



# Grief Matters for Children manifesto briefing

The Childhood Bereavement Network brings together people who work with children and young people when someone special has died. Our *Grief Matters for Children* campaign wants to make sure that all bereaved children, young people and their families can get good support easily, wherever they live and however their special person has died.

This briefing sets out further detail to support the Grief Matters for Children manifesto, including the national policy developments needed to bring about the changes we want to see. It addresses some of the potential barriers to our suggestions.

## The issue

The death of someone close brings change and challenge into the life of a young person, and can be devastating. Around 1 in 28 children and young people currently of school age have experienced the death of a parent, brother or sister, and 1 in 16 have been bereaved of a friend<sup>i</sup>. Many more are affected by the death of someone else close.

Children's circumstances and personalities differ and they respond to bereavement in different ways. The death of someone close affects many aspects of their lives, sometimes for a very long time.

Where children and young people's support needs go unrecognised, bereavement and the changes that accompany it can make them more vulnerable to poor outcomes, particularly in disadvantaged circumstances<sup>ii</sup>.

## Our manifesto

**In each local area, the local authority and primary care trust should work with other services to make sure**

- **they know how many children and young people have been bereaved of a parent, carer, brother or sister that year, and what services they need**

Planning services for bereaved children and young people is hampered by a lack of statistics about the numbers affected. Community studies give some idea, but there is no official collection of this data. Registrars could collect this information - at least on deaths of parents, carers and siblings - when a death is registered, by asking whether the person who died had any children or siblings aged 16 or under.

*But these questions would be so intrusive. Do we really need to know this?* Asking about dependent children could give Registrars an opportunity to tell families about the support that is available to them, and raise awareness of children and young people's needs.

### Be healthy

Children and young people who are bereaved can develop a range of somatic complaints<sup>iii</sup>. Compared to their peers, they visit their GP more often<sup>iv</sup>, are more likely to have a range of mental disorders<sup>v</sup>, have lower self-esteem<sup>vi</sup> and are more likely to engage in risky health behaviours<sup>vii</sup>.

### Stay safe

After a death, children and young people often anxious about their own safety and that of surviving relatives<sup>viii</sup>. Some report being bullied about their bereavement<sup>ix</sup>, and some who are already vulnerable seem to be at increased risk of abuse<sup>x</sup>.

### Enjoy and achieve

Children, parents and teachers report difficulties at school arising from poor concentration, lack of interest or bullying. Some young people underachieve<sup>xi</sup>. However, 'opposite effects' may emerge as some young people strive particularly hard<sup>xii</sup>.

### Make a positive contribution

Some studies suggest higher rates of aggressive or disruptive behaviours among parentally bereaved children and young people<sup>xiii</sup>. Persistent young offenders are around six times more likely to have been parentally bereaved than their peers<sup>xiv</sup>.

### Achieve economic wellbeing

The changes and disruptions to family life that follow a bereavement can cause a drop in family income. A study found that men bereaved of a parent before they were 16 were more likely to be unemployed at 36 than their non-bereaved peers<sup>xv</sup>.

- **adults who work with children can get training and support to understand how they might help someone who has been bereaved**

Adults are often anxious about how to respond to bereaved children, and may worry about making things worse, meaning children can miss out on support.

Increased awareness of bereavement in childhood and practical ideas for offering support in particular settings complements practitioners' existing skills. This increases their confidence and helps them to respond appropriately to the diverse needs of bereaved children and families, including making referrals to childhood bereavement services. 95% of respondents to a recent CBN survey thought teachers should have training to be able to support children if someone has died.

Guidance on initial training frameworks for the children's workforce should ensure these include an awareness of bereavement. Guidance on continuing professional development should ensure that local authorities invest in making this available in every area.

***But training schemes are packed already. Why should bereavement be included?*** Anyone working on a day to day basis with children and young people is likely to come into contact with those who have been bereaved. Training can help them to understand better the impact of bereavement, overcome some of their fears and increase their confidence.

