

## Childhood Bereavement Network response to Children and Young People's Mental Health – role of education

1. This briefing has been prepared by the Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN), the hub for those working with bereaved children and young people across the UK. CBN promotes the interests of bereaved children, young people and their families, and encourages the development of quality support for them. CBN is hosted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB).
2. Many CBN member organisations offer a range of services to local schools and other education settings. This includes training, staff support, 1:1 and group support for children, and resources. Their involvement often begins when a pupil is facing a death in the family, or has been bereaved, but many also have proactive contact with local schools.

### Numbers of bereaved children

3. Around 1 in 29 school-age children and young people (5-16) have been bereaved at some point in their childhood of a parent or sibling – that is roughly one per class<sup>i</sup>
4.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of 11-16 year olds have been bereaved of someone close to them<sup>ii</sup>
5. 70% of primary schools have at least one recently bereaved pupil on roll<sup>iii</sup>
6. No data is collected annually on the number of children whose parent dies, nor those bereaved of a sibling or someone else close. This hampers service development and is a symptom of an under-addressed issue. For detailed estimates by authority area, please see <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/research/local-statistics.aspx>

### Bereavement, wellbeing and mental health

7. The death of a parent or sibling affects every aspect of children's lives. Often the impact is not just the death itself, but all the further changes that it brings – new working and childcare arrangements for the surviving parent, often moving house and school.
8. Grief affects emotional well being. Teenagers who experienced bereavement at any age have lower **emotional well-being** aged 13 than those who had not been bereaved of a family member, even taking into account their emotional well-being at age 10. *'Family bereavement had continuous, cumulative effects on children's emotional and social well-being, long after the event happened'*.
9. Two years after their parent died, children and young people have significantly **lower self-esteem** than their peers, and feel **less able to effect change**<sup>iv</sup>.
10. Not all bereaved children show their feelings, sometimes to protect others in the family. They are less likely to share their worries with a friend or family member, and have lower life satisfaction<sup>v</sup> than their non-bereaved peers.
11. Grief is not an illness, but it does increase the risk of mental health difficulties, both in childhood and later life. Around 1/3 of bereaved children reach clinical levels of emotional/behavioral difficulties in the two years following a parent's death<sup>vi</sup>.

12. Compared to their non-bereaved peers, children whose mother or father has died are around 1.5 times as likely as non-bereaved children to have a mental disorder<sup>vii</sup>, 3 times more likely to develop new-onset depression, if bereaved suddenly<sup>viii</sup>, more likely to report depressive symptoms at the age of 30 (women)<sup>ix</sup>, 1.7 times more likely to attempt suicide in young adulthood<sup>x</sup> and more likely to be hospitalised for a psychiatric disorder<sup>xi</sup>.

### **Promoting emotional well-being, building resilience, and protecting good mental health**

13. Schools have a dual role to play in promoting the emotional well-being around bereavement.

#### *Providing opportunities to learn about death and bereavement in the curriculum*

14. Given the numbers of children who will experience bereavement during childhood, there is a strong case for them to learn about some of the common feelings associated with loss. The general provision of education about loss and bereavement can help to dispel myths and taboos<sup>xii</sup>. This could reduce the bullying and isolation which bereaved children may experience, and encourage children to seek support for themselves or for friends if they are experiencing a bereavement.
15. Evidence suggests that the majority of children think about death and dying and that *'children have a greater awareness of death than most adults would believe'*<sup>xiii</sup>. 75% adult respondents to a CBN survey in 2007 said they wished their school had taught them about coping with bereavement.
16. However, because of the anxieties and sensitivities around including death and bereavement in the curriculum, many schools do not address it<sup>xiv</sup>. Making PSHE statutory would help schools to prioritise this work and seek the training and support which will help to increase staff confidence in tackling difficult subjects.
17. Meeting the needs of all learners on a topic such as bereavement goes beyond the content of the programme of study. A whole school approach is needed, involving proactive and flexible pastoral support, a system for managing and communicating important information about bereavements, staff training and support, and policy development.
18. Young people's suggestions about what could help to make school a good place to learn about death and bereavement included teachers checking with young people who've recently been bereaved whether they are happy to join in the lesson, no pressure to talk about personal experiences, somewhere quiet to go or someone to talk to after the lesson if they are feeling upset, telling them where they can get further help and support.

