

Childhood Bereavement Network response to Staying Safe

The **Childhood Bereavement Network** (CBN) is the national, multi-professional network of organisations and individuals working in the field of childhood bereavement. CBN promotes the interests of bereaved children, young people and their families and encourages the development of quality support for them. We have over 300 subscribers across the UK including all the major bereavement care providers.

Bereavement in childhood

No concrete statistics are collected on the number of children and young people bereaved each year, but studies suggest that around 4% children currently of school age have experienced the death of a parent or siblingⁱ. Many more are dealing with the death of someone else close: a grandparent, friend or teacher: 78% 11-16 year olds report that a close relative or friend of theirs has diedⁱⁱ.

The death of someone close brings change and challenge into the life of a young person, and can be devastating. There is increasing evidence that bereavement, especially in life situations that are already disadvantaged, can put children at greater risk of poor social and educational outcomes and can threaten their emotional, mental and physical health. Many factors will mediate children's experience of bereavement, including their own personality and coping style, their age and stage of development, the nature of the death, the significance of the relationship that is lost and the support that is available to them.

Many of the difficulties which children and young people experience following a death – including sadness, poor concentration, sleeping problems and regression – are of short duration, but others have the potential to affect children's lives in the longer term. Children who have been bereaved are likely to revisit their loss and can experience new aspects of grief as they face later transitions such as moving house, changing school or forming new relationships.

We cannot keep children safe from the knowledge of death and the experience of bereavement, and nor should we try to do this. Our goals should be to reduce the risks associated with bereavement and to support parents and carers in providing stable, loving environments in which children and young people can learn to manage the impact of death on their lives.

Childhood bereavement and safety

Anxieties about safety

Children who have been bereaved often feel anxious about their own safety and that of their surviving parent, and these fears increase during the first year after death. Girls tend to be more anxious than boysⁱⁱⁱ. Their fears can make it difficult for them to leave the people they are close to, for example during the school day.

I worry about my father getting into a car accident and dying. Where will we go?

I am afraid when she yells and stuff that she might get a heart attack and then I will be an orphan (Young people in Worden, 2005, p50)

Illness and accidents

Bereaved children visit their GP more frequently than their non-bereaved peers^{iv} and are more likely to develop somatic complaints such as headaches and stomach aches as well as more serious illnesses during the first year after their bereavement^v. They are also more likely to have accidents, especially adolescent boys^{vi}. William Worden found that among the 125 parentally bereaved children in his study, the 25% children who had an accident in the four months after their parent's death felt more anxious and unsafe and showed more disturbed behaviour.

Mental and emotional health and well being

There is considerable debate about whether bereavement is a risk factor for a range of mental health difficulties including depression. A study found that a range of emotional and conduct disorders were more frequent among children bereaved of a parent or sibling than those not bereaved.^{vii} Some studies suggest adults who were bereaved in childhood (possibly in conjunction with other factors) may be more vulnerable than the general population to psychiatric disorders, particularly depression and anxiety, which may be precipitated by further losses.^{viii}

Self-esteem and self-efficacy both seem to be affected by bereavement^{ix}. Worden's study showed that bereaved children believed that they had less control over life's circumstances than their non-bereaved peers. Changes in self-esteem appeared two years after the death, with bereaved children rating themselves lower than those who had not been bereaved. This is a reminder of the need to take a long view when looking at the impact of bereavement on children and young people's lives.

Bullying

Many children and young people report feeling alone and different following the death of someone close. Some experience bullying as a direct result of bereavement.

My cousin hung himself and they keep telling me they can see things dangling from the trees. (Caller to ChildLine in Cross, 2002)^x

Instability at home

Young people bereaved of a parent are more likely to leave home early.^{xi} Some children enter public care after the death of a parent because there is no-one else to look after them: 30% of looked after children under five in one study had been bereaved of a close relative.^{xii} Attachment difficulties in children and young people who have had disrupted early relationships can make it hard for them to develop positive, healthy relationships and get support around life transitions.

Abuse and neglect

Some young people, already vulnerable, seem to be at increased risk of physical, emotional or sexual abuse through their bereavement.^{xiii}

Dad's only like this because mum died. He cries a lot and then goes to the pub. He only beats me after that (Caller to ChildLine in Cross, 2002)

Health behaviours

In one study, 47% 18 year old girls who had experienced the death of a parent had tried drugs, compared to 20% those living with both parents and 37% those whose parents had separated. The sample size was small, but pregnancy among these 18 year olds was six times more frequent than among those living with both parents^{xiv}.

