

Child bereavement in Humberside schools



John Holland

John Holland, MA, BSc, BA, ARICS, PGCE, DipSEN, DipSpLD, DipPsy

Special Needs Teacher, East Riding Learning Support Wawne, Humberside, UK

Children spend such a large proportion of their waking hours at school that it can become a second family, potentially a haven in times of stress. However, this supportive

function cannot be taken for granted. The provision for bereavement in a group of schools was researched in two projects described here, and the findings highlight the need for resources to help schools prepare in advance for bereavement, so that they are in the best position to help both staff and pupils when it occurs.

ATTITUDES TO DEATH

In schools, as in the rest of society, death is a subject on which there is often a cultural taboo. The reasons for the taboo are complex, but one factor may be that we encounter premature death less often, now that life expectancy has been extended and the rate of infant mortality has declined. Death itself has been 'sanitised' by professionals: undertakers, for example, have gradually encroached upon the family role of care for the body after death, so that now it is not usual to retain it in the home before the funeral. Marris¹ points out that the formal grieving structures and conventions which provided a certainty in the past, now frequently go unobserved, leaving a cultural anomie. Holland² mentions other factors, such as the breakdown of the extended family system (which may also result in families being easily isolated and lacking a support network); the decline in religion; the modern faith in science, and the disillusionment if science fails to sustain life.

Helping grieving children

If teachers have a basic awareness of the grieving process, then they will be better able to empathise with, and help, a bereaved child. In common with other adults, teachers often grossly underestimate the under-

EDITOR'S NOTE

When one primary school head heard that the mother of two of her pupils had died leaving them as orphans, she immediately phoned me for advice on handling the children, the staff and the other pupils. This telephone consultation was followed by a visit to the school, where the staff were shocked by and sympathetic to the children's plight and wanted to help. They felt quite unprepared to deal with children's bereavement, even though the Gulbenkian Foundation had distributed the pamphlet 'Wise before the Event' (reviewed on p 11 of this issue) to all schools in the country the year before. How much better it would have been if the school had thought about the possibility before the death (the mother had been seriously ill for many months), prepared their responses and armed themselves with appropriate literature.

Holland's surveys of schools' preparedness for a death within their community are valuable in showing us how much needs to be done. The frequency of bereavement affecting school pupils is here shown to be greater than anticipated and he makes useful suggestions for managing future bereavements in schools by training key teachers and connecting with other agencies.

During the progress of these studies, Holland was also working as a Cruse volunteer. Bereavement services in other areas might be encouraged by his work to offer their services to their local education authorities in training teachers, and in supporting staff and pupils when there is a death, or likelihood of death, affecting their community.

standing that children have of death and are unaware of their real needs. Zach³ contended that by early school age, children have begun to grasp the meaning of death and to fear it. If teachers are not aware of this, then they are less likely to help effectively after a death. Blackburn⁴ identified a mismatch between bereaved children and their teachers which was greatest with primary teachers, surprising, perhaps, as they are with the same children all day. Raphael⁵ suggested that a bereaved child will actually 'mark time' until an adult helps them to express their thoughts and feelings about a bereavement. LeShan⁶ contended that children should be told the truth about the circumstances surrounding a death, thus allowing them to share their grief.

THE RESEARCH

Two research projects were undertaken in Humberside schools, the first in primary schools⁷, the second, in secondary schools⁸. The focus of the projects was on 'normal' bereavement, that is bereavement where there had been neither a large media focus, nor much formal help offered. The projects were intended to examine the school provision for such bereavements, which agencies were asked for help, and other issues, such as the provision of training and allocation of responsibilities within the schools for handling this area.

Both studies were conducted by postal questionnaire to head teachers. A sample of 75 primary schools was chosen at random from a total of 124 schools in the East Riding division of Humberside, and 48 of the questionnaires were returned. Questionnaires were sent out to all the secondary school heads in the county of Humberside; 33 out of 64 were returned.

Of the primary schools, 71% had at least one recently-bereaved child (ie bereaved in the previous two years) on their roll; the secondary schools each had, on average, eight recently-bereaved children. These figures, though greater than had been anticipated, could well be an underestimate, assuming that not all bereavements are reported.

Rating of bereavement

Overall most schools rated the issue of bereavement highly (85% on average). However those primary schools

who did not have a recently-bereaved child on roll, rated it at only 70 %, compared with those that did, at 88% – probably reflecting the greater awareness of those with recent bereavement experience.

Response to bereavement

No primary schools, and only six per cent of secondary schools, had a formal procedure for dealing with a bereavement; most responded in an *ad hoc* manner. This was surprising and seemed at odds with the high rating they gave the issue. Schools may consider that as each bereavement is unique it should be addressed individually and that a formal procedure would be too rigid.

However, it is still possible to have flexibility of response within a general procedural and policy framework. This could give guidelines on such matters as breaking the news to children and staff, making a formal announcement, liaising with home and other agencies, dealing with staff grief and finding counselling help. A framework does ensure that things are thought out before a bereavement occurs, and it is then less likely that something will be omitted in the crisis of the moment.

