

Parents' support group in Dunblane

Getting through the first year after a violent bereavement

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Dunblane families face anniversary united in grief*

One year after the Dunblane shootings, in which 16 primary school children and their teacher were killed, the victims' parents said that they had learnt to cope with their grief through meeting every week to laugh and cry together.

The meetings, held every Thursday evening in the town's Ecumenical Hall, were suggested to the families by social workers and have become an emotional anchor in their lives. Les Morton, who lost his daughter Emily in the massacre on March 13 1996, said: 'A lot of people talk about Thursday evenings, that the meetings are the highlight of their week and I can understand that because it is actually very difficult to lead what people might think is a normal life. In a funny way, the only people that I can be myself with are the other bereaved parents, because they are the only people who really know how I feel and I know how they feel.'

The parents were speaking exclusively on an ITV documentary, 'Dunblane: Remembering Our Children' which was screened on the first anniversary of the killings. Ellen Petrie, whose son John was killed, said: 'I look forward to a Thursday to go and have a blather with the girls, where we can have a drink, a laugh and we're not crying all the time. And then Friday morning I feel fine.' Her husband, Sandy, said: 'You can feel your week falling away, and then it comes to the Thursday night and once you've been where the other people know exactly how you feel, you get that lift.'

Liz McLennan, mother of Abigail, said that the members of the families took it in

turn to deal with media inquiries, depending on how strong they felt. There is always somebody ready there to pick up: like in a battlefield, when the guy who holds the banner falls, there is always somebody behind to pick up that banner and to go forward.'

Martyn Dunn, whose daughter Charlotte died, said that the other parents had become like an extended family. He and his wife, Barbara, moved to England after the shootings because of his job but they visit Charlotte's grave in Dunblane regularly. 'Even though we are 300 miles away, we know that the extended family are looking after our interests,' he said. Mr Dunn said that all the families had co-operated with the programme makers, but only eight of the families had agreed to be interviewed because the others had not felt strong enough.

David Scott, father of Hannah, said: 'We decided to make this film to show how we can be positive, how difficult it is day to day, how all of our priorities have changed and how the children and Gwen [their teacher] live on.'

The parents said they had only recently started talking about the shooting itself. Most of their energy has been spent getting through one day at a time, and supporting surviving children. Mrs Petrie said she took comfort every day from going into her son's room. 'In the morning I open his blind and

we've got a woollen doll and I'll say, "Morning wee man", and I know he's not going to answer me but this helps me through the day.'

Her husband, Sandy, added: 'At night I close up his room and I always read him a story. I found it very, very comforting to do that, it's something I always did when he was alive. I actually draw quite a bit of strength from it, in the sense that you are there for ten, fifteen minutes, well on your own with somebody watching from above.' **BC**

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The Summer 1997 issue of *Bereavement Care* carried an Editorial about the seminars that the team from the Traumatic Stress Clinic, London, gave in Dunblane, Scotland to the professionals offering help to the bereaved families. Last November we were invited back. The group working with the families had shrunk, appropriately, and some from other districts had returned to their previous work. What those who remained were struggling with was the difficulty of helping those with chronic, unremitting grief, without feeling impatient or irritated with their clients or despondent at their seeming lack of progress. The parents quoted in this article found much solace from the other bereaved parents in a self-help group which met regularly without professional support. Some parents, coming from traditionally self-sufficient, rural Scottish stock, resented the assumption made by many that bereavement was an illness, or a weakness, from which they could not recover without treatment. And yet, if we are to reduce the numbers of bereaved people who become chronically affected by grief, we must learn more effective ways of predicting who are most in danger of developing morbid grief and persuading them to inoculate themselves by accepting a preventive intervention known to reduce this risk. As Parkes points out (p17), not all bereaved people need specific counselling but we must put at the service of those who are likely to need it, our knowledge of the consequences of traumatic bereavements and find ways of convincing them that we have something of value to offer them. We publish this article not long after a similar massacre at a school in Arizona, USA (though there the perpetrators were fellow-pupils) and at a time when the public are reacting to a controversially sympathetic account of a child-murderer who also was a child when she killed.



The parents who appeared in the ITV documentary in March 1997

Photo by Meridian Broadcasting