



Associations between childhood bereavement and children's background, experiences and outcomes

Secondary analysis of the 2004 Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain data

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

The present study aimed to explore the background characteristics, experiences and outcomes of bereaved children and young people using data from the 2004 *Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain* study (Green and others 2005; Office for National Statistics 2005): a nationally representative sample of 5- to 16-year-olds living in Great Britain. We were able to examine the differences between children who had experienced the death of a parent or sibling, those who had experienced the death of a friend, and those who had experienced neither¹.

We organised our analysis around six key research questions and briefly summarise our findings below.

1. *Within a nationally representative sample of children and young people, what percentage had experienced the death of a friend or parent/sibling?* Across the sample, 9.5 per cent of children ($n=739$) were reported to have experienced either the death of a parent/sibling or a friend or both. In more detail, 3.5 per cent of children and young people had experienced the death of a parent or sibling, and 6.3 per cent had experienced the death of a friend. Among these children, a very small percentage (0.3 per cent) had experienced both types of death.
2. *What are the background and family characteristics of children who had experienced the death of a parent, sibling or friend? Do they differ from the wider sample of children and young people?* Bereaved children had different background and family characteristics to the larger sample of children who had not experienced the death of a parent, sibling or friend. In brief, children who had experienced the death of a parent/sibling tended to come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds relative to the other groups in terms of living in lone parent households, economically inactive households, low earning households and households where educational attainment was low. Children who had experienced the death of a friend were more likely to be girls, to come from separated or divorced families and have parents with higher levels of mental health problems than their peers. Bereaved children were older than children who had not experienced the death of a parent/sibling or

¹ It should be noted that our analyses are in no way causal. That is, we cannot determine whether a child's experience of bereavement **causes** the outcomes, or whether the other outcomes were there before the death happened. Rather, we can draw conclusions about whether there are any associations between bereavement and outcomes net of the control variables.

All data were weighted to adjust for unequal sampling probabilities of some children and to make the sample representative in terms of the children's age, sex and region.

friend, presumably because the risk of experiencing a death increases as a child gets older.

3. *Have bereaved children experienced other stressful events in their lives to a greater extent than children who have not experienced the death of a parent, sibling or friend?* Yes, parents of bereaved children – regardless of who had died – were more likely than other parents to report that their children had experienced certain other stressful events at some point in their lives (this could have been before or after the death). These events were: one parent had had a major financial crisis; one parent had had a serious mental illness; and the child had a serious illness which required a stay in hospital. Parents of children who had experienced the death of a friend were more likely than other parents to report that: they had experienced a separation; one parent had had a problem with the police involving a court appearance; the child had been in a serious accident or badly hurt in an accident; and the child (13 years of age and older) had experienced the break-up of a steady relationship. Finally, parents of children who experienced the death of a parent/sibling were three-and-a-half to four times more likely than other parents to report that one parent had had a serious physical illness. Bereaved children had experienced significant levels of stressful events in their lives.
4. *What services and supports (formal and informal) are available for bereaved children? Do these differ depending on whether children experienced the death of a parent/sibling or friend?* Findings revealed that children who had experienced the death of a parent/sibling were more likely than other children to have been in contact with specialist medical or mental health services over the last year for concerns over emotions, behaviour or concentration difficulties. These children were considerably more likely than other children to have been looked after by the local authority at some point. Their parents rated them as having somewhat lower social capabilities and fewer strengths than their peers. Parents of children who experienced the death of a friend approved less of their children's friends than other parents and were more likely to report that their children's friends got into trouble.
5. *Do bereaved children participate in school and activities to the same extent as their peers?* Bereaved children were more likely to have changed schools and been excluded at some point in their pasts relative to other children. In terms of participation in clubs and activities in and out of school, children who had experienced the death of a parent/sibling were least likely to participate in these activities. The reasons for the barriers to their participation were not evident.
6. *Are bereaved children more likely to have a clinical mental disorder or engage in problem behaviour relative to their peers?* Yes, but the types of problems seemed to vary depending on who had died. Children whose parent or sibling had died were somewhat more likely than other children to have problems with anxiety and drinking. On the other hand, children who had experienced the death

of a friend were more likely to display conduct problems, use substances and engage in troublesome acts such as staying out late or truanting from school.

The findings from the present study suggest that bereaved children face significant challenges, although their experiences and outcomes varied depending on who had died.