The absence of formal policy and procedures may be partly related to a lack of expertise and training in this area. However it should be possible to devise a set of guidelines on policy and procedure over time, with all staff contributing, rather than relying on a reactive, crisis-management system.

Responsibility for bereavement

It is useful to delegate one person as a focus to initiate procedures and be available to help the staff at a time of crisis. In 16 % of the surveyed primary schools there was one person directly responsible for bereavement, ranging from the head teacher, the deputy or the special needs co-ordinator, to the home-school liaison teacher. In the primary schools which had a recently-bereaved child on roll, a further 16% had arranged for the staff to be jointly responsible for this area.

In contrast, over 90% of secondary schools had members of staff responsible for bereavement, and in only two of these schools, was responsibility shared by all the staff. Year tutors were in charge of this area in 34% of schools, heads of year in 20%, and head teachers or deputies were responsible in 14% of schools.

The teachers' observations

Tatelbaum⁹ describes the grief process, the stages of shock, anger, denial, withdrawal and depression through which the bereaved may pass. Table 1 shows some of the problems noticed by teachers in the surveyed schools. Over 78 % in the primary sector and 87% in the secondary sector reported noticing either physical or psychological post-bereavement effects. The variation in the problems observed in the two phases of education may reflect the different developmental stages of the children.

The need for training and help

Only five teachers (10%) in the sample of primary schools had received any training in the area of bereavement. The training included courses held by Cruse Bereavement Care, a local hospice and as part of a previous medical career; only one had been directly related to education, an aspect of a special educational needs course. Marginally more expertise was apparent in the secondary sector, where 16% had a trained member of staff.

Primary schools with a recently-bereaved child on the roll were more likely to consider that more training was needed (64%, compared with 58 % without recent experience of bereavement). In the secondary sector, 70 % saw a need for more training.

Four of the five primary schools whose staff had received some training saw the need for more, as did all but one of the primary schools with a delegated person or persons responsible for bereavement. Evidently primary schools with some structure and training in place still tended to feel that more help was needed rather than less. In the secondary sector there was a link between the ratio of bereavements to the total number on roll, and the need felt for more training. The higher the bereavement quotient, the higher the perceived need.

As Table 2 shows there were slight differences between the sectors in the agencies most likely to be approached for help. In primary schools both the church and social services were rated more highly than in secondary schools, perhaps reflecting their more local nature.

Length of the grieving period

Ward¹⁰ suggests that the acceptance of a death, the final stage in the grieving process, generally takes

Table 1 Post-bereavement problems noticed by teachers, in rank order

Primary schools
Disruptive behaviour/ anger
Crying
Withdrawal
Lack of concentration
Distress/ emotional behaviour
Sadness
Obsessive behaviour,
Deterioration in school work
Increased absences,
Moodiness
Fear of death
Secondary schools
Moodiness
Depression
Lack of concentration
Distress/ emotional behaviour
Attention seeking

place during the second year, as the individual adjusts to life without the deceased. A number of factors (eg trauma) may inhibit and delay the grieving process, particularly in the case of children, if it is not facilitated by an adult. Many of the schools did seem to have a fairly realistic idea of the length of the grieving process and to know that it can take a long time to resolve grief.

Death education

A question about death education was only asked in the secondary school study. The issue was addressed by 77% of schools, 44% through personal and social education courses and another 30% through religious education. The rest of the schools used various other subjects as vehicles, including English, humanities and life skills lessons, as well as assemblies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Both studies produced a series of recommendations, some of which resulted from comments made by the schools themselves as part of their response to the survey.

Table 2 Agencies likely to be approached for help

Primary Sector
Social Services
Church
G.P.
Educational Psychologist
Health Visitor
Educational Welfare Officer
Secondary Sector
Educational Psychologist
Educational Welfare Officer
G.P.
Church
Social Services

Primary school recommendations:

- to respond to the schools perceived training needs ;
- to prepare and circulate a help sheet of information;
- to establish a central resource bank.

Secondary school recommendations:

- to continue to respond to the training needs;
- to establish a resource centre from which schools can obtain material or seek help;
- to establish specialist help and support for schools having problems in this area.

It has not been possible as yet to resource all these recommendations. However, training courses on bereavement for teachers did take place in Humberside, and a help sheet was drawn up, giving a summary of the findings of the study, brief advice, and a contacts and book list, and

distributed to all schools in the county.

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the help of Corrine Ludford of Bridlington School and co-researcher, Janis Hostad of Dove House Hospice, Hull, who inspired the primary study. He has also published a handbook for teachers, *Coping with Bereavement* (Cardiff, UK: Cardiff Academic Press, 1997) and is now training as an educational psychologist.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor

The Reading Branch of Cruse Bereavement Care is looking for reports of feelings of euphoria – elation and a sense of well-being – following a death. The feelings may or may not be prolonged, may occur at any stage of bereavement, may perhaps be seen as incongruous or having a religious significance.

If you have encountered reactions of 'emotional excitement', we would be grateful if you would contact us. When we have added your instances to those from our branch of Cruse, we shall prepare a questionnaire for you in order to construct a general, more detailed picture. We should be pleased to receive data from any source, eg clients, friends and personal experiences. Of course, data will be entirely confidential and no names will be required.

