

# Childhood Bereavement Network

## Response from the CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT NETWORK to the Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters'

The **Childhood Bereavement Network** (CBN) is national, multi-agency forum, which is hosted by the National Children's Bureau. Since 1998, the CBN has been working to:

- improve the range and quality of bereavement care for children, young people, their families and other caregivers;
- increase access to bereavement support and services.

The CBN has a membership of c. 250 organisations and individuals throughout England and the UK. All members subscribe to a *CBN Belief Statement* that states, "all bereaved children and young people have the right to information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives."

This response to the Green Paper was developed by the CBN Consultant Panel, an advisory group which is made up of representatives from a range of national and local bereavement care organisations within the membership of the CBN. As a forum hosted by the National Children's Bureau, in the knowledge that the response from NCB will address the document comprehensively as a whole, the CBN has opted to focus its response exclusively as it relates to childhood bereavement.

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The Government is to be congratulated on the Green Paper, particularly

- the creation of a new Minister for Children, Young People and Families
- plans to appoint a Children's Commissioner
- common core training for all childcare professionals
- the focus on the roles of parents and importance of parenting
- highlighting the importance of early interventions to improve outcomes for children and young people

However, the CBN is concerned and disappointed that there is no reference in the Green Paper to bereavement as a risk factor for children and young people.

**Approximately 50 children a day are bereaved of a parent in the UK, equating to around 20,000 bereaved children and young people each year.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics supplied and verified by Winston's Wish, a bereavement support service for children and young people.

The death of a parent, sibling or other close relative can have a devastating impact on the life of a child or young person. Bereavement can affect a child's emotional and physical health, and capacity for educational achievement. Developmentally, at key transition points in their life, bereaved children will revisit and reassess the impact of the death, which may affect their physical and mental health, and/or behaviour. Bereaved children are particularly vulnerable to being bullied and to school exclusion.

The death of a significant member may also have an adverse effect on family dynamics, relationships and functioning.

- "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."
- "Dad's only like this because Mum died. He cries a lot and then goes to the pub. He only beats me after that."<sup>2</sup>

There is increasing evidence that the experience of bereavement – if not properly acknowledged and supported - can lead to negative outcomes for children, young people and their families. Unfortunately, lack of research and comprehensive statistical data has inhibited the development of effective policy and practice in the field of bereavement care for children.

As an 'early intervention', to promote long term health and well being, the CBN advocates that all children and young people should have easy access to a choice of information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives.

However, many bereaved children and their families are unable to access support and/or services because they are unaware of the range of services available to them or because there isn't a children's bereavement support service operating locally. Similarly, many teachers, health professionals, social workers and other care workers do not know about what services are available and, therefore, do not help bereaved children and families to access these services.

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The CBN also wishes to make the following comments:

## SUPPORTING PARENTS AND CARERS

The Harvard Study<sup>3</sup> revealed that, following the death of a parent, the capacity of a surviving parent to nurture and emotionally support a bereaved child or young person was critical in determining a positive outcome for the child. Therefore, the CBN would welcome improved services for families experiencing bereavement and advocates that a range and choice of information, guidance and support should be made easily available to all bereaved children and their families.

A virtual 'network' of specialised bereavement support services for children and families already exists in England, under the umbrella of the Childhood Bereavement Network. New services are being established each year in response to demand from potential services users and childcare professionals. Although provision is patchy across England, these services are gradually filling a gap in statutory services by providing non-stigmatising, responsive and easily accessible support to bereaved children and families, professional carers, schools etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Cross, S. (2002) *'I can't stop feeling sad: calls to ChildLine about bereavement'*, Harrison, H. (ed.) ChildLine

<sup>3</sup> Worden, W. (1996) *Children and Grief*. Guildford, New York.

Better communication between parents and schools – meetings and discussions involving teachers, parents and children - could improve the quality of support offered to bereaved children and young people.

- All schools should have a pro-active bereavement policy to meet the needs of individual bereaved children and the school as a whole, in case of a critical incident.
- All teachers should receive initial and ongoing training in bereavement awareness to enable them to acknowledge and support the needs of children and young people in their care.

