



The Good Childhood enquiry: response to call for evidence

Introduction

The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) is a national, multi-professional federation of organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people.

CBN has approximately 300 members across the UK; around 70% are organisations. Most of these organisations operate in the voluntary sector, and have charitable status. The work of the CBN is informed by a Consultant Panel. Current organisational members include

- Acorns Children's Hospice
- Barnardo's
- Bereavement Services Association
- Cruse Bereavement Care
- Essex CAMHS
- Jigsaw4u
- Macmillan Cancer Relief
- Marie Curie Cancer Care
- National Children's Bureau
- Northern Ireland CBN Steering Group
- Norwich PCT
- Notre Dame Centre/ Seasons for Growth
- Release - Nightingale House Hospice
- SeeSaw
- St Christopher's Hospice
- The Child Bereavement Trust
- The Laura Centre
- University of Gloucester
- Wigan Family Support Team Counselling Service
- Winston's Wish

CBN is hosted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB). NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives.

As an umbrella body for the children's sector in England and Northern Ireland, NCB provides essential information on policy, research and best practice for our members and other partners. NCB aims to:

- challenge disadvantage in childhood
- work with children and young people to ensure they are involved in all matters that affect their lives
- promote multidisciplinary cross-agency partnerships and good practice
- influence government policy through policy development and advocacy
- undertake high quality research and work from an evidence-based perspective
- disseminate information to all those working with children and young people, and to children and young people themselves.

NCB has adopted and works within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This response includes quotes from bereaved children and young people involved in three films made by CBN with the help of subscribers St Christopher's Candle Project, Jigsaw4u, Penhaligon's Friends, Chums Child Bereavement Service for Bedfordshire and the Northampton General Hospital Trust child bereavement service, and from a 2002 report from Childline *'I can't stop feeling sad'*

What do we understand by childhood?

For the purposes of this enquiry, we are defining childhood as the period from birth to 19. A number of CBN's subscribers work with care leavers, young people with disabilities and other young people beyond this age.

Bereavement is often sidelined or dismissed as a life issue for children. Yet bereavement is more common in childhood than may be supposed: 92% 11-16 year olds in one study said that they had experienced a significant bereavement (Harrison and Harrington, 2001)

Clearly, this covers a wide variety of experiences and relationships. Some children and young people may experience bereavements which are highly disruptive, bringing further changes and losses such as temporary loss of support from other grieving relatives; financial difficulties for the family; moving house; changing schools and being away from friends. Other children may experience bereavements which make less difference to their day-to-day lives, but which do raise significant questions about relationships and the meaning of life and death (Ribbens McCarthy 2005).

Children's lives have many transitions, and these may cause them to revisit and reassess the impact of a death, which in turn may affect their physical and mental health and their behaviour. Bereavement is not something which is 'over' in a matter of months or years: it continues to have significance throughout childhood and beyond.

Concrete data about the number of children affected by particular bereavements is very difficult to access. Statistics are gathered each year on the number of children affected by parental divorce, but not on those affected by parental death. Studies suggest that between 3.9 and 7.4% children are bereaved of a parent before the age of 16. Figures for the death of a sibling are thought to be similar or slightly lower, and figures for the death of a friend may be more common (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005).

What does a good childhood mean to us?

Bereavement and a good childhood are not mutually exclusive. While we might prefer that tragic and disruptive things didn't happen to children, it is important to see grief as a natural part of life and one which children can encounter and live through.

To us, a good childhood is one where the child or young person is enabled to manage the impact of death on their lives; where bereavement doesn't compromise their achievement of the five outcomes for children: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.

What are the conditions for a good childhood?

The conditions for a good childhood include the child or young person having access to information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives. 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

Such conditions are provided by family, friends, other adults including teachers, and a growing network of childhood bereavement services. Some services are within the statutory sector, others are attached to hospices and support those whose parent or sibling died within the hospice's care, some use trained volunteers.

Importantly there is a growing number of community-based organisations offering services to any bereaved child, regardless of the cause of death. 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. However, large areas of the UK are without local open-access services.

Subscribers to the Childhood Bereavement Network endorse a *Belief Statement* which states that:

We believe that all children have the right to information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives.

