

Organising a family day

By Jackie Browne, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham

Since June 2003 a family day has been held in Nottingham for bereaved parents and children. Many parents say how isolated they feel after a bereavement and wish they could meet other families who had also lost a child. However those involved in child bereavement services may feel unsure about the resources and skills required to organise a large-scale event that meets their needs. This example shows how the enthusiasm of one person can lead to the involvement of a team of people, creating a valued and regular event.

Aims

To enable bereaved families to meet with others in a similar situation, in a safe, informal, supportive environment.

Our specific objective is to provide bereaved families with the opportunity to:

- attend a 'fun' day together, as a family, in memory of the child who died
- meet with other families who have experienced the death of a child
- speak, hear and write their child's name
- take part in craft and remembrance activities in memory of the child who died
- obtain bereavement information and resources
- meet and speak with staff from the hospital
- feedback on the bereavement service and make suggestions for improvements to service and future events.

This leaflet is one of a series showing different models for working with the parents and carers of bereaved children and young people. The series aims to provide practical ideas and inspiration for others thinking about setting up services for bereaved families. Funded by the Parenting Fund, the series is produced by the Childhood Bereavement Network, a national federation of over 300 organisations and individuals and Winston's Wish, a national charity helping children and young people rebuild their lives after a family death.

Principles

A set of key principles underpins our approach to providing bereavement support, and these are reflected in the organisation of the family day. Others thinking about setting up a similar event may find it helpful to take these into account in their planning and development:

- Grief is a natural part of life and not all bereaved families will require intervention. However families need to be aware of the support available should they wish to use it.
- There are generally no rights or wrongs when grieving, as long as it is helpful to the grieving person and is not harmful to themselves or others. Most problems arise from other people's expectations of how people should grieve. Society needs to be more aware of the needs of grieving families.
- Most parents and families do not want to 'let go' of their dead child. They often need to find a way of keeping them in their life, in a way that enables them to carry on and hopefully enjoy their own life, although it will have changed.
- Children should not be 'protected' from grief. They should be involved, informed and given appropriate choices.
- Hospital staff can play an important part in helping grieving families. Although they cannot make it better, they can help create some good memories of a difficult time and at the same time be a good role model and provide the family with information which will help prepare them for what they may face in the future including possible feelings and emotions.

How the family day came about

The family day was initiated by Jackie Browne, the child bereavement facilitator at Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham. Over the years she had heard many parents talk about their isolation and their wish to meet other families who had also lost a child, and had visited services around the country which organised events for bereaved families in a variety of ways. She saw the benefit in replicating something like this in Nottingham, but was initially unsure where to begin and how it could be funded.

The opportunity to work as a volunteer at a family day held at Glenfield Hospital, Leicester gave Jackie the impetus and the confidence to plan a family day for bereaved parents in Nottingham.

Identifying the need

We were aware that, throughout Nottingham, hospices and other organisations held their own remembrance days and events. However there was an unmet need for bereaved families where a child had died, as there was no event like this being held in the city.

Each year in December, Queen's Medical Centre holds an annual service of love, thanksgiving and remembrance for the children and babies who have died, which is really well attended. This provided an ideal opportunity to ask people whether they felt a family day would be helpful. A form was drawn up to explain the day, which families took away to complete and return to the hospital, and it was also announced at the service. The response from parents was very positive. Families receiving ongoing support through the hospital's bereavement service were also asked if they felt such an event would be helpful. Again the response was very positive. The date of the family day was set for June 2003, coinciding with the end of Jackie's first year in post. Once the decision to go ahead had been made, there were many questions to consider.

1. Who to invite?

It was difficult to know how many families to invite and how far back in our records to go. It was important to have clear criteria for deciding whom to invite, to avoid difficulties should a family ask why they had not been invited. In the end we invited all families whose child had died since June 2002, when the child bereavement facilitator post first became operational, up until March 2003. The families whose children died after March were asked to the next year's event. We also invited those families who had indicated an interest in the day at the Christmas remembrance service. We decided on 50 as a minimum number that would make it viable but did not really consider a maximum number.

2. How would it be funded?

The child bereavement facilitator post did not have a budget attached, so funding for the event needed to be sought. Several ward areas with their own charitable trust funds were approached. Fortunately they felt this would be a very appropriate use of the money. A large local company also contributed funding. Local businesses were also approached for smaller practical contributions to the day, for example floral arrangements and plant pots.

3. Who would help with planning, preparation and running the event?

In Leicester, staff from the hospital had been asked to help out. We decided to adopt the same strategy in Nottingham, so a memo was sent out

to all wards and other areas that had an interest in getting involved. The memo outlined the plan for the day and asked for volunteers. The response was overwhelming, and led to the first of many volunteer meetings. A colleague from Leicester attended several of the meetings to answer questions and provide some first-hand experience.