Summary of findings on children reported to have been bereaved of a parent or sibling

Children who were reported by their parents to have been bereaved of a parent or sibling were more likely than the other two groups (those bereaved of a friend or those not bereaved of a parent, sibling or friend) to have a father respond to the survey and to have an older parent. They were less likely than other children to live in married households and – not surprisingly – more likely to live in widowed households. They were more likely than the other two groups to live in households where the head had no qualifications, households experiencing long-term unemployment and economically inactive households. They were most likely to reside in households with low earnings (that is, less than £300 per week).

Parents of these children were more likely to report that they (the parent) slept badly, felt unhappy or depressed, that at some point in the child's life they or a partner had had a major financial crisis or serious mental illness, or that the child had had a serious illness than parents whose children had not experienced the death of a parent, sibling or friend. They were more likely than parents of the other two groups to report that one parent had had a serious physical illness.

Parents of children who had been bereaved of a parent or sibling were more likely than parents of the other two groups to have made contact with medical or mental health professionals during the last year about concerns over their child's emotions, behaviour or concentration, and were more likely than parents of children who hadn't been bereaved to have sought the help of a teacher. Children bereaved of a parent or sibling were three-and-a-half times as likely than children bereaved of a friend, and six times more likely than children not bereaved of a parent, sibling or friend to have been looked after by the local authority at some point.

Parents reported these children to have lower social aptitudes and strengths than the other two groups. Their parents were more likely than parents of children not bereaved of a parent, sibling or friend to report that the children had difficulty in making friends.

Children and young people whose parent or sibling had died were more likely than children who hadn't experienced the death of a parent, sibling or friend to have changed schools or been excluded. They were less likely than the other two groups to participate in clubs, both in and out of school.

Summary of findings on children reported to have been bereaved of a close friend

Children who were reported by their parent to have been bereaved of a friend were more likely than the other two groups (those bereaved of a parent/sibling, and those not bereaved of a parent, sibling or friend) to be white, female, identified by a mother rather than a father responding to the survey, and living with a lone parent.

Parents of these children were more likely than those of the non-bereaved children to report that they or their partner had had financial problems, that they or their partner had had serious mental illness, and that the child themselves had had a serious illness requiring a stay in hospital. They were more likely than parents of the other two groups to report that they had separated from their partner, that they or their partner had had a problem with the police, or that they had mental health difficulties.

Children who had experienced the death of a friend were more likely than the other two groups to have friends of whom their parents disapproved, or friends who got into trouble.

They were more likely than children not bereaved of a parent, sibling or friend to live with parents with no educational qualifications and parents who are economically inactive, as well as to have changed schools or to have been excluded. They were more likely than the other two groups to display problems in their conduct, use substances and engage in troublesome acts.

Parents who reported their child had been bereaved of a friend were less likely than those who reported that their child had been bereaved of a parent/sibling to have been in contact with medical or child mental health specialists over the last year, but they were more likely to report that their child had been very sad or unhappy in the recent past.

Future directions for research

Although the present study was informative, we hope that future research will provide a more sophisticated examination of the influence of bereavement on children's and young people's well-being.

- The collection of more nuanced assessments of children's experiences of bereavement would be a useful addition to the data, including details on the timing of bereavement in children's lives as well as more specific information on the person who died. Further details on the quality of the relationships between children and the person who died would also be useful. Qualitative research would be able to explore these issues in greater detail.
- Longitudinal data would help to determine causality and directionality; that is, whether bereavement tends to lead to various events and outcomes; whether the various outcomes and events make people more susceptible to death; or whether other factors,

such as social class, are jointly linked to both bereavement and other outcomes.

- Further work is needed to explore in more detail the impact of the death of a friend on children, including qualitative work with children and young people and research into the impact of a death within a school or other community.
- Future studies could use more sophisticated analysis such as matching procedures to enable us to determine with more confidence the difference between the various groups.

Future directions for policy and practice

We hope that this research will help to inform discussions about how to provide appropriate support to children and young people who have experienced bereavement.

- The study brings a new spotlight onto the experiences of those bereaved of a friend, about which we knew very little before, and may help to convince policy-makers and funders that this group also face significant difficulties, which could be helped by a range of services.
- By highlighting the differences between the experiences and outcomes of those bereaved of a parent/sibling and those bereaved of a friend, the study will help to inform the design of services and interventions that are tailored to different experiences of bereavement.