potentially adding many more young people to the numbers experiencing bereavement each year. Winston's Wish estimates that there may be many hundreds of thousands of adults in Britain who

experienced bereavement in childhood and who never got any support for their grief. The impact of this may be lifelong.

Fergus spoke a lot about the concept of secondary loss, where the bereaved child not only loses the person, but may also have to move home away from their friends, change schools or may become isolated from friends who are not well equipped to support them. He said that, because people around them can find talking about death or loss difficult, children being supported by Winston's Wish also often report that they find themselves frequently managing other people's responses to their bereavement in addition to their own feelings.

It was revealed, by Winston's Wish Young Ambassador Eleanor Turner, who was supported by the charity after her father took his own life, that research suggests that although schools see support for grieving pupils as a priority, only around 15% of schools currently have a planned, holistic response to bereavement. When her father died, Eleanor said she didn't even know how to tell her classmates, as many of them didn't even understand what suicide meant – or that it was something that could be talked about.

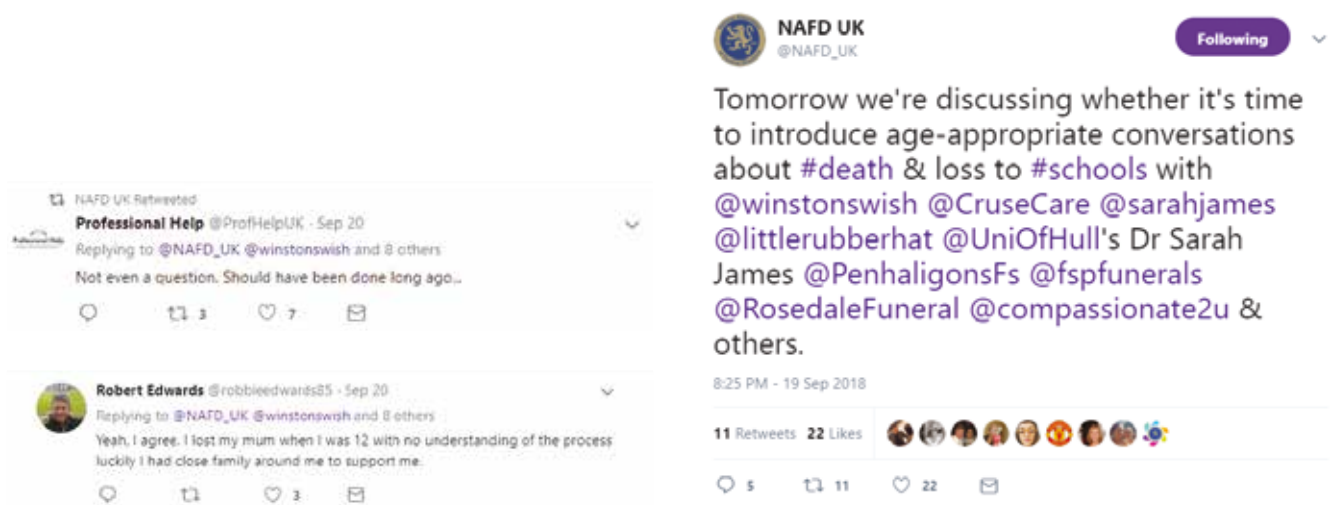
Children are naturally curious about death

Dr Sarah James, Lecturer in Education Studies, Social Inclusion and Special Needs, talked about how, when she was a teacher, she undertook a Masters' degree and, as part of it, she asked Year 5 (nine and ten year old) pupils if they had questions about dying or death.

“Children are naturally curious about death. They need to be allowed to ask their questions.”

Dr Sarah James, Hull University

The questions on dying were relatively straight forward and limited – the children had a good idea what it meant, but there was a great outpouring of curiosity from the children about death itself - and she realised there was something very powerful in children's natural willingness and desire to find out what happens when you die. Some children confessed they lay awake at night thinking about it, but they didn't know who to ask. Dr James argued that it



is important that we give children agency to ask their questions about death because, whilst the taboo may be lifting a little in adult society – it certainly isn't for children and within many schools.

Interesting parallels between sex and death

SRE consultant Jonny Hunt has helped to develop and introduce a sex and relationships education programme to 120 primary schools in Warwickshire, the Midlands and beyond. Based on the Dutch programme Spring Fever that has been running in Holland for over 15 years and which Warwickshire Council bought the rights to, they have now replaced Spring Fever with their own evidence-based programme 'All About Me' that incorporates messages about protective behaviours.

