

Grief Matters for Children

Call to action briefing paper



Childhood
Bereavement
Network

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 access high quality 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 Call to Action*, 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 *Call to Action* has been developed in consultation with bereaved children and young people, parents, bereavement care providers and others working with children and families.

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 29 children and young people currently of school age have experienced the death of a parent, brother or sister: that's over 252,000 5- to 16-year-olds in England alone.¹ Around 1 in 16 have been bereaved of a friend and many more are affected by the death of someone else close: 78 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds report that at least one of their close relatives or friends has died.²

A wide range of interrelating factors affect how a particular child responds to bereavement, including their characteristics and previous experiences, the circumstances of the death, their beliefs and culture, their social relationships and the support available to them. The death of someone close affects many aspects of their lives, sometimes for a very long time. As they get older and develop their understanding of the meaning a death has in their lives, young people often revisit their grief, experiencing and expressing it in new ways, particularly at times of further change or loss.

When 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.³

I had a good strong family, we all pulled together and grieved as a family, but I feel for young people and children who might not have this and will need help in other ways. (Bereaved young person)

OUR CALL TO ACTION

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

BEREAVEMENT AND THE EVERY CHILD MATTERS OUTCOMES

Be healthy

Children bereaved of a parent experience more somatic symptoms, accidents and serious illness requiring hospitalisation⁴ and visits to the GP⁵ than their peers. They are more likely to have an anxiety disorder⁶ and to have poor health behaviours,⁷ and bereavement may have effects on mental and emotional health into adulthood.⁸

Stay safe

After a death, children and young people are often anxious about their own safety and that of surviving relatives.⁹ Some report being bullied about their bereavement, and some who are already vulnerable seem to be at increased risk of abuse.¹⁰

Enjoy and achieve

Children, parents and teachers report difficulties at school arising

from poor concentration, lack of interest or bullying. Some bereaved young people underachieve¹¹ and they are more likely to have been excluded.¹² However, 'opposite effects' may emerge as some young people strive particularly hard to succeed.¹³

Make a positive contribution

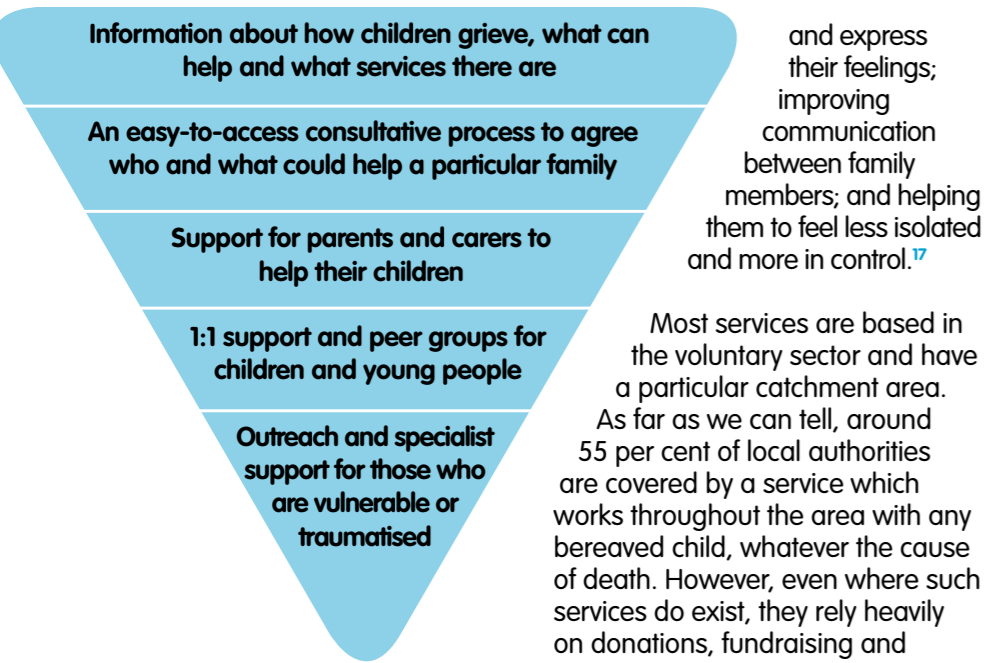
Some studies suggest higher rates of aggressive or disruptive behaviours among children and young people who have been bereaved of their parents.¹⁴ Persistent young offenders are at least four times as likely to have been bereaved of a parent than their peers.¹⁵