From this point on, the organisation of the family day became a team event rather than a 'one-man job'. The team came up with ideas and plans for the day and were incredibly enthusiastic. The most valuable source of support at this stage was a very enthusiastic and efficient secretary, who took over all paperwork, which was vital as we were to discover that organised, documented planning is crucial for a large event like this. We started our planning in January, giving us six months' preparation time. We would advise anyone else considering a similar event to leave at least this length of time.

4. How would we provide staff training and support?

Running a family fun and activity day, as opposed to an event focused on dealing with grief, meant that not all staff were required to be counsellors or trained in dealing with bereavement. However, many of the staff who volunteered were from children's services within the hospital and many already worked with bereaved families in a variety of ways.

Most staff were allocated jobs on the day that were suited to the role they played within their working life, for example play specialists ran craft activities. Although the staff were volunteers, the majority were given time back in lieu by their individual managers.

During volunteer meetings we talked through the type of support necessary and people were encouraged to ask questions and air any concerns they might have. Staff were encouraged to talk to Jackie individually if they were worried about their own contribution to the day.

The families were asked to have responsibility for their own children, so we did not have a strict ratio of staff to families. However we allocated a certain number of staff for each activity and had several 'floating' staff who were able to give children and parents individual time and support as necessary.

Although not all volunteers have bereavement or counselling training, it is important that some do. If a volunteer is with someone who becomes upset, but does not feel able to support the person themselves, they need to be able to identify who is most appropriate to support that person.

At the end of the family day the volunteers who were able to, met for an informal debriefing session. Volunteers completed an evaluation form and a formal meeting was held to review both staff and family evaluations two weeks after the event.

5. Where would it be held?

Cost was an important consideration for us when choosing the venue, as was accessibility. In addition we wanted somewhere that:

- was comfortable, relaxed and safe
- had an outside area
- had a space that could be easily cleaned to serve as a craft area (for example would not be spoiled with paint)
- could offer a quiet area.

After lots of phoning round for quotes and several visits to different venues, we chose the function suite of a football ground as the venue for the first two family days. It was hoped this would make it more appealing to the men and boys, particularly as a tour of the ground and trophy room was included. However this had a limited outside area and the numbers have now outgrown the venue, so the event now takes place in a country club with beautiful safe gardens, which has added an extra element to the day.

6. What catering would we offer?

The food needed to be suitable for children and adults. It also needed to be available for most of the afternoon to allow for those arriving later and travelling long distances. Vegetarian food was available, clearly labelled and separate from the rest. This was very important for families and volunteers.

7. Any other considerations?

There were a number of other issues we addressed when planning the family day:

Risk assessment/health and safety

We carried out a range of activities to ensure appropriate procedures were followed and the site was accessible and secure, for example:

- all volunteers police checked through the Criminal Records Bureau
- first aid services in place
- fire regulations consulted and disseminated
- insurance provisions put in place
- appropriate toilet facilities were made available
- access for disabled visitors provided
- breastfeeding and baby changing facilities provided
- highchairs provided
- emotional support following the event offered to families and staff.

Paperwork

There were lots of documents to create and distribute:

- invite list with labels
- invitations, with return slips, clearly identifying who and where to return them to
- attendance list
- plan of day
- maps
- minutes of meetings for volunteers
- volunteer list with contact details
- work schedule and activity list
- evaluation forms
- photographic consent forms
- names to be read out
- letters to companies
- thank you letters
- certificate of attendance for volunteers to go in their work profiles.

Format of day

We considered some key questions when planning the event, to ensure it was interesting and ran smoothly:

- which craft activities would appeal to a wide range of ages and interests?
- which leaflets would it be useful to hand out?
- what toys and games should be available?
- what would be good remembrance activities?
- would there be enough for individuals or couples coming without children?
- what is a good way to end the event?
- would there be enough volunteers and time for setting up and clearing up afterwards?
- should it be a one-off or an annual event?

And we ensured we had a microphone and sound system in place!

Cultural issues

We ensured that:

- all families where a child has died were invited to the day
- the day was not a religious occasion and any readings or poems recited during the reading of the names and prior to the balloon release were non-denominational.
- invitations and leaflets were translated into different languages as appropriate.

- at least one volunteer was available who spoke the same language as the families who did not speak English as their first language.

Environmental issues

This was a particular issue in relation to the balloon release, so we ensured that:

- we used only natural latex balloons and helium gas
- the balloons were not tied together in bunches
- all components were biodegradable
- no ribbons or strings were attached
- they were no more than 12 inches in diameter.

The day itself

The day begins with families arriving for a buffet lunch. Craft and memory activities are set up around the room for all members of the family to take part in throughout the day. Other areas include a quiet area, a babies' area and a young people's area. Other events taking place throughout the day include head and neck massages and outside sports events. We ensure that bereavement information and resources are available for those who are interested. Towards the end of the afternoon the names of the children who have died are read out and everyone goes outside for the release of balloons with messages attached. As families leave, we give out goody bags for the children, along with child and adult evaluation forms.