- **children, young people and their families experiencing the death of someone close can get good services (see fig 2)**

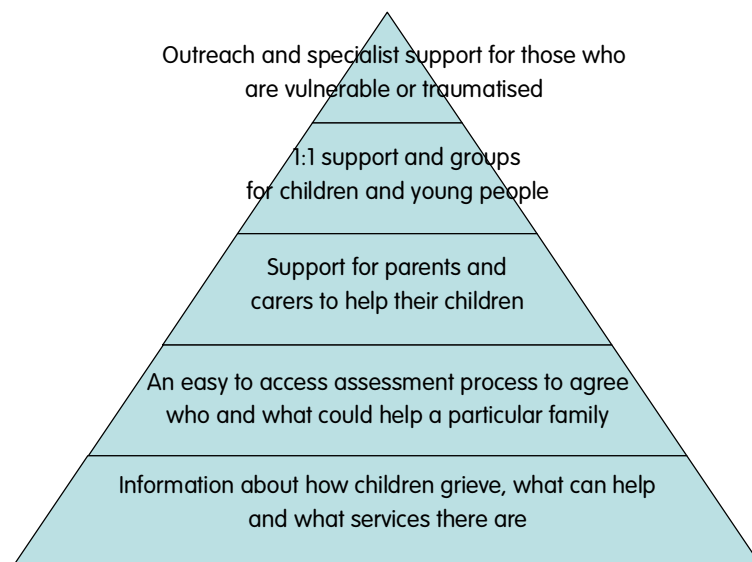
Children, young people and their parents are clear about the benefits such services can bring, helping them to make sense of what has happened and to explore and express their feelings, improving communication between family members, and helping them to feel less isolated and more in control<sup>xvi</sup>.

*'It's helped me like learn that other people also feel upset in the way that I did'*

*'We're unbelievably good at coping when we get help'*

*'She is a much happier young woman who has been able to address her anxieties and fears.'*

Most services are based in the voluntary sector and have a particular catchment area. As far as we can tell, around 45% of local authority areas are only partially covered – or not covered at all - by a service which works with all children, whatever the cause of death. Even where services do exist, they rely heavily on donations, fundraising and volunteers, often struggling to keep their services afloat<sup>xvii</sup>. Demand for services is growing and they risk being overwhelmed by referrals if they raise their profile.



**Figure 1: what good provision for bereaved children looks like**

Guidance for local authorities and PCTs should remind them to

- include bereaved children and young people among potentially vulnerable groups - as defined in the CAMHS review<sup>xviii</sup> - whose needs should be assessed,
- plan and commission services in response to the needs identified.

Guidance on developing plans for children who are already vulnerable (eg those who are in custody, in public care) should ensure these include the provision of bereavement support.

Inspection frameworks for children's services should examine how well bereavement support is provided locally.

***There's such pressure at the moment to find enough money to meet all children's needs. Why should bereavement take priority?*** If we look into the histories of many vulnerable children and young people, such as those in custody or looked after by the local authority, we find high rates of bereavement. By adopting the approach to bereavement support outlined in Figure 1, we can intervene early, supporting families to prevent difficulties escalating, and promoting the emotional and mental well-being of all bereaved children and young people and the adults they will become: a model of working that could benefit children experiencing many other types of loss.

### To play their part, each school should have

- **sensitive people and ways of doing things that provide support and information to children and staff when someone has died**

Up to 70% primary schools have at least one recently bereaved pupil on roll<sup>xix</sup>. To promote the well-being of bereaved children and young people, proactive, flexible pastoral support should include

- a system for managing and communicating important information about a bereavement
- the inclusion of bereavement in relevant plans and policies
- staff training and support to increase their awareness and confidence
- referral to a range of provision as outlined in recent guidance for headteachers and commissioners of targeted mental health services in schools<sup>xx</sup>
- partnerships with childhood bereavement services.

***Don't most schools have a good pastoral support system in place anyway? Why be specific about bereavement?*** Schools which have experienced a death in the school community often wish they had been better prepared. Setting out clearly how the school will respond to the death of a pupil, parent or staff member can be very helpful if and when it happens. Bereaved children and young people say they have support needs that are specific to bereavement and that a general approach isn't as meaningful or helpful.