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 who had been bereaved of a parent before they were 16 were more likely to be unemployed at 36 than their non-bereaved peers.¹⁶

We're unbelievably good at coping when we get help. (Bereaved young person)

Figure 1: What good provision for bereaved children looks like



and express their feelings; improving communication between family members; and helping them to feel less isolated and more in control.¹⁷

Most services are based in the voluntary sector and have a particular catchment area. As far as we can tell, around 55 per cent of local authorities are covered by a service which works throughout the area with any bereaved child, whatever the cause of death. However, even where such services do exist, they rely heavily on donations, fundraising and volunteers, often struggling to keep their services afloat¹⁸ and they may not be able to cope without extra resources if their profile rises and referrals and demand increase. For details of services, and for guidance in setting up a new service, visit www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

- Guidance for local authorities and PCTs should remind them to:
- include bereaved children and young people among potentially vulnerable groups – as defined in the CAMHS¹⁹ review – whose diverse needs should be assessed
 - plan and commission services in response to the needs identified.
 - include bereavement support in plans for children who are already vulnerable (e.g. those in custody, those in public care).

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

Further research should be undertaken into the diverse social and cultural contexts in which children and young people experience bereavement, the support they want

and how they can be helped to access it.

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. This preventative model of working could benefit children experiencing many other types of change and loss.

- **Adults who work with children get training and support to understand how they might help someone who has been bereaved and where to find extra support.**

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.

Training and support increases practitioners’ awareness of bereavement in childhood and their knowledge of practical ideas for offering support in particular settings, complementing their existing skills in working with children. This increases their confidence and prepares them to respond appropriately to the diverse needs of bereaved children and families, including making referrals to childhood bereavement services whose staff will have had more in-depth training. In a recent CBN survey, 95 per cent of respondents thought teachers should have training to be able to support children if someone close to them 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.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘HIGH QUALITY’ SERVICES?

All subscribers to the Childhood Bereavement Network believe that all children and young people have the right to information, guidance and support to enable them to manage the impact of death on their lives. We believe that any information, guidance and support offered to children should:

- be viewed as part of a continuous learning process for the child, contributing to the development of their knowledge and understanding as they grow into adulthood
- aim, wherever possible, appropriate and feasible, to involve family members, others caregivers and any professionals working with the child in a wider social context.

If this information, guidance or support is offered as a service by an organisation or in a professional context, it should be:

- acknowledge the child’s grief and experience of loss as a result of death
- be responsive to the child’s needs, views and opinions
- respect the child’s family and immediate social situation, and their culture, language, beliefs and religious background
- seek to promote self-esteem and self confidence, and develop communication, decision-making and other life skills

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 are facing or who have experienced bereavement. Training can prepare them to understand better the impact of bereavement, overcome some of their fears and increase their confidence.

To play their part, each school should have:

- **Sensitive and flexible people and systems who provide support and information to children and staff when someone has died.**

Up to 70 per cent of primary schools have at least one recently bereaved pupil on their roll.²⁰ To promote the well-being of bereaved children and young people, a lead person should take responsibility for ensuring that pastoral support is proactive, flexible and involves:

- checking with the child and their family how they would like support to be provided
- a system for managing and communicating important information about a bereavement, including across transitions from one class or school to another
- bereavement being included in relevant plans and policies
- staff training and support to increase their awareness and confidence in providing day-to-day support to a bereaved child
- swift and easy referral to a range of specialist provision as outlined in recent guidance for headteachers and commissioners of targeted mental health services in schools²¹
- 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.²² 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 should 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.

Being with other young people who had been bereaved was the single most helpful thing for me. (Bereaved young person)

Won't this just scare children?

Children and young people are naturally interested in death and bereavement and often raise questions about this issue. Not answering these questions can leave children feeling that the subject is forbidden and that can make them feel even more scared and isolated. Many young people – including those who haven't been bereaved – are keen for death and bereavement to

be incorporated into the curriculum although they are clear that this needs to be handled sensitively. Learning about common feelings and sources of support could encourage children to seek help for themselves or for friends if they are experiencing bereavement. In a recent survey undertaken by CBN, 75 per cent of adult respondents wished their school had taught them about coping with bereavement.

For more details about bereavement in childhood or this Call to Action, please contact the Childhood Bereavement Network at cbn@ncb.org.uk

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