Each year 20,000 young people in full time education will lose a parent or sibling; thousands more will lose grandparents, other family members, friends and pets. Sadly teachers may die and suffer bereavement themselves and many teachers and pupils struggle with how to handle discussions. Struggling with what to say often leads to saying nothing at all which can result in the teacher or pupil feeling even more isolated and alone.

Children and young people are often less likely to adhere to the taboo which exists around discussing death, dying and bereavement and projects with young people can often lead to open family discussions.

Schools are generally keen to link in with their local communities, especially on issues which affect their students and teachers. Schools currently link with end of life care in a number of ways such as fundraising or volunteering at their local hospice. Some projects have seen students link up with patients to create art and performances.

If you’re thinking about engaging with your local school, here are some things to bear in mind:

- Consider how your idea will link to the national curriculum or wellbeing/PHSCE programme
- Consider what’s in it for the school - will your project raise the school’s profile?
- Identify a named person within the school
- Prepare an outline of your proposal with the pupil activity, outcome and proposed timescale – keep it brief as staff will usually be inundated with requests
- It is best to email teachers as they are usually unavailable to speak on the telephone
- Be prepared to be flexible as most teachers will have to fit projects around their existing commitments
- Try to make your request innovative – you want to stand out from other similar requests
- Find out before you begin the project if any of the students have close family with long term conditions or have had recent bereavements – they may require additional support
- Be brave – most teachers will respond positively to innovative requests which broaden the horizons of their students

Examples

Mossbourne Academy
Six pupils from Mossbourne Academy in East London, all aspiring to careers in medicine, were partnered with day patients from St Joseph’s Hospice, Hackney over a ten week period. They met each Wednesday afternoon and their only remit was to talk. The aim of the project was to help negotiate the common barriers that often arise around complex and emotive subjects, such as death, dying and bereavement, and to minimise the sense of isolation both generations can often feel towards one another - the misconception that either one will not understand the other's point of view due to age and cultural differences.

Throughout their ten weeks the students kept journals, recording their visits to the hospice, what they talked...
about and how they felt. Buket Gundogan, one of the pupils, noted that by her second week, “our talks were evolving from the mundane style of questions and answer ‘session’ into proper conversation. I felt like he was – dare I say it – a friend”. The journals were then produced as a report, along with pictures of the pupils and patients and was launched at an event during the 2010 Dying Matters awareness week at the House of Commons. The pupils also worked with a local film maker who captured their experiences and the transformative impact of the project in a 15 minute documentary. The friendships which developed allowed the pupils to feel comfortable broaching difficult subjects with the patients, such as death, dying and bereavement, at times making them re-evaluate their own relationship with family members.

When the project started, the aim was to get the pupils and patients talking, to try to understand and to learn from each other. While the patients had the opportunity to reflect on their own lives, they also changed the perceptions of the students about long term illness as well as dying and all agreed it would inform their careers in medicine.

Haberdashers’ Aske’s Hatcham College

NCPC has facilitated a number of projects between day patients at Greenwich and Bexley Community Hospice and art students at Haberdashers’ Aske’s Hatcham College. The projects saw individual students matched with day patients who they visited over a number of weeks. Discussions centered around anything from the kind of music they liked to how patients felt about their illness and impending dying and their concerns over discussing these issues with close family. The students then produced pieces of art based on these conversations which ranged from portraits and landscapes of happy memories to more abstract pieces including one which saw the hospice as the magic land in the Wizard of Oz. After an initial exhibition to display the art the work was handed over to patients and their families at an evening event at the hospice. Many of the students commented that this was the first time their work had meant something to someone else.

Feedback

This work “shows how important it is for schools to work together with outside organisations, sometimes even those we would least expect. Schools cannot operate in a vacuum or bubble if we are to prepare our students for life, and indeed death. It also shows how ground breaking projects such as this should be tackled and the rewards that can result.”

Dr E M Sidwell CBE
Schools Commissioner for England & Former CEO, Haberdashers’ Aske’s Federation

“Visiting the Hospice was nowhere as emotionally draining as I expected it to be. Although there were a few awkward moments at the beginning, Richard was very easy to talk to and had plenty of stories to share. He was always smiling, animated and well dressed which is what I tried to convey in my etching.”

Martha
Student, Haberdashers’ Aske’s Federation

Resources

NCPC has developed a range of resources for students, teachers and those wishing to engage with schools:

• A Lesson Plan
• Examples of previous intergenerational projects between schools and hospices
• Examples of student blogs
• Links to the National Curriculum
• Talking to children about dying leaflet

All of these and more are available on the Dying Matters website: www.dyingmatters.org/site/resources

Useful weblinks:
www.schools.co.uk
www.schoolswebdirectory.co.uk
http://schoolsfinder.direct.gov.uk