For single parent families, there are particular issues when that parent dies:

- The child may have moved to live with family friends following the death of their parent and there may be confusion over who holds parental responsibility.
- There may be legal proceedings between various family members to secure custody of the bereaved child.
- Many children who are bereaved of a parent/s are subsequently cared for by grandparents, siblings or other relatives. However, these carers do not receive statutory financial assistance as is the case for a widowed parent.
- When it can be confidently anticipated that a child will move into public care following the death of a single parent, a plan should be developed with that child or children pre-bereavement to facilitate and enable them to manage the transition process. In terms of outcomes, in consultation, young people have highlighted the importance of clear, honest communication and participation in making decisions that affect their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Research and collection of statistical data is urgently needed to clarify the status of children bereaved of a single parent.

## EARLY INTERVENTION AND EFFECTIVE PROTECTION

### Improving information collection and sharing

At the present time, there is no consistent system in existence to identify children and young people who have been affected by the death of someone significant in their lives. Bereavement is not perceived by policy makers as risk factor for children.

- Within clear boundaries, to ensure that all bereaved children, young people and their families can access the information, guidance and support they need to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives, the CBN would welcome a system that could 'flag' bereavement as a potential risk factor for vulnerable children.
- The death of a primary carer or sibling should be a trigger for sharing information about a child.
- Partnership arrangements between voluntary and statutory agencies within local authorities should include clear protocols and agreement on how information can be equitably transferred and shared.

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<sup>4</sup> Childhood Bereavement Network *A death in the lives of...* (2002) Video produced by Childhood Bereavement Network, London. Also, Winston's Wish *A Charter for Bereaved Children*, (undated) Winston's Wish, Gloucester

## Common assessment framework

The death of a significant person in the child's life must be included as a risk factor in any common assessment framework. Bereaved children and young people are vulnerable and without support may be at risk. At present, data to demonstrate conclusive links between bereavement and social exclusion is not collected. However, it is the general view within the field of bereavement care for children, based on practice experience and consultation, that many socially excluded young people will have experienced the death of a significant person in their lives.

- Gwyneth Boswell has written, "In a study of Section 53 offenders, 57% had experienced significant loss via bereavement or cessation of contact and in some cases both."<sup>5</sup>
- A ChildLine Report (2002) details telephone calls from bereaved young people, "Dad died three weeks ago. Mum's been drunk ever since. She threw me out tonight."<sup>6</sup>

Research is urgently needed to determine:

- the number of children in public care who have experienced the death of someone important to them;
- how an early intervention following a significant bereavement could reduce the risk of social exclusion for children and young people.

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND INTEGRATION – LOCALLY, REGIONALLY AND NATIONALLY

As stated above, most specialised bereavement support services are voluntary agencies.

- However, it is felt that the Green Paper fails to adequately acknowledge the critical role of voluntary sector agencies in providing alternative services to children and their families.
- The CBN recognises that flexibility is essential to ensure that local needs and structures are reflected in any partnership working undertaken by local authorities. Nevertheless, to ensure equity, the Government should issue clear guidance to local authorities on consultation protocols and partnership arrangements with voluntary organisations, including funding and information sharing.
- All local authorities should be encouraged to undertake local mapping exercises to identify existing specialist bereavement support services for children (voluntary and statutory). As a national umbrella body, the Childhood Bereavement Network can provide a link to these local services.

## WORKFORCE REFORM

### Common core training and continual professional development

- Bereavement awareness should be an integral part of any core training for childcare professionals.
- Bereavement should not be pathologised but "be viewed as part of a continuous learning process for the child, contributing to the development of the child's knowledge and understanding as they grow into adulthood".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Boswell, G. (2000) The Backgrounds of Violent Young Offenders, The Present Picture in *Violent Children and Adolescents*. Ed. Boswell, G. Whurr Publishers, London

<sup>6</sup> Cross, S. (2002) 'I can't stop feeling sad: calls to ChildLine about bereavement', Harrison, H. (ed.) ChildLine

- In addition, other caring professionals – who may not work or come into direct contact with children or young people – nevertheless also need bereavement awareness training to enable them to be fully aware of how any death will impact on related or connected children.

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Finally and crucially,

- the CBN believes that the Green Paper does not adequately address the needs of bereaved children and young people from different cultural, spiritual, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers.
- All childcare professionals need core training to enable them to meet the needs of bereaved children and families from different cultural, spiritual, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.
- Resources, including interpreters, need to be made available to meet the different language needs of bereaved children and families.
- Local authorities should be issued with clear guidance by Government to encourage recruitment from different cultural, spiritual, ethnic and linguistic communities.

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The Childhood Bereavement Network  
8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE  
Tel: 020 7843 6309  
E.mail: [cbn@ncb.org.uk](mailto:cbn@ncb.org.uk)  
[www.ncb.org.uk/cbn](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cbn)