Youth offending

Some studies suggest higher rates of aggressive or disruptive behaviours among parentally bereaved children and young people than among the general population^{xv}. Others have shown young people bereaved of a parent to be over-represented among those supervised by their local Youth Offending Team^{xvi} and among those convicted of the gravest crimes^{xvii}.

Bereaved children – what is needed

Good support for bereaved children, young people and their families involves

- Information and education to understand death and what it means to them
- Communication to be encouraged to talk honestly with one another
- Opportunities to understand and express their feelings and thoughts of grief
- Opportunities to meet others and share similar experiences
- Opportunities to remember the person who has died for as long as they choose

Responsibility for providing these opportunities is shared between families, communities, statutory children's services and the voluntary and community sector. Under the Every Child Matters framework, all those working with children and young people have a part to play in ensuring that those who have been bereaved get the support they want and need.

Helping all children and young people to be safe

Death and bereavement in the curriculum

Given the numbers of children who will experience bereavement during childhood, there is a strong case for them to learn ways of managing feelings associated with loss. 75% adults in a recent Childhood Bereavement Network survey said they wished their school had taught them about coping with bereavement.

Education about death and bereavement could help to reduce some of the myths around these subjects, helping children to realise that death is a normal part of life, and to understand more about bereavement and ways of coping and supporting friends^{xviii}. This in turn could reduce some of the bullying and stigma associated with bereavement. By including death and loss in the wider curriculum eg science, English and geography, schools can help to normalise these topics^{xix}.

Protecting vulnerable children and young people

Bereavement can make children and young people more vulnerable, as shown above. Many bereaved children and young people get excellent support, but others struggle to find the help they want and need. Our Grief Matters for Children campaign wants support to be available to all bereaved children, young people and their families, wherever they live and however they have been bereaved. To help this to happen, we want:

1. Parents and carers of bereaved children to be offered information and appropriate support for their parenting or caring role

2. More training and support for the children's workforce, to give them the skills and confidence to address bereaved children's diverse needs
3. 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
4. More childhood bereavement services, with reliable financial and human resources to sustain them and robust evaluation to show the difference they make
5. Support for bereaved children and young people to be included in local plans and commissioning
6. Inspection frameworks for children's services to examine how bereavement support is provided
7. 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
8. 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.

Improving practice in children's social care

A recent Swedish study found that many more 18-year-olds who had been fostered during childhood had experienced the death of a parent (26 per cent) than those who grew up in their birth families (4 per cent) (Franzen and Vinnerljung, 2006). No similar studies exist in the UK, but professionals consulted as part of a CBN study^{xx} believed that looked after children and young people were more likely to have experienced the death of someone close to them. They cited drug and alcohol misuse and other risk-taking behaviour, poor general health, severe mental health problems, domestic violence and involvement in crime as contributing factors to higher mortality rates – and greater proportions of sudden and traumatic deaths - among the birth families and friends of looked after children and young people. Some of these factors are similar to those that could have led to a child or young person becoming looked after in the first place.

In addition, some children and young people come into care because of the death of a parent and absence of other family members to look after them. This highlights the importance of planning for the care of children and young people who experience the death of a lone parent.

It is not just the death of a parent or sibling which has the potential to affect a child or young person: as the CBN study shows, children and young people in care can be deeply affected by the death of a grandparent, friend, neighbour or foster carer, often because the person had been involved in parenting the child and were thus very significant to them.

Looked after children and young people experience a variety of separations and losses in their lives. All of them were separated from their birth families when they entered the care system. Carers and professionals who contributed to the CBN study thought that the losses experienced by children and young people in care could add to and make more acute the impact of the death of someone close.

Aspects of life in care affect the way children and young people experience bereavement. Problems with contact can mean that a child doesn't have time to prepare for a death

even when others are expecting it, or that the news is relayed in a way they find difficult. They can feel isolated from the rest of their grieving family, and anxious about surviving relatives who they don't often see. Children may have feelings of anger or guilt towards their birth family and when an ambivalent relationship is ruptured by death, grief can understandably be complicated. If the dead person was abusive or neglectful, it can be difficult for carers to acknowledge the sadness and longing of a child or young person's grief. Carers' attempts to offer support can be hampered if they don't know the full circumstances of a death, and some children and young people will have experienced bereavements of which their carers are unaware. Placement instability can mean that children and young people lose *'potentially supportive ongoing relationships with professionals'* (Healthy Care Partnership, CBN study).