“Children are resilient if they’re able to talk about how they feel. When we protect children from talking about death, are we really protecting ourselves?”

Jonny Hunt, SRE consultant

He addressed the reluctance he has come across among teachers to cover the topic of sex and relationships with primary age children, that may also apply to the subject of death. “If you’re an educator, you need to enable children to feel okay asking about anything - sex, death, whatever.

Listen to what they have to say, ask them what they think the answer is, correct any misunderstanding and let the conversations happen. That’s where understanding happens. There is a massive opportunity to allow children to have conversations that will help to protect them in the future.”

However, in his experience, given that schools are under so much pressure, until this becomes a specified part of the National Curriculum and is, in his words, “OFSTED-ible” many schools simply won’t get around to it.

The group resolved to advocate for the Department for Education to include death, bereavement and loss specifically in the final version of the draft guidance that is currently being consulted upon. There are natural opportunities to do so, given the focus on mental health, wellbeing, resilience and being life-ready.

Jonny Hunt also addressed a natural concern that many parents raise with him about whether four-year-olds are ready for sex and relationships education - and shared a *Daily Mail* headline ‘Four year-olds get sex lessons under Labour’ from when the programme launched.

His reply? We don’t teach other subjects by waiting until the children tell us they are ready. We develop lessons that are age-appropriate and introduce the children to concepts that we know will be of benefit to them. We don’t teach maths by going straight into simultaneous equations! We teach four year olds to count, using their fingers and toes and we progress from there as they grow. The same is true of sex and relationships education and would be

true for loss and bereavement. At four and five it’s not about sex, it’s about consent.

At four, the first ‘All About Me’ lesson begins with understanding that just because you like something doesn’t mean everyone does - “is your fun, fun for everyone?”. The lessons move on to talking about whether all cuddles are nice. What about tickling and different types of touch? A parallel might be to start by talking about the time they have left their teddy at their grandparents or on holiday – as that is as great a loss as any when you are four and five.

“Children hear silence a lot. They are excluded from conversations and if we don’t explain things to them, they worry it’s their fault. My experience is – and all the evidence suggests - that to protect children you must be open and honest with them.”

“I wasn’t allowed to visit my dad in the chapel of rest, but my school bus stopped outside the funeral home every day. Each morning, I would think “My dad’s in there. How do I get in?” Many years later I saw a job advertised there and I got it. So I got into the building eventually – and here I still am.”

Fiona Hughes, Funeral Partners



How best could the subject of death be woven into the curriculum?

During the second half of the event there was a facilitated discussion covering issues such as what might be useful to ask the British public about this subject; what might the barriers to introducing the subject of death into the curriculum be, and how might these be overcome; what content/resources are already available and what might we need to create. We also brainstormed ways in which the funeral profession could contribute to, and support, the campaign.

During the discussion, Dr Sarah James said: “This is not necessarily about creating the subject of death in schools. It is about utilising existing curricular learning opportunities to discuss loss and death and also to allow for more naturalistic, impromptu learning through discussion. For

example, most children study Ancient Egypt in primary school, providing one of the best death education opportunities. The children love looking at things like mummification, not just having fun rolling themselves up in toilet roll but in talking about the technical aspects of how the Egyptians went about it. There’s a logical extension there in looking at how we preserve bodies today through embalming, for example – and modern funerals rites, compared to those of the Pharaohs.

“There are also opportunities in science when children study the life-cycle of animals. So often we see the life-cycle of a butterfly stop when it emerges from the chrysalis. How about discussing how long a butterfly lives and what happens to it after it dies as a springboard for simply introducing the subject of mortality?”

The group also discussed the many opportunities in children’s literature and

film to create discussion points. From books such as those by David Walliams, in which many of the main characters suffer a bereavement during the story, to the Disney film *Coco*, which takes Mexico’s Day of the Dead celebrations as its reference point and offers an opportunity to younger pupils to talk about how we remember things, people and pets that are no longer alive.

“I have also often seen children learning from each other: when a child brings into school news perhaps about a family funeral, or the death of a pet, teachers will sometimes sit back and let everyone learn from each other – guiding the conversation and answering questions. We need to equip and support teachers in allowing these opportunities to unfold,” said Dr James.