- **opportunities to learn about death and bereavement as part of life**

The majority of young people will experience a bereavement at some point in their childhood, and studies suggest that the general provision of education about loss and bereavement could improve peer support for bereaved children and young people, and help to dispel myths and taboos which can make them vulnerable to bullying<sup>xxi</sup>. There are many opportunities for doing so, including Personal, Social,

Health and Economic Education (PSHE) and through the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme.

As with other sensitive topics, teachers are often anxious about addressing death and bereavement in the classroom. Parents may be concerned about what their children are learning and how this fits with the conversations they have with them.

Guidance should be issued on how to teach about death and bereavement sensitively and effectively, to promote a culture of compassion and understanding. For example, before any teaching about death and bereavement, teachers check with families who have been recently bereaved about how the pupil would like to be involved in the lesson. This can only be done if the school is already aware of the bereavement, which depends in part on a good pastoral support system being in place, as outlined above.

***Won't this just scare children?*** Children and young people are naturally interested in death and bereavement and often raise questions about them. Not answering these questions can leave children feeling that the subject is forbidden and that can make them feel even more scared and isolated. Young people – including those who haven't been bereaved - are keen for death and bereavement to be incorporated into the curriculum and in a recent survey undertaken by CBN, 75% respondents wished their school had taught them about coping with bereavement.

Childhood Bereavement Network

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For more details about bereavement in childhood or to comment on the manifesto, please contact Alison Penny, CBN Coordinator on [apenny@ncb.org.uk](mailto:apenny@ncb.org.uk)

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<sup>i</sup> Green, H et al (2005) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain, 2004* London: HMSO

<sup>ii</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (2005) *Young People, Bereavement and Loss: Disruptive transitions?* London: NCB

<sup>iii</sup> Worden, J W (1996) *Children and Grief: when a parent dies* New York: Guildford

<sup>iv</sup> Lloyd-Williams, M and Wilkinson, C and Lloyd-Williams, F (1998) Do bereaved children consult the primary health care team more frequently? *European Journal of Cancer Care* 7, 120-124

<sup>v</sup> Green et al (2005) *ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> Worden, J W (1996) *ibid*

<sup>vii</sup> Sweeting, H, West, P., and Richards, M (1998) Teenage Family Life, Lifestyles and life chances: Associations with family structure, conflict with parents and joint family activity *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 12, 1

<sup>viii</sup> Worden, J W (1996) *ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> Easton, C. (2002)

<sup>x</sup> Easton, C. (2002) Forward in Cross, S. *I can't stop feeling sad: calls to ChildLine about bereavement* ChildLine

<sup>xi</sup> Abdelnoor A and Hollins S (2004) The effect of childhood bereavement on secondary school performance *Educ. Psych. in Practice* 20(1) 43-54

<sup>xii</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (2007) *ibid*

<sup>xiii</sup> eg Draper, A (2007) Unpublished doctoral thesis Tavistock Clinic, London and West Hertfordshire PCT examines scores of parentally bereaved children on Rutter's delinquency scale

<sup>xiv</sup> Vaswani, N (2008) Persistent Offender Profile: Focus on Bereavement. Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland Briefing 13

<sup>xv</sup> Maclean, M and Wadsworth, MEJ (1988) The interests of children after parental divorce: a long-term perspective. *International Journal of Law and the Family*, 2: 155-66

<sup>xvi</sup> Rolls, L., and Payne, S. (2007) Children and young people's experiences of UK childhood bereavement services, *Mortality* 12, 3, 281-303

<sup>xvii</sup> Rolls, L., and Payne, S. (2004) Childhood bereavement services: issues in UK provision, *Mortality*, 9(4), 300-328

<sup>xviii</sup> National Review of CAMHS – an Independent Review supported by officials from the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department of Health (2008) *Children and Young People in Mind*

<sup>xix</sup> Holland, J (1993) *Childhood Bereavement in Humberside primary schools Educational Research* 35 (3)

<sup>xx</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) Targeted Mental Health in Schools – Using the evidence to inform your approach: a practical guide for head teachers and commissioners (2008)

<sup>xxi</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (2005) *Young People, Bereavement and Loss: Disruptive transitions?* London: NCB