Further, in line with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, the Children Act 1989, the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Children's Act 2004 we believe that any information, guidance and support offered to children should:

- acknowledge the child's grief and experience of loss as a result of death
- be responsive to the child's needs, views and opinions
- respect the child's family and immediate social situation, and their culture, language, beliefs and religious background
- seek to promote self-esteem and self-confidence, and develop communication, decision making and other life skills
- 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
- aim, wherever possible, appropriate and feasible, to involve family members, other caregivers and any professionals working with the individual child in a wider social context

If this information, guidance and support is offered as a service by an organisation or in a professional context, it should be:

- provided by people who have had appropriate training and who are adequately supported
- provided in an appropriately supportive, safe and non-discriminatory context
- regularly monitored, evaluated and reviewed

Family

The primary provider of the conditions for a good childhood for bereaved children is the family. Parents and other relatives play the crucial role in helping children and young people to manage the impact of death on their lives. A US community based study of children and young people indicated that the way the surviving parent functioned was the most powerful predictor of how a child adjusted to the death of a parent (Worden 1996).

This study found that family factors associated with children doing better (ie having fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties) included continued routines, physical and emotional availability of the surviving parent, consistent discipline, a parent who perceived the child's needs and behaviour in similar way to how the child perceived it, and active coping strategies.

Children and young people value the practical and emotional support they receive from family members:

'My mum helped me because she was always open to talk about when it happened and when my dad was ill she told us everything that happened. Some of my mum's friends said she was too open with us and she shouldn't tell as much.'

'When we were going through a bereavement my brother was really good. He's not a domestic kind of person but he likes to do the washing up and he cooked meals for us and made tea and he was really nice to me, which is unusual!'

'[My mum] makes the same decisions as my dad used to do and she does it with the family'

However, while adults are mourning, it can be difficult for them to offer support and care to bereaved children in the family. After the death of a parent, new responsibilities and financial constraints may mean that the surviving parent is less available to the children.

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. Different feelings may emerge at different times and the intense sadness and crying associated with grief may be quite intermittent, interspersed with times of play and hilarity. This can mean that adults around bereaved children may not recognise that they are grieving, or think that they are behaving inappropriately. Bereaved children have been described as 'forgotten mourners'.

As death is less likely to happen at home than in the past, children have less opportunity to learn about it as part of the life process. Families and professionals may be unsure and uneasy about supporting bereaved children, fearful of making the situation worse. Children may pick up on their embarrassment and anxiety, feeling isolated and confused. Both adults and children may try to hide their feelings from one another to protect themselves:

'My mum was like scared to cry or show any emotions in front of me because she thought it would make me upset. So my mum was trying to avoid me and that didn't really help because I didn't mind crying.'

Particular family circumstances may have implications for children's experiences. The death of a lone parent may result in the child moving into public care.

'Mum died a fortnight ago, I'm in a home. I cry myself to sleep'

Data from the National Child Development Study found significant associations between parental bereavement and leaving home early (Kiernan, 1992 in Ribbens McCarthy, 2005).

Calls to Childline analysed in 2002 showed a disturbing feature of some callers becoming vulnerable to abuse and neglect as a result of bereavement

'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.'

'Mum beats my little brother. She won't listen to me. She didn't drink until my stepdad died.'

Health

Grief itself not an illness, it is a natural response to death. However, some studies have shown that bereavement can pose threats to children's physical health and to their emotional health and well-being, in both the short and the long term.

A study found that bereaved children attend the GP more often than their non-bereaved peers (Lloyd-Williams, 1998). Methodological difficulties and differing definitions cloud the literature on links between bereavement and depression, but some studies have found links between parental bereavement and risk of depression in the teenage years and in adult life (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005)

Studies looking at young people's self-concept and self-worth after a bereavement point to the need to look at long term effects, and reveal possible differences between the impact of the death of a parent and that of a sibling. When compared with non-bereaved peers, children bereaved of a parent reporting significantly lower self-worth two years after the death (Worden, 1996) while young people bereaved of a sibling scored higher self-concept,

even seven or nine years after the death (Balk 1995 etc in Ribbens McCarthy, 2005). However, the studies showed variation and complexity.

One study found significant links between girls bereaved of a parent and poor health behaviours including smoking, drinking and drug use (Sweeting et al, 1998)

Friends

Peer relationships are important to bereaved children and young people, both as a source of support and as a reminder of how life can be

'Well a few friends helped me, like they were helping me through it and that so that was quite good, having a few friends saying 'don't worry' and that and 'we'll be there'.