Training and support for social workers and carers

Adults working with children and young people are often anxious and uncertain about how to respond to bereaved children, and may be worried about making things worse. As the majority of children and young people will experience the death of someone close to them by the time they are 16, anyone in the children's workforce – including social workers, teachers, early years practitioners, foster carers and others - is likely to be in contact with bereaved children in the course of their work. Lack of knowledge about how children express their grief can mean that adults don't link behaviours such as regression, withdrawal or aggression to bereavement, and so children miss out on the support they want and need.

DfES' *Common Core of Skills and Knowledge* says that everyone working with children and young people should be able to identify transitions in children's lives (including bereavement) and offer support. They should know about the likely impact of bereavement and know when and how to refer on to another organisation. Yet many children's workers report that they have had no training in bereavement.

Training can give workers an increased awareness of bereavement in childhood, support for managing their own experiences of loss and ideas about offering practical support in their setting. This can increase their confidence and help them to respond appropriately to bereaved children's diverse needs, including making referrals to childhood bereavement services.

Partnership working

Social services, health and local bereavement services should develop funded partnership arrangements to ensure that specialist input, training support and direct work with looked after children and young people and their carers is available across the country.

Assessment and planning

Children in care should be assessed for any support needs stemming from their experiences of bereavement, and these should be prioritised as part of their health plan. This assessment should include screening for traumatic experiences.

Reducing numbers of accidents

Ensuring that parents and carers have information about children's likely reactions to bereavement – including the fact that they may temporarily be more prone to accidents - can help them to understand and manage their children's manifestations of grief.

Parental problems which impact on children and young people's welfare

Parents and other relatives play the crucial role in helping children and young people to manage the impact of death on their lives, and Worden found that the capacity of a surviving parent to care for a bereaved child was the most critical factor in determining a positive outcome for the child. His study found that family factors associated with children doing better (ie having fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties) included continued routines, the surviving parent being physically and emotionally available and perceiving the child's needs and behaviour in a similar way to how the child perceived them, consistent discipline and active coping strategies.

However, while adults are mourning themselves, it can be an enormous struggle to manage new responsibilities and financial constraints and maintain availability to the children. Parents need information and appropriate support for their parenting role. Parents of bereaved children consulted by Penhaligon's Friends child bereavement service in Cornwall said that information on bereavement was not easily obtainable and not always relevant to their needs. They said that literature providing bereavement advice should be clear and accessible and should signpost other means of support^{xxi}. A recent survey by CBN revealed that only 43% adults would know where to go to find extra support for a bereaved child in their area.

The Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to provide information to parents which they might need for their children right through to their 20th birthday, and to be proactive in reaching parents. This should include information about children's responses to bereavement, and about sources of local and national support. This information should be easy to access through libraries, council offices, schools and extended services, children's centres, funeral directors, GP surgeries, registrars' offices and the internet.

Parents access specialist childhood bereavement support to meet their own emotional needs and support their parenting, to meet the needs of a particular child, and to help family unit. A recent study found that participating parents all saw benefits to their involvement with a service, including being helped to manage their own pain and grief, and supported and reassured in their care for their children^{xxii}.

98% respondents to a recent CBN survey said that all bereaved children and their families should be able to get support from a service for bereaved children if they want it. CBN brings together local and national services for bereaved children and their families. Some are within the statutory sector, some are attached to hospices and support those whose parent or sibling has died in the hospice's care.

A growing number of community-based organisations work with any bereaved child, regardless of the cause of death^{xxiii}. These organisations offer a range of services including one to one and group work with bereaved children, young people and their families as well as ancillary services such as support for schools and training for professionals. Services are usually offered to a catchment area county or borough. However, services struggle for funding and large areas of the UK are still without open access services. Areas with the greatest disadvantage may be least likely to have adequate support.

The Children Act 2004 requires children's services authorities and other key partners to cooperate to improve the well-being of children and young people in the local area. Inevitably, some children and young people's well-being is affected by bereavement, and local authorities should be addressing their support needs.

CBN wants to see Children and Young People's Plans include reference to bereaved children's needs, and services commissioned locally to meet their needs. This will involve better support for bereaved children and young people in universal services, but also the commissioning of targeted services from the voluntary and statutory sectors, specifically for bereaved children and young people.

To ensure that this happens in every area, frameworks for inspecting local children's trust partnerships should require children's services authorities to demonstrate specifically how they meet children and young people's bereavement support needs in cooperation with local partners, including specialist childhood bereavement services.

For more information or to discuss this response, please contact

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