In terms of challenges, it was acknowledged that it is important to work with faith communities to make sure not only the needs of all faiths practised in UK schools

were represented, but also different cultural norms relating to rites of passage and key life events in relation to death could be shared and explored as part of RE curricula. Anne Thomas, of Cruse Bereavement Care, talked about the importance of not only restricting the training to school teachers – but also to play therapists, social workers and all those who work closely with children, to make sure there was a consistent approach and capability. Hasina Zaman, of Compassionate Funerals, shared details of the work she was already doing with libraries in her part of east London to develop resources to support those who are bereaved – as did Anne Beckett Allen, who talked about some of the innovative work of Nelson's Journey, the Norfolk-based child bereavement charity with which her business, Rosedale Funeral Home, works closely.

The funeral directors in the room shared the experience from their own businesses of supporting families where there is a bereaved child. First Vice-President David Barrington shared his experience of losing his own father at 12 and how it informs the conversations he has with families about whether or not children should attend the funeral.

There was considerable discussion about the differing views as to whether children should visit with deceased relatives in the Chapel of Rest, inspired by a frank and open video made for the round-table by bereaved mum Kathryn Cragg, who lost her husband Colin when her son was six and was honest with him throughout his father's illness and death, which has proven extremely positive and beneficial for her son.

Those not from the funeral profession were surprised and enthusiastic to discover that all of the funeral directors present regularly

offer to accompany and support adults and children who wish to visit a Chapel of Rest, to support them if no one else is able to. There was a general call upon the funeral profession to promote this service more widely and openly.

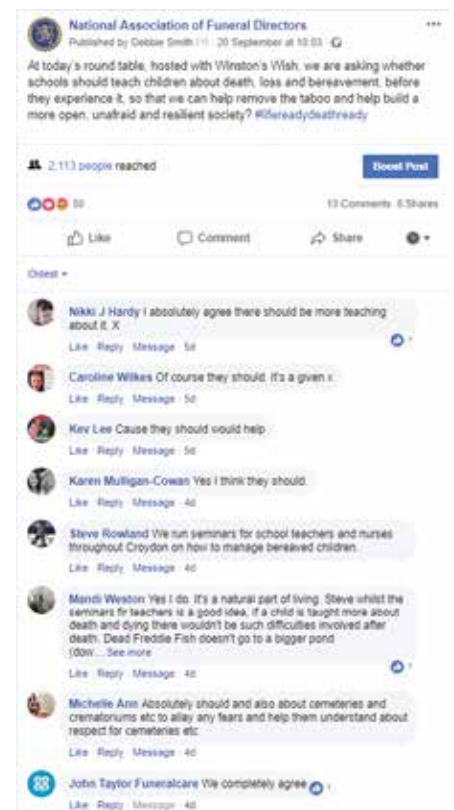
Next steps

After a fun brainstorm about what the campaign could be called - which resulted in a particularly innovative suggestion from Past President Alison Crake - and a discussion highlighting the wide number of potential stakeholders and supporters for the project, everyone in attendance professed a strong desire to see a campaign develop – with the NAFD in the centre pulling the hard work and resources of the many different organisations together and shining a spotlight on it.

Dignity's Andrew Judd also suggested the NAFD could develop helpful guidance information for members and bereaved families on ways to support bereaved children through a funeral.

The very fact that the round-table had happened at all was seen as hugely positive in the room. Becky Thomas and Julie Parker, from Penhaligon's Friends, had travelled from Cornwall for the event and remarked how positive it was to share ideas with child bereavement charities from other parts of the UK.

Reflecting on the day, President Abi said: "There is such strong agreement, between all of the professionals involved in supporting children after a bereavement, that some awareness, properly and naturally planned into the curriculum, would make the world of difference. As funeral directors we also know that, despite the amazing work everyone has done through Dying Matters



Week and our own community initiatives, far too many adults are unprepared, practically and emotionally, for the end of their life or that of someone we love."

She continued: "If we look at other cultures around the world, where death is much more a part of life and is a normal and healthy topic of discussion, we can see that it is possible for things to be different – but to achieve this we need to make sure children don't learn to fear death, but to retain their natural curiosity about it. That way we can sow seeds that will help them in the future - either when they are bereaved themselves, or when a close friend suffers a loss and needs their support."