JOAN WASON

Reading Cruse Bereavement Care
English Martyrs Community Centre
64 Liebenrood Road
Reading RG30 2EB

R E V I E W S

RESOURCE PACKS

THE GRIEF GAME

Yvonne Searly, Isabelle Strong.
London, UK: Jessica Kingsley, 1996.
Game and booklet: £38.18.

DEALING WITH BEREAVEMENT

Judith Green. Leicester, UK: Youth Work Press, 1995. Booklets and cards: £14.99.

FACING UP

St Catherine's Hospice. Preston, Lancs, UK, 1992. Video and package: £30.00.

LIFE GOES ON

St Margaret's Somerset Hospice. Taunton, Somerset, UK, 1995. Two videos: £58.75 each, £88.20 for both.

GRIEF, BEREAVEMENT AND CHANGE

Penny Casdagli, Francis Gobey.
Cambridge, UK: Daniels Publishing, 1994. Package: £39.95.

There comes a time for most of us, no matter how extensive our experience, when we need ideas and inspiration in our work. The five, quite different items here will, between them, be a valuable source of both these things for bereavement workers for many years to come.

The simplest, apparently, is *The Grief Game*, a therapeutic tool designed by clinical psychologists to help children and adolescents (six to 16 is the recommended age range) come to terms with bereavement. Anyone familiar with the *All about Me* game (Ilford, Essex, UK: Barnardos, 1992) will have some idea what this one is like. There is an attractive board with a start point, and shapes on which players can land, some of which lead to the turning over of a card to do with thoughts, wishes and dreams, or feelings or memories or facts. Each

card carries a question, for example: 'If you had a wish for your special person, what would it be? Does the pain of losing someone ever go away? Did the special person ever hug you?' They are not all emotion-laden – one asks how tall the special person was, another that the player find out what the other players are good at. Together they provide a wide range of topics for discussion using, in the words of the authors, an integrated psychotherapy model which incorporates systemic, cognitive-behavioural, humanistic and psychodynamic orientations. There is a brief but useful accompanying booklet. Highly recommended for therapists; others should approach with caution.

Dealing with Bereavement is for youth workers and others, helping them enable young people to express and explore their feelings on this subject. There are two booklets to set the scene and give suggestions for group work, and a set of cards to facilitate discussion, encourage role play and allow an exercise to be played out.

The introductory booklet covers much of the theory, with particular reference to adolescence. It provides a good start for someone coming fresh to the topic and the sections on religious beliefs and resources are most welcome. The second booklet contains a set of 10 exercises, or activities, which youth workers can carry out. The author is careful to spell out the limitations of what she is offering, but I would have welcomed a clearer indication of the need to debrief at the end of a session, and some suggestions on how this might be done. That apart, this could be a valuable resource for teachers in secondary

schools, as well as youth workers.

Facing Up is a video about a young man who is killed while riding a motor bike, with a set of notes, worksheets and information sheets for teachers. The declared purpose is to challenge young people in their mid-teens with the implications of bereavement. The 25-minute video is well made, and should certainly set the scene effectively. The materials are devised for a session each week for six or seven weeks. There is factual information, a section on emotions and finally a move to bring in other losses, including moving house, divorce and other separations.

The background of the video, and to some extent the package, is Christian and children of other faiths, or those who have none, may find it hard to identify with what is portrayed. However, teachers do not have to follow the package as though it were a cook book. Of all the approaches reviewed here, this is the most school-like, in that there are many suggestions for discussions and a lot of questions to put to children. It is well worth looking at, although some of the material may need to be adapted.

The training video, *Life Goes on*, from St Margaret's hospice comes in a 15 and a 30-minute version. Both contain the same basic material: an account by four girls aged between 14 and about 20 of the death of a parent and how they have, or have not, coped. With admirable candour they talk of their immediate responses, the way their school or college behaved, the part played by friends and counsellors. They articulate their regrets and give example upon example of ways in which they have come to terms with

their loss. Both contain the same stories, but the longer version has more detail and if only one could be bought, this is the one to go for. There appears to be no accompanying literature which is a shame since many of the ideas expressed, even in the longer version, could bear discussion. Although called training videos, either could be used with a youth group to illustrate points, although there is far too much material to show either of them all at once.

The Neti-Neti Theatre Company was founded in 1987 and since then has made a name for itself by producing theatre for young people which is, in their words, challenging and accessible. Having seen two of their performances, I can vouch for that, and would add that when they have dealt with death, they have reached deep emotional levels as well. Their pack, *Grief, Bereavement and Change*, consists of detailed notes for five workshops for young people, with sections on further reading and contact addresses. A video, *Grief**, is available separately from Neti-Neti and may be used with the pack.

There is an enormous range of ideas and of topics touched upon, with the underlying aim of opening up issues and making it safe to talk about them. The workshops are designed to run over five weeks but there is more than enough material in each to extend over a longer period. The authors are careful in their background discussion to emphasise the need to be aware of the structure of group work, the need, for example, to warm up first and to debrief at the end.

The contents of the workshops are in many ways different from the other