At our event in 2005, 91 adults, 55 children and 30 volunteers attended. We offered the following craft activities:

- painting plant pots
- decorating tiles
- ceramics
- creating memory jars
- decorating trinket boxes
- collages
- cake decorating.

We ran the following memory activities:

- a memory book
- lighting candles
- a memory tree
- make your mark
- labels for balloons
- reading names
- releasing balloons.

Other activities and areas included:

- a 'meet and greet' area at the entrance
- resources/information area
- crèche
- young people's chill-out area
- outside quiet area
- massage area
- cricket/football.

Cost

The total cost of running a family day is approximately £2,000. This breaks down as follows:

Item	Cost £	Total £
Room hire	Free	0
Food and drink	1782.50	1782.50
Sweets/crisps	26.00	26.00
Arts and crafts	75.00	75.00
Balloons	94.00	94.00
Ladybird massagers	67.50 (@ 40% supplier reduction)	67.50
Mini van	15.00	15.00
Icing cans	7.50	7.50
Goody bags	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry people (donated by local company) • Teddies (donated by dieticians) • Drinks (donated by hospital catering) 	0
Candles	Donated by local company	0
Flowers for small tables	Arranged by a member of staff	0
Large flowers	Donated by local college	0
Cookies	Donated by local cookie business; toppings donated by pizza company	0
Pebbles	Donated by local business	0
Pottery	Donated by local pottery painting business	0
Tissues	Donated by local company	0
Total cost		2067.50

Reflections on the family day

We reflected on the process of organising a family day, focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for all involved (a 'SWOT' analysis). Although this is specific to our day, others may identify some areas for further consideration if they are thinking about holding a similar event.

Strengths

- informal
- day for the whole family
- high numbers attending each year (some of whom attend year after year) – helped because it is held on Sunday
- lots of volunteers want to help
- good venue, with distinct areas allowing people to be on their own or to join in
- positive atmosphere, about having fun and remembering, not being sad
- crèche facilities provide opportunity for parents/carers to talk on their own
- information is available
- both parents and children join in, and families can take things home to remind them of the day
- little training necessary for volunteers
- open to all cultures
- releasing of the balloons

Weaknesses

- relatively high cost; lots of organisation
- only available to those who can attend that day
- difficult for staff to know what support will be needed
- relies on goodwill of volunteers and contributions from organisations
- difficulty in knowing what to do about inviting families where there may have been child protection issues
- need space to put the things created during craft activities
- may become too big or small
- need to think of new activities each year
- in 2006 the balloons kept going down so some didn't float away when released
- difficult to give each family an evaluation form on the way out – our only way to know what has worked

Opportunities

- opportunity to find out what support is needed and helpful for bereaved families
- may lead to other events, for example child or adult only events
- could be extended to adult deaths
- could be run/facilitated by trained volunteers/ex-service users
- could be run on a smaller scale in other locations
- opportunity for families to be creative and try a range of different activities
- opportunity to solve the balloon problem so that they stay up!
- opportunities to make friends, meet staff and meet others facing similar challenges

Threats

- funding not being available
- possible lack of volunteers
- trying to out-do ourselves each year and losing sight of the purpose for the day
- venue not being big enough for increasing numbers of families attending
- families becoming bored if activities are not varied enough, and choosing not to come again
- funding might be stopped if there is not enough interest

Evaluation

Families and staff are given evaluation forms for the day. We have separate forms for children and young people. The form asks people to score the venue, food, craft activities and memory activities on a scale of 1 to 4 (where 1 is poor and 4 very good). We convert these into a percentage score to analyse them. We also ask for comments in each section and ask what went well, what could be improved and what suggestions people have for future days.

The day generally evaluates very well. The latest evaluation produced the following ratings:

Area	Family ratings	Staff ratings
Venue	92%	100%
Food	88%	92%
Craft activities	96%	98%
Memory activities	94%	98%

Some of the comments from families included:

'It was a lovely opportunity for new friendships.'

'Just the right atmosphere and level of balance for remembering in a warm caring environment.'

'I enjoyed it very much and cannot think of any way to better the day.'

'It was nice to have the support and be able to talk to staff members and to feel we are not alone. There are lots of others in the same situation.'

'In a way being there helped the process.'

'It is nice to know we are getting continued support.'

'I enjoyed the day and it helped me think about my brother.'

'Make sure it happens in 2006 – thanks.'

Reflection

There are many things we have learnt from running the day, which we would pass on to others considering a similar event:

- it takes a lot of planning
- it is exhausting
- it is a day of mixed emotions – both for families and staff
- it is very rewarding.

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