#### *Pastoral support*

19. For those children and young people who are experiencing bereavement themselves, schools play a key role in their network of support. Many children find that school can offer them a respite from the change and turmoil at home, while others struggle to get the support they need from staff and peers. Some young people report bullying as a direct result of their bereavement, and some simply feel set apart from their peers by the experiences they have gone through.
20. A flexible pastoral support system involves

- a. checking with the child and family how they would like support to be provided, and how they would like information to be shared with the rest of the class
  - b. a system for managing and communicating important information about a bereavement, including across transitions from one class or school to another. Keeping a note on a child's file of important dates such as the anniversary of a death or the birthday of the person who has died can help subsequent staff maintain an awareness of potentially difficult days for the pupil and family.
  - c. bereavement being included in relevant plans and policies
  - d. staff training and support to increase their awareness and confidence, helping them understand how to respond helpfully, and where to get extra support
21. A senior leader should have responsibility for this provision.

### **Support for young people with mental health problems**

22. Some bereaved young people are vulnerable to mental health problems, and they need swift and easy referral to specialist provision.
23. A range of open access child bereavement services exist in the community, supporting children whatever the cause of death (<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/find-help-near-you.aspx>). Many can offer telephone advice to schools about when to seek extra help for a child. We estimate that between 70 and 80% of local authority areas have such provision, although this may be some distance from families' homes, and there may be a waiting list. Funding is precarious, and many services would be overwhelmed if all the families in their catchment area needed to access them. Where services exist, it is important that schools work in partnership with them to provide seamless support to young people.
24. Some young people will need specialist CAMHS provision. However, we are aware of issues with thresholds to CAMHS services, and reports of CAMHS referring children on to local voluntary sector child bereavement services if there is a bereavement anywhere in the child's history, even if their level of mental health difficulties mean that they need support at specialist CAMHS levels. This just serves to delay treatment and reduce trust among young people and families.

### **Building skills for professionals**

25. Teaching about death and bereavement, and supporting bereaved pupils can feel alarming, and may raise issues for staff about their own experiences of loss. Initial teacher training should give staff a basic understanding of children's responses to loss and change, including death.
26. Many local bereavement services provide twilight sessions to staff, and making these links can also aid referral when children need more help. Child Bereavement UK produces an e-learning package for school staff. There are some interesting examples of bereavement contacts being trained in a cluster of schools, and offered peer support each term.

### **Social media and the internet**

27. The rise of social media and general speediness of communications makes it increasingly difficult for schools to manage information when there has been a death in the school

community. This makes preparation all the more valuable, so that leaders can respond quickly and reassuringly following a death.

28. Social media can also be used as a source of support for young people, helping to establish a sense of community with others who have experienced bereavement. Examples include [www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk) and [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

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<sup>i</sup> Fauth, B., Thompson, M. and Penny, A. (2009) 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, London: NCB.

<sup>ii</sup> Harrison, L. and Harrington, R. (2001). 'Adolescents' bereavement experiences. Prevalence, association with depressive symptoms, and use of services'. *Journal of Adolescents*, 24, 159-169.

<sup>iii</sup> Holland, J. (1993). 'Child bereavement in Humberside Primary Schools'. *Educational Research*, 35 (3), 289-297.

<sup>iv</sup> Worden, WJ (1996) *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York: Guilford Press.

<sup>v</sup> Parkes, A, Sweeting, H and Wight, D (2014) *Growing Up in Scotland: Family and School Influences on Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

<sup>vi</sup> Worden, WJ (1996) *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York: Guilford Press.

<sup>vii</sup> Fauth, B, Thompson, M and Penny, A (2009) *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*. London: National Children's Bureau.

<sup>viii</sup> Melhem, NM and others (2008) 'Antecedents and sequelae of sudden parental death in offspring and surviving caregivers', *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 162(5), 403-410.

<sup>ix</sup> Parsons, S (2011) *Long-term Impact of Childhood Bereavement: Preliminary Analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*. London: Child Well-being Research Centre.

<sup>x</sup> Jakobsen, IS and Christiansen, E (2011) 'Young people's risk of suicide attempts in relation to parental death: A population-based register study.', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 52(2), 176-183.

<sup>xi</sup> Wilcox, HC and others (2010) 'Psychiatric morbidity, violent crime, and suicide among children and adolescents exposed to parental death', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(5), 514-523.

<sup>xii</sup> Rowling, L (2003) *Grief in School Communities* Buckingham: OUP

<sup>xiii</sup> Bowie 2000: 24 in Ribbens McCarthy, J (2005) *ibid*

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