



## Summary of some of the key issues for bereaved children and young people

The Government's Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme aims for every child to have the support they need to:

- **be healthy**, enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle;
- **stay safe**, being protected from harm and neglect and growing up able to look after themselves;
- **enjoy and achieve**, getting the most out of life and developing broad skills for adulthood;
- **make a positive contribution** to the community and to society and not engage in anti-social or offending behaviour;
- **achieve economic well-being**.

This paper highlights some of the issues for bereaved children and young people in each of these areas, summarising some key research and quoting from children and young people themselves.<sup>1</sup> It also gives notes on relevant national and local agencies and initiatives and includes extracts from policy and guidance.

Research on whether bereaved children and young people as a group are at greater risk of not achieving these outcomes is not easily summarised<sup>2</sup>, partly because of the range of factors which mediate and moderate the impact of bereavement<sup>3</sup>, for example the ability of parents to support children in their grief. Bereavement clearly brings different challenges and opportunities to different children and young people, and these will change over time. However, children and young people who have experienced bereavement alongside multiple losses or other disadvantages seem to be at increased risk of negative outcomes in areas such as education, emotional and mental health and risk-taking behaviour.<sup>4</sup> This diversity of experience makes it all the more important to listen to children and young people's own stories about the impact of death on their lives.

Robust research into the risks posed by bereavement should be clear about the group of young people being studied (eg those bereaved of a parent / those bereaved of a someone close to them). When looking at young people experiencing particular difficulties, such as depression or criminal behaviour, rates of bereavement should be compared with those among the general population:

- between 4 and 7% young people experience the death of a parent by the age of 16<sup>5</sup>
- 78% 11-16 year olds reported the death of a first or second degree relative or close friend<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this paper taken from Cross, S (2002) *I can't stop feeling sad: Calls to ChildLine about bereavement* Childline; and from A death in the Lives of (2002), You'll Always remember them, even when you're old (2003) and It will be ok (2004), videos made by the Childhood Bereavement Network with the help of the Candle Project, Jigsaw4U, CHUMS Child Bereavement Service, Penhaligon's Friends and the Northampton General Hospital Trust Child Bereavement Service

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the research literature, see Ribbens McCarthy, J with Jessop, J (2005) *Young People, Bereavement and Loss: Disruptive Transitions?* London: National Children's Bureau

<sup>3</sup> eg Dowdney, L (2000) Annotation: Childhood Bereavement following Parental Death *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 7 pp 819-380

<sup>4</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (ibid)

<sup>5</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (ibid)

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, L and Harrington, Z (2001) 'Adolescents' bereavement experiences. Prevalence, association with depressive symptoms, and use of services', *Journal of Adolescence* 24, 2,159-69

<b>BE HEALTHY</b>	
<b>Physical health</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A study found that bereaved children visit their GP more frequently.<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• Parentally bereaved children were found to be more likely to develop symptoms and health problems such as headaches and stomach aches<sup>8</sup> <i>'My tummy is in a ball and my life is bundled up on itself'</i></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> Department of Health <a href="#">website</a> National Service Framework for Children and Young People  <b>Local</b> Primary Care Trusts
<b>Emotional and mental health</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between 50 and 66% children and young people bereaved of a parent show distress and depressive symptoms, and these may persist over time.<sup>9</sup></li> <li>• A study found that 2 years after the death, parentally bereaved children felt less able to effect change and had lower self-esteem than their peers.<sup>10</sup></li> <li>• A study found that a range of mental health difficulties were more frequent among children bereaved of a parent or sibling than those not bereaved.<sup>11</sup></li> <li>• 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.<sup>12</sup></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> Department of Health <a href="#">website</a> National Service Framework for Mental Health  <b>Local</b> Social Services CAMHS - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Connexions SureStart
<b>Teenage Pregnancy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One study found that pregnancy by age 18 was six times more frequent in girls bereaved of a parent than in those living with both parents.<sup>13</sup></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> Teenage Pregnancy Unit <a href="#">website</a>
<b>Dependency</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 47% 18 year old girls in one study 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.<sup>14</sup></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> Drugs Strategy Directorate <a href="#">website</a> <b>Local</b> Drug Action Teams
<b>STAY SAFE</b>	
<b>Looked after children</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some children enter public care as a result of the death of a parent: 30% of looked after children under five in one study had been bereaved of a close relative.<sup>15</sup></li> <li>• Looked after children are more likely to leave school without qualifications, become unemployed, become young parents, to commit offences that result in a prison sentence and to become homeless.<sup>16</sup></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> DCSF <a href="#">website</a> Healthy Care <a href="#">website</a>  <b>Local</b> Social Services
<b>Abuse</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some young people, already vulnerable, seem to be at increased risk of physical, emotional or sexual abuse through their bereavement.<sup>17</sup> <i>'Dad's only like this because mum died. He cries a lot and then goes to the pub. He only beats me after that'</i></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> Department of Health <a href="#">website</a>  <b>Local</b> Local Safeguarding Children Board
<b>Bullying</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bereaved children report being bullied because of their bereavement <i>'My cousin hung himself and they keep telling me they can see things dangling from the trees.'</i></li> </ul>	<b>National</b> Anti Bullying Alliance <a href="#">website</a>
<b>Leaving home early</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people bereaved of a parent are more likely to leave home early.<sup>18</sup></li> </ul>	
<b>ENJOY AND ACHIEVE</b>	
	Department for Children, Schools and Families <a href="#">website</a>

<sup>7</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>8</sup> Worden, J W (1996) *Children and Grief: when a parent dies* New York: Guildford

<sup>9</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, J (2006) *Young People's Experiences of Loss and Bereavement: towards an interdisciplinary approach* Maidenhead: OUP

<sup>10</sup> Worden, J W (1996) *Children and Grief: when a parent dies* New York: Guildford

<sup>11</sup> Green et al (2005) *The Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain, 2004* Office of National Statistics

<sup>12</sup> Black, D (1998) Bereavement in childhood *British Medical Journal* 316 931-933

<sup>13</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>14</sup> Sweeting, H et al (1998)

<sup>15</sup> Cousins, W, Monteith, M, Larkin, E and Percy, A (2003) *The Care Careers of Younger Looked After Children: Findings from the Multiple Placement Project* Belfast: Queen's University

<sup>16</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (2001) *Preventing Social Exclusion*

<sup>17</sup> Easton, C. (2002) Forward in Cross, S. *I can't stop feeling sad: calls to ChildLine about bereavement* ChildLine

<sup>18</sup> Kiernan, K (1992) The impact of family disruption in childhood and transitions made in young adult life *Population Studies*, 51: 213-34

<p><b>School difficulties</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Families and schools report bereaved children and young people experiencing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>poor concentration <i>'Mum died a few months ago I can't concentrate on school work'</i></li> <li>lack of interest <i>'I don't want to be here. All I can think about is my baby.'</i></li> <li>missing school <i>'I had to go home because... I kept on crying'</i></li> <li>further losses <i>'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'</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Regional</b> Local Education Authority <a href="#">website</a> Healthy Schools <a href="#">website</a></p> <p><b>Local</b> Primary and Secondary schools Special schools FE colleges Pupil Referral Units Early years settings PSHE curriculum</p>
<p><b>School exclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One study found that 63% of a group of 15-16 year olds outside mainstream schooling had been bereaved of significant person close to them.<sup>19</sup></li> </ul>	<p><b>National</b> DCSF <a href="#">website</a></p> <p><b>Local</b> Pupil Referral Units</p>
<p><b>Attainment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A study found a link between death of a parent or sibling and underachievement at GCSE<sup>20</sup> but contradictory findings suggest the influence of risk and protective factors.<sup>21</sup></li> </ul>	

<p><b>MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION</b></p>	
<p><b>Self confidence and managing life changes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With help in managing their feelings, some children see bereavement as an opportunity to learn important coping skills which will go with them for life <i>'You've got two parents and they're both going to die so you think to yourself "I'm coping this time, maybe it'll be better next time and I'll be able to cope more."</i></li> </ul>	
<p><b>Offending behaviour</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bereavement was listed as one of the five most common health issues encountered by a group of youth offending teams.<sup>22</sup></li> <li>10% Section 53 offenders (children convicted of the gravest crimes) in one study had experienced the death of a parent.<sup>23</sup></li> </ul>	<p><b>National</b> Youth Justice Board <a href="#">website</a></p> <p><b>Local</b> Youth Offending Teams Young Offender Institutions Secure Training Centres</p>

<p><b>ACHIEVE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mortality rates are higher (and falling more slowly) in lower socio-economic groups.<sup>24</sup> Children in these groups are more likely to face bereavement</li> <li>36% one-parent families live on gross weekly incomes of less than £150 per week, compared to 10% married and 15% cohabiting couples.<sup>25</sup></li> <li>Some children need to be fostered after the death of parent. Relatives fostering children often have less financial support than non-family foster carers approved by the local authority. In one study, 71% grandparents caring full time for grandchildren (10% as a result of bereavement) had suffered financial hardship as a result.<sup>26</sup></li> <li>Families living in tied accommodation (eg armed services and clergy families) are at particular risk of upheaval and secondary loss through moving house after death of a parent.</li> <li>A study found that adult men who had been bereaved of a parent while under 16 were more likely to be unemployed at 36 than their non-bereaved peers<sup>27</sup></li> </ul>	<p><b>National</b> HM Treasury <a href="#">website</a> Department of Work and Pensions <a href="#">website</a> Cabinet Office: Social Exclusion Task Force <a href="#">website</a></p> <p><b>Local</b> Benefits Agency</p>

<sup>19</sup> Cooper, M (2002) Conference presentation at Childhood Bereavement Network Conference 29 June 2002

<sup>20</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>21</sup> Dowdney, L (2000) *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Youth Justice Trust (2001) *A survey of some of the general and specific health issues for YOTS* Manchester: Youth Justice Trust

<sup>23</sup> Boswell, G (1995) *Violent Victims: the prevalence of abuse and loss in the lives of Section 53 offenders* Prince's Trust

<sup>24</sup> Acheson, D (1998) *Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health* London: HMSO

<sup>25</sup> ONS (2002) *Living in Britain: Results from the 2001 General Household Survey* London: HMSO

<sup>26</sup> Richards, A (2001) *Second Time Around* Family Rights Group

<sup>27</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

## Relevant Policy and Guidance

### Department for Education and Skills (2005)

#### [Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce](#)

This document sets out the areas of expertise which anyone whose work brings them into frequent contact with children should have. The six areas include 'Supporting transitions', which states that 'some children may have to face very particular and personal transitions not necessarily shared or understood by all their peers. These include: family illness or the death of a close relative'. Workers should therefore know about the likely impact of bereavement, be able to offer support and know about local resources for further help.

### Department for Education and Skills (2005)

#### [Common Assessment Framework for Children and Young People](#)

This new standardised approach to assessing children's needs is used across universal services. The accompanying guidance suggests that it may be appropriate to initiate a common assessment when significant changes have been observed in a child who has been bereaved. The guidance also mentions several points in the assessment procedure where the impact of bereavement on the child and family should be considered.

### Department of Health (2004)

#### [National Service Framework for Children, Young people and Maternity Services](#)

The government's vision of bereavement care for children and families is that the PSHE and citizenship framework and Healthy Schools initiative includes provision on health related matters including bereavement (core standards p55), information is provided locally to parents by health and social care agencies on services to support them and their children through bereavement (ibid p71), and PCTs, Local Authorities and the voluntary sector ensure that local planning addresses the needs of parents who are experiencing problems as a result of bereavement (ibid p77).

Following the death of a child, the vision is that parents and families are given time, space and information to make practical arrangements and decisions, and receive ongoing support to cope with their loss (standard 8: Disabled Children p35).

The vision is that Primary Care trusts and Local Authorities ensure that both the commissioning and delivery of [mental health services] are informed by a multi-agency assessment of need that is updated on a regular basis. This needs assessment may identify...groups of children for whom service development is required. (standard 9: the Mental Health and Psychological Well-being of Children and Young People p20)

### Department of Health (2004)

#### [Choosing Health](#)

Chapter 3 sections 46-49 The Government's vision is that half of all schools will be healthy schools by 2006, with the rest working towards healthy school status by 2009... From 1 April 2005, a Healthy School will provide...comprehensive PSHE. This includes education on relationships, sex, drugs and alcohol as well as other issues that can affect young people's lives, such as emotional difficulties and bereavement.

### National Institute for Clinical Excellence (2004)

#### [Improving Supportive and Palliative Care for Adults with Cancer](#)

Section 12 deals with support for carers and families, including bereavement care.

Department of Health (2002) Promoting the Health of Looked After Children

Section 12.2 identifies bereavement as a factor affecting children's mental health.

Section 12.5 highlights that many mental health problems are missed among looked after children, 'in particular the effect of grief and loss and resulting depression in younger children'.

### Department of Health (1999)

#### [National Service Framework for Mental Health](#)

To reach the standard of mental health promotion, 'local health and social care organisations should identify particularly vulnerable individuals and groups, and explore the opportunities to promote better mental health, perhaps within wider social inclusion initiatives and programmes'. (p24)

Supported by:

*Diana*

THE WORK CONTINUES

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

8 Wakley Street, London ECV 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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