



# Briefing on Childhood Bereavement

Grief is a normal part of life and yet everyone will have their own experience of bereavement, bringing unique challenges and varying emotions. While adults are mourning, it can be difficult for them to offer support to their grieving children; and others such as teachers, health, social care and community staff may be unsure and uneasy when faced with bereaved children, fearful of making the situation worse. 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. Children may therefore become the unrecognised mourners – their needs unmet due to a combination of lack of knowledge, misguided intentions, poor awareness of the issues, lack of will and lack of resources.

Without appropriate support, bereaved children and young people may be at risk of health, social and educational difficulties and disadvantages.

## How many children and young people are bereaved?

No official statistics are collected on the number of children bereaved. Samples suggest that

- around 1 in 25 children and young people currently aged 5-16 have experienced the death of a parent or sibling<sup>1</sup>
- every 30 minutes in the UK a child is bereaved of a parent. This equates to 53 children a day, 20,000 children every year<sup>2</sup>
- many more children are bereaved of a grandparent, school friend, other relative or another significant person such as a teacher.

A study showed that 70% primary schools had at least one pupil on roll who had experienced a significant bereavement in the last two years<sup>3</sup>. As life expectancy varies by geography and socio-economic group<sup>4</sup>, it seems likely that children in disadvantaged circumstances experience bereavement more frequently.

## The issue

The death of someone close brings change and challenge into the life of a young person, and can be devastating. The primary loss of a parent may be compounded by other changes such as temporary loss of support from the other grieving parent; financial difficulties for the family; moving house; changing schools and being away from friends.

Many factors moderate and mediate children and young people's experiences of bereavement<sup>5</sup>, and must be considered when assessing its likely impact<sup>6</sup>. These influential factors include characteristics of the bereaved child (eg their age, gender and coping style), their family (including the relationships before and after the death, the changes which the family experiences and the mental health of surviving relatives) and their wider social and cultural contexts (including rituals surrounding the death, and the availability of support).

Some factors may complicate young people's experience of grief. These include being bereaved through suicide or murder, witnessing a traumatic death, the death of a lone parent, which might result in the child moving into public care 'Mum died a fortnight ago, I'm in a home. I cry myself to sleep', and living in a complex or dysfunctional family situation where support is unavailable to the mourning child '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'<sup>7</sup>.

Studies suggest that the death of someone close, especially in circumstances that are already disadvantaged, can put children at increased risk of social and educational difficulties, and can threaten their mental and emotional health.

- Bereaved children attend their GP more frequently<sup>8</sup>
- Children with a range of emotional and conduct disorders were found to be more likely to have experienced the death of a parent or sibling than those with no such disorder<sup>9</sup>.
- Bereavement was listed as one of the five most common health issues encountered by a group of youth offending teams.<sup>10</sup>

More research is needed into the risk and protective factors influencing the relationship between bereavement and outcomes in childhood and into adulthood.

## What is needed?

A range of support is needed to help children manage the impact of death on their lives. Their needs will change over time and some new aspects may emerge: Worden's study of parentally bereaved children<sup>11</sup> found that they had lower self-esteem than their non-bereaved peers, and this was most marked at two years after the death.

The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) launched in 2001 as a national network for organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people, and now has over 300 subscribers, all of whom believe that *'all children have the right to information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives'*<sup>12</sup>. This involves

- **information and education** to understand death and what it means to them,
- **communication and encouragement** to talk honestly within the family,
- **opportunities to understand and express their grief**
- **chances to meet others** and share similar experiences,
- **opportunities to remember** the person who has died.

Responsibility for providing these opportunities is shared between families, communities, statutory children's services and the voluntary and community sector. 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<sup>13</sup>. 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.

## What else is needed?

Our *Grief Matters for Children* campaign wants

- 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
- significant people in bereaved children and young people's lives 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 offered 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 address bereaved children's diverse needs
- 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
- 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
- **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, in order to plan policy and practice development.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, H et al (2005) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain, 2004* London: HMSO

<sup>2</sup> Because no official statistics are collected on the numbers of children bereaved each year, Winston's Wish, a CBN subscriber have calculated these figures using data from the Office of National Statistics and from Meltzer, M (1999) *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents* HMSO

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

<sup>4</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (2007) *Highlight no 232: Children, Young People and Bereavement* London: NCB

<sup>5</sup> Dowdney, L (2000) 'Annotation: Childhood Bereavement Following Parental Death' *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* Vol., No 7 pp 819-830

<sup>6</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (2007) *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Quotes from Cross, S. (2002) *I can't stop feeling sad: Calls to ChildLine about bereavement* ChildLine

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd-Williams, M and Wilkinson, C and Lloyd-Williams, F (1998) Do bereaved children consult the primary healthy care team more frequently? *European Journal of Cancer Care*, 120-124

<sup>9</sup> Green, H et al (2005) *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Youth Justice Trust (2001) *A survey of some of the general and specific health issues for YOTS* Manchester: Youth Justice Trust

<sup>11</sup> Worden, J W (1996) *Children and Grief: when a parent dies* New York: Guildford

<sup>12</sup> CBN (2001) *Belief Statement* London: CBN

<sup>13</sup> For details of services: [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Supported by:

  
THE WORK CONTINUES

The Childhood Bereavement Network is hosted by the National Children's Bureau, Registered Charity No. 258825

8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE  
Telephone: 020 7843 6309 Fax: 020 7837 1439  
Email: [cbn@ncb.org.uk](mailto:cbn@ncb.org.uk)  
Website: [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

  
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