



Policy briefing on childhood bereavement

Summary

Grief is a normal part of life and yet everyone will have their own experience of bereavement, bringing unique challenges and varying emotions. While adults are mourning, it may be difficult for them to offer support to their grieving children; and others such as teachers, health, social care and community staff may be unsure and uneasy when faced with bereaved children, fearful of making the situation worse. Children's understanding of death and expression of grief varies with their experience and their age and stage of development, and manifests itself differently from adult grief. Children may therefore become the unrecognised mourners - their needs unmet due to a combination of lack of knowledge, misguided intentions, poor awareness of the issues, lack of will and lack of resources.

Without the appropriate support, bereaved children and young people may be at risk of health, social and educational difficulties and disadvantages, as well as threats to their emotional health and well-being.

How many children and young people are bereaved?

- Every 30 minutes in the UK a child is bereaved of a parent.
- This equates to 53 children a day, 20,000 children every year¹.
- Many more children are bereaved of a sibling, grandparent, school friend, other relative or other significant person such as a teacher.
- A study showed that 70% primary schools had a pupil on roll who had experienced a significant bereavement in the last two years².

The issue

All bereaved children will experience many changes and losses as a result of the death of someone important, for example, a mother or father. The primary loss of a parent may be compounded by other changes such as temporary loss of support from the other grieving parent; financial difficulties for the family; moving house; changing schools; being away from friends. The immediate aftermath of a death, particularly a death in a hospital environment, needs sensitive handling by the professionals caring for the family.

Some factors may complicate young people's experience of grief. These include being bereaved through suicide or murder; witnessing a traumatic death; the death of a lone parent, which might result in the child moving into public care **'Mum died a fortnight ago, I'm in a home. I cry myself to sleep'**, living in a complex or dysfunctional family situation where support is unavailable to the mourning child **'We're worried about Dad - he doesn't wash, he's always in the pub. I try to wash and iron like Mum. I do a paper round so I've got some money for food'**³.

Bereaved children are at increased risk of educational disruption and physical and emotional health difficulties. As a group they

- attend their GP more frequently⁴
- formed 63% sample of forty 15-16 year old non school attenders⁵.

There is increasing evidence that bereavement, in life situations which are already difficult, may have long term effects on mental health and anti-social behaviour

- adults bereaved as children seem to be more vulnerable to psychiatric disorder particularly depression and anxiety⁶
- in one study, 10% children convicted of the gravest crimes had experienced the death of a parent⁷.

More research is needed into the risk and protective factors which may influence links between childhood bereavement and negative outcomes and health inequalities.

It is important that all young people and their families have easy access to a range of bereavement support services, and that those offering these services have appropriate training and support for themselves.

What do bereaved children need?

Bereaved children and their families say they need:

- **Information and education** to understand death and what it means to them
- **Communication** to be encouraged to talk honestly with one another
- **To understand and express their grief**
- **To meet others** and share similar experiences
- **Opportunities to remember** the person who has died

Where can they get this support?

The Childhood Bereavement Network brings together local and national services for bereaved children, young people and their families. Some services are within the statutory sector, others are attached to hospices and support those whose parent or sibling died within hospice's care, some use trained volunteers.

There are a growing number of community-based organisations offering services to any bereaved child, regardless of the cause of death⁸. These dedicated open access services offer individual and group work with bereaved children, young people and their families as well as ancillary services such as school support and training for professionals. Services are usually offered to a catchment county or borough: Winston's Wish in Gloucestershire services a population of 500,000 and sees approximately 250 children a year. However, large areas of the UK are without local open-access services.

What else is needed?

Our new campaign *Grief Matters for Children* wants

- appropriate information and support to be available to all bereaved children, young people and their families, wherever they live and however they have been bereaved
- significant people in bereaved children and young people's lives to have the confidence to give appropriate support
- children, young people and their families to be involved in decisions that affect them after a death.

For this to happen, we need

- **parents and carers** of bereaved children to be offered information and appropriate support for their parenting or caring role
- more **training and support for the children's workforce**, to give them the skills and confidence to address bereaved children's diverse needs
- a better understanding of the **diverse cultural, spiritual, language and access needs** of bereaved children, young people and their families, in order to develop more appropriate support and services
- more **childhood bereavement services**, with reliable financial and human resources to

sustain them and robust evaluation to show the difference they make

- support for bereaved children and young people to be included in **local plans and commissioning**
- **inspection frameworks** for children's services to examine how bereavement support is provided
- **plans for individual children** who are already vulnerable (eg those looked after by the local authority and those in custody) to include the provision of bereavement support
- government to monitor and report on **the number of children and young people bereaved annually** of a parent or sibling, in order to plan policy and practice development.

Each year of our campaign, we will be looking at how these objectives can be met in particular areas of bereaved children and young people's lives. This year, we are focusing on schools, and we are campaigning for **every school to**

- promote the well-being of bereaved children and young people through a whole school approach including **proactive, flexible pastoral support and the curriculum**
- have **a system for managing and communicating important information** about children and young people's bereavements
- ensure that staff have **training** to give them the confidence and skills to respond appropriately to the diverse needs of bereaved children and their families, including making referrals to child bereavement services
- support these measures by incorporating them into relevant **policies**.

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¹ Because no official statistics are collected on the numbers of children bereaved each year, Winston's Wish, a CBN subscriber have calculated these figures using data from the Office of National Statistics and from Meltzer, M (1999) *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents* HMSO

² Holland, J (1993) *Childhood Bereavement in Humberside primary schools* *Educational Research* 35 (3)

³ Quotes from Cross, S. (2002) *I can't stop feeling sad: Calls to ChildLine about bereavement* ChildLine

⁴ Lloyd-Williams, M and Wilkinson, C and Lloyd-Williams, F (1998) *Do bereaved children consult the primary healthy care team more frequently?* *European Journal of Cancer Care*, 120-124

⁵ Cooper, M (2002) *Small scale unpublished study*, Birmingham

⁶ Black, D (1998) *Bereavement in childhood* *British Medical Journal* 316

⁷ Boswell, G (1995) *Violent Victims: the prevalence of abuse and loss in the lives of Section 53 offenders* Prince's Trust

⁸ For details of services: www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Supported by:

Diana

THE WORK CONTINUES

The Childhood Bereavement Network is hosted by the National Children's Bureau, Registered Charity No. 258825

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