

A spotlight on children and young people – and remembering Colin Murray Parkes

Emily Harrop

Editor-in-chief, Bereavement

HarropE@cardiff.ac.uk

Welcome to *Bereavement*, Volume 3. As we begin the year with the sad news of the death of our founding and long-serving editor, Colin Murray Parkes, we remember and reflect on his role in the journal, one of his many significant legacies. Colin founded *Bereavement Care* in 1982 with the aim of ‘providing all the people who work to help the bereaved with a forum for discussion and further education’ (Bereavement Care, 1982). Under his editorship the journal became an international research journal read by bereavement professionals and volunteers, academics and researchers and all those with an interest in bereavement (Parkes, 2019; Kerslake, 2020). Forging the way for scientific research sitting alongside personal accounts, the journal continues in this spirit and ambition, publishing material which challenges, stimulates and broadens perspectives (Kerslake, 2020). In this continuing vein, it gives me great pleasure to introduce our first publications of 2024, reflecting on their timely and important contributions to the field.

These four publications share a much-needed focus on children and young people, and what we can do to improve not only the support available to those experiencing bereavement, but the death and grief literacy of our young people more broadly.

Lytje and Dyregov (2024) provide a critique of current approaches to assess complex grief in

children, which like adult models have tended to focus on grief as ‘intra-psychic’ reactions. The authors demonstrate the unique and essential role of a child’s social context and relationships in influencing their responses to grief and bereavement, arguing that family dynamics, community support, and individual reactions should all be considered when assessing and providing care. In focusing on the child’s social environment, the benefits of helping parents to navigate their grief and communicate openly with children are emphasised. The importance of sensitive school environments is also stressed, with teachers and classmates recognised as providing vital support, but often struggling with knowing how to do this effectively, requiring appropriate training and tools.

While not focusing specifically on the experiences of bereaved children, Hughes and Jones (2024) similarly highlight the significance of social networks and environments for enabling children and young people to understand and manage their emotions and anxieties relating to death and bereavement. Their qualitative research exploring children and young people’s experiences and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK identified increasing death anxiety, the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health, and the need for more targeted and specific mental health support. The authors argue for simple, clear and timely information alongside opportunities for children to confidently share and express their emotions around death, dying, and bereavement. They highlight the importance of effective relationships and trust to allow them to communicate confidently in a safe and non-

judgemental environment, whether through informal support from parents and friends or more formal support from teachers or mental health specialists.

Offering an example of what a holistic school-based intervention looks like, Wainer *et al* provide a detailed account of their work in Argentine schools. As in the UK (Dawson *et al*, 2023), the authors observed how death and grief are not included in pedagogical planning, with most educational institutions avoiding engaging with these topics. The dual focus of their project includes equipping schools to better support students facing bereavement, in particular following the death of a member of the school community, whilst also providing workshops on delivering grief education to students. The authors reflect on how their project was increasingly welcomed by students, families and school staff, who recognised the importance of being able to talk to students about death and loss.

Discussing the same topic, a ‘rapid response’ by Scholes to the recent review by Dawson *et al* (2023), similarly acknowledges the value and potential benefits of grief education in schools. However, unlike the review authors, Scholes contests the notion that this should become a mandatory part of the curriculum in Scotland, due to concerns with overcrowding of the existing Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum, the limits of mandatory status in ensuring quality, and time constraints within current teacher training routes. Instead, a model of partnership working is proposed between grief and education experts to find ways of navigating these challenges.

This shared attention to social context, and in particular schools, is timely and well aligned with current public health approaches and initiatives focused on improving community-based support and building a more compassionate society (Aoun *et al*, 2012; Breen *et al*, 2020; Childhood Bereavement Network, 2017). The pandemic shone a light on the need for wide-ranging improvements in the support that is available for people experiencing bereavement, including children and young people. Responding to these challenges the recent landmark report by the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) called for all education settings to provide age-appropriate opportunities for children and

young people to learn about coping with death and bereavement, alongside implementation of a bereavement policy, staff training, and a process for supporting a bereaved child or young person and their family. With a consultation on the Relationships Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum expected in England, the implementation of teacher training on grief and bereavement in Northern Ireland and the development of a new child bereavement support pathway in Wales, the relevance and potential of the journal for informing the pressing grief and bereavement issues of today remains striking – surely an apt tribute to its creator and captain for so many years.

Funding

Emily Harrop’s post is supported by Marie Curie centre grant funding (grant no MCCC-FCO-11-C).

References

- Aoun S, Breen L, O’Connor M, Rumbold B & Nordstrom C (2012). A public health approach to bereavement support services in palliative care. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 36(1), 14-16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-6405.2012.00825.x>
- Bereavement Care (1982) Editorial: A vital step for Cruse-the launch of our regular magazine. *Bereavement Care*, 1(1) 1. Available at: <https://www.bereavementjournal.org/index.php/berc/article/view/27>
- Breen LJ, Kawashima D, Joy K, Cadell S, Roth D... Macdonald ME (2020) Grief literacy: a call to action for compassionate communities. *Death Studies*. 18:1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1739780>
- Childhood Bereavement Network (2017) *Grief Matters for Children*. Available at: <https://nationalbereavementalliance.org.uk/grief-matters-for-children/>
- Dawson L, Hare R, Selman LE, Boseley T, & Penny, A (2023) The one thing guaranteed in life and yet they will not teach you about it: The case for mandatory grief education in UK schools. *Bereavement*, 2 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2023.1082>
- Hughes B & Jones K (2024) Covid-19: the impact of the pandemic and resulting support needs of children and young people. *Bereavement*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2024.1118>

Kerslake D (2020) Tribute to Colin Murray Parkes *Bereavement Care*, 39(3) 102–104. Available at: <https://www.bereavementjournal.org/index.php/berc/article/view/1072>

Lytje M & Dyregov A (2024) Beyond prolonged grief: Exploring the unique nature of complicated grief in bereaved children. *Bereavement* 3. <https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2024.1127>

Parkes CM (2019) Early studies of bereavement and Cruse Bereavement Care. *Bereavement Care*, 38 (2-3). Available at: <https://www.bereavementjournal.org/index.php/berc/article/view/1040>

Scholes S (2024) Where grief education goes to die? A response to making learning about grief, death, and loss mandatory in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence. *Bereavement*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2024.1137>

UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) *Bereavement is everybody's business*. Available at: <https://bereavementcommission.org.uk/ukcb-findings/>

Wainer R, Nespral A & Radosta D-I (2024) Grief in the school: A review of a participatory project in Argentina. *Bereavement*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2024.1121> ■