'My friends, when I went to school, they were all comforting me but really I just wanted them to be themselves'

Not all peer relationships are positive, however. Bereaved young people voice anxieties about feeling different from their friends, and peers' perception of this difference may lie behind some of the distressing examples of bullying which some young people report as a consequence of their bereavement:

'Friends could be more supportive because I got teased when my dad died. They shouldn't tease you.'

'My cousin hung himself and they keep saying they can see things dangling from the trees'

Many bereaved children who have met others in similar circumstances report this as being beneficial:

'I had help from [a childhood bereavement service]. That helped a lot because there's people that have experienced the same thing....I know a number of different people, some people my own age and various ages and it's nice to speak with different ages and know how they've dealt with it.'

As well as meeting in person, opportunities exist for young people to exchange experiences and support online, such as the facility at Cruse Bereavement Care's young people's website www.rd4u.org.uk

Despite these opportunities, studies have shown that many young people report not having talked to anyone about their feelings following a bereavement. (Brown, 2002 and Rosen, 1984 in Ribbens McCarthy, 2005). As well as being worried about upsetting family members, young people cited not knowing where to go for help, and finding it too upsetting to talk.

Values

Understanding death and what it means for them is important for children and young people. Like adults, they may have very different ideas. For young children, being helped to understand the permanence of death is key. Euphemisms such as someone having 'gone to sleep' can confuse and distress young children. Some children and young people find that their faith is a source of comfort:

'I'm a Roman Catholic so I think it was more my faith [that was helpful] because I knew my dad was going to a better place and that's what supported me.'

The death of a parent may affect children and young people's values and views of relationships. Jane Ribbens McCarthy's literature review suggests quite opposite effects may emerge for different young people: some moving early into committed relationships

and others avoiding them. One study found that girls bereaved of a parent were eight times more likely to be pregnant at 18 than those living with two parents.

Studies suggest too that there may be links between bereavement and offending behaviour especially in the cases of drug-related crime or more serious offences (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005).

Learning

Bereaved children and young people cite school as a potential site of both support and information.

'It's important that teachers listen to children because they might be really upset and they can't tell anybody because nobody wants to listen or anything and then you end up being really unhappy.'

'When my dad first passed away I got into quite a bit of fights and [the head] sort of came down on me a bit, but he sort of said that he understood me being angry because if it was him he'd be in the same position. So he was really helpful.'

Young people point to opportunities in the curriculum where death and bereavement could be tackled

'It's kind of ironic, because...[death] it's the only thing that's guaranteed in life, and they won't teach you about it'

'They could talk to you about death and what aspects of it and you could have like a discussion with your class about it. That would prepare you for it in a way.'

But learning can be disrupted by bereavement. Families and schools report bereaved children and young people experiencing poor concentration, lack of interest, time off and moving schools:

'I don't want to be here. All I can think about is my baby.'

'Mum died. I'm going to have to live with my brother and his wife. I like them and I want to live there but I don't want to change school and I'll lose my friends'

Studies suggest that educational achievement and age of leaving school may be affected by the death of a parent (Dowdney, 2000). However, it may have quite opposite effects for different young people (Ribbens McCarthy 2005): some may be too distracted by their experiences while others may want to work particularly hard to make their dead parent proud or to please the surviving parent.

Other issues

Clearly, the interplay of personal, family and community factors affects the quality of a bereaved child's childhood. Particular circumstances may complicate children and young people's experience, of bereavement, such as being bereaved through suicide or murder, or witnessing a traumatic death. This complexity makes it difficult to summarise research evidence into bereavement as a risk factor for young people, as the same event may have opposite effects for different young people, and those effects may change over time.

Mortality rates across the UK vary by social class and geography and young people who are already disadvantaged are more likely to experience bereavement and multiple losses, which put them particularly at risk. In addition, organised support is less likely to be available to these young people (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005)

What changes could be made that would be likely to improve things?

The Childhood Bereavement Network's new three-year campaign aims to ensure that support is available to every bereaved child. We want

- 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
- everyone in contact with bereaved children and young people 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 entitled to 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 meet bereaved children's diverse needs
- 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
- a better understanding of the diverse needs of bereaved children, young people and their families
- 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, 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

- have a system for managing information about children and young people's bereavements
- promote the well-being of bereaved children and young people through proactive, flexible pastoral support and the curriculum
- ensure that staff have training to give them the confidence and skills to offer bereavement support
- support these measures with a bereavement policy, or incorporate them into relevant other policies.

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Alison Penny

Childhood Bereavement Network, 8 Wakely Street, London, EC1V 7QE

cbn@ncb.org.uk

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk