

Parentally bereaved children communicating their feelings: preliminary analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study

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Introduction

Each year in the UK, over 40,000 children under 18 are thought to be bereaved of a parent, although a lack of data hampers estimates (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2016). The death of a parent brings change and challenge into a child's life, and increases their risk of poor outcomes.

Many children experience intense and disruptive emotions following a death, including sadness, anger, guilt and confusion (Christ 2000, Haine et al 2008). Children very often experience an increase in anxiety, particularly worries about further losses, the safety of other family members, and fears around separation (Akerman and Statham 2014).

At the same time as dealing with these difficult emotions, many bereaved children also face disruptions to their usual patterns of communication. While there is little evidence that cathartic expression of emotion is helpful for all bereaved children, they do seem to be at increased risk if they feel they have to inhibit emotions they would like to express (Haine et al, 2008). Yet they may not want to share their feelings with other grieving family members for fear of burdening them further. Some report difficulties in their friendships (Servaty and Hayslip 2001), and even outright bullying (Cross, 2002) following a death. Children experiencing greater distress following the death are more likely to have unsatisfactory peer relationships (Silverman and Worden, 1992). Good communication in the family has been shown to improve children's outcomes (Raveis et al 1999) and support from other family members and friends, and from the wider community, also play an important role (Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop 2005).

This small study sought to explore the associations between the death of a parent and the child's pattern of communication, from the child's own report.

The sample

The data come from secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (University of London Institute of Education 2015), a longitudinal birth cohort study following a sample of children born in the UK in 2000/01. These findings use data from the fifth sweep when the children were aged 11 (n=13,469) and in their last year of primary school. Cases were weighted to adjust for design features which resulted in oversampling of certain areas and groups, and for differential non-response rates.

A variable was created to identify if children had been bereaved of one or both parents. Initial bivariate analyses were conducted to explore associations between children's experiences of the death of a parent and their response to the question 'what do you do if you are worried about something?' and their degree of agreement with the statement 'I do not show my emotions to others'. Subsequent logistic regression analyses explored the predictive value of bereavement after controlling for the child's gender.

The children

Only a very small minority of the 11 year olds had been bereaved of a parent – less than one in fifty (table 1). Boys were significantly more likely than girls to have been bereaved of a parent (table 2).

Table 1: Characteristics and experiences of the children (n=13,469)

Group	Definition	Per cent
Not bereaved	Both natural parents alive	98.4
Bereaved	One or both natural parents deceased	1.6
Boys		51.6
Girls		48.4

Table 2: Children's experiences of bereavement by gender

Gender	Not bereaved (%)	Bereaved (%)
Boys	98.1	1.9
Girls	98.8	1.2

($\chi^2(1) = 11.272, p = .001$)

What children do if they are worried about something

The children were asked what they would do if they were worried about something, and were able to tick as many options as they wished. Parentally bereaved children were significantly more likely to keep their worry to themselves (28.2% vs 21.4%) and significantly less likely to tell a friend or tell someone at home. They were less likely to tell a teacher but this did not reach statistical significance. Boys were more likely than girls to keep their worry to themselves (23.6% vs 19.4%) and less likely to tell a friend, someone at home or a teacher.

Table 3: What children do if they are worried about something, by bereavement experience and gender (n=12,819)

Group	Keep it to myself (%)	Tell a friend (%)	Tell someone at home (%)	Tell a teacher (%)	Tell someone else (%)
Not bereaved	21.4	39.5	70.2	28.4	12.5
Bereaved	28.2	27.7	60.0	24.5	11.2
	$\chi^2(1) = 6.495(1), \text{Cramer's } V = .020, p = .011$	$13.580, \text{Cramer's } V = .029, p = .000$	$11.554, \text{Cramer's } V = .027, p = .001$	$1.724, \text{Cramer's } V = .010, p = .189$	$.278, \text{Cramer's } V = .004, p = .598$
Boys	23.6	33.0	68.4	27.4	12.7
Girls	19.4	46.0	71.8	29.3	12.3
	$\chi^2(1) = 41.108, \text{Cramer's } V = .051, p = .000$	$279.323, \text{Cramer's } V = 1.33, p = .000$	$22.993, \text{Cramer's } V = .037, p = .000$	$6.945, \text{Cramer's } V = .021, p = .008$	$.646, \text{Cramer's } V = .006, p = .421$

Logistic regression models were built to explore the contribution of children's experiences of bereavement to how they cope with their worries, controlling for gender. After controlling for gender, the experience of bereavement no longer made a significant contribution to the child's likelihood of keeping their worries to themselves (table 4). However, bereaved children's likelihood of not telling a friend and not telling someone at home remained significant after controlling for gender. The odds of bereaved children not telling a friend about a worry were 1.605 times the odds of non-bereaved children [CI: 1.069-2.409], and the odds of them not telling someone at home were 1.539 times those of non-bereaved children [CI: 1.049-2.257] (tables 4-6).

Table 4: Logistic regression model of bereavement and gender on keeping worries to oneself

Included	Wald (f)	Odds ratio	CI	
			Lower	Upper
Constant	94.217***			
Bereaved of a parent	2.150	1.401	.891	2.203
Boy	25.665***	1.281	1.163	1.410

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, Nagelkerke = .005

Table 5: Logistic regression model of bereavement and gender on not telling a friend about a worry

Included	Wald (f)	Odds ratio	CI	
			Lower	Upper
Constant	39.628***			
Bereaved of a parent	5.243**	1.605	1.069	2.409
Boy	147.005***	1.725	1.579	1.885

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, Nagelkerke = .025

Table 6: Logistic regression model of bereavement and gender on not telling someone at home about a worry

Included	Wald (f)	Odds ratio	CI	
			Lower	Upper
Constant	40.485***			
Bereaved of a parent	4.899**	1.539	1.049	2.257
Boy	12.615***	1.174	1.074	1.283

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, Nagelkerke = .003

Showing emotions to others

Children were asked the degree to which they agreed with the statement ‘I do not show my emotions to others’. Bereaved children were significantly more likely to say this was definitely true of them (19.8% vs 10.9% among those whose parents were both alive, $p < .001$). Boys were also significantly more likely to say this was definitely true of them (12.5% vs 9.6% of girls, $p < .001$).

Table 7: I do not show my emotions to others (n=12,586)

Group	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true	Definitely true	Total
Not bereaved	24.1	45.6	19.4	10.9	100.0
Bereaved	24.4	37.8	18.0	19.8	100.0
			$\chi^2(3) = 19.058, \text{Cramer's } V = .035, p = .000$		
Boys	21.9	44.8	20.9	12.5	100.0
Girls	26.4	46.2	17.7	9.6	100.0
			$\chi^2(3) = 83.909, \text{Cramer's } V = .074, p = .000$		

A logistic regression model was built to explore the relative contributions of gender and experience of bereavement to children’s likelihood of definitely keeping their emotions to themselves. After controlling for gender, the odds of a bereaved child saying they definitely don’t show their emotions to others were 1.94 times the odds of a non-bereaved child [CI: 1.072-3.510].

Table 8: Logistic regression modelling bereavement and gender on likelihood of definitely not showing emotions

Included	Wald (f)	Odds ratio	CI	
			Lower	Upper
Constant	147.408***			
Bereaved of a parent	4.824**	1.940	1.072	3.510
Boy	16.010***	1.326	1.154	1.524

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, Nagelkerke = .006

Conclusion

This preliminary analysis has shown that the death of a parent is a significant predictor of children's likelihood of not telling friends and family about their worries, and of not sharing their emotions with others. Further analysis of the interaction between gender and bereavement is warranted, along with an exploration of other factors that might impact on bereaved children's patterns of communication. Associations between poor communication and children's emotional health, self-esteem and other outcomes could also usefully be explored.

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