

# Planting the garden

## Opening up communication within a family

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Fairy tales, morality plays, parables – throughout the ages the power of metaphor has long been recognised as an essential tool in communicating ideas and seeking to bring about change. In bereavement work the use of metaphor is limited only by the imagination of the worker.

I had devised an exercise for a family who were struggling to cope with the death of a family member, to inform me of who knew what and also what they each wanted of me. This exercise revealed that the facts surrounding the death had not been shared with the children, though they may have had knowledge from other sources, for example, the media. The facts challenged the essence of the dead person, something one parent found too hard to contemplate.

Communication, or lack of it, was a central issue in this family – secrets known, or not known, but certainly not shared. I wanted to work on the family's hidden agenda, but my colleagues slowed me down: 'Why not aim to begin the communication rather than try to define the problem,' they said. 'Here's an idea...'

### The garden metaphor

At my next meeting with the whole (nuclear) family, I checked that everyone had a basic understanding of why I was there, and then began to describe my metaphor. 'The family is like a garden, and the plants are the people. Each plant is different and special. But some-

times the plants don't know how special they are or don't think that they are special at all. This little game will help you tell each other, and yourselves, how special you are.'

I cut out the parts of flowers from coloured paper – oval petals, circular centre, stalk, leaves – and for each member of the family put enough parts to make one flower into an envelope big enough to take the whole flower once it was constructed. On two of the petals I asked everyone to write or draw something



good about themselves; these petals could be shared or kept secret. On the other petals, something good about each other person in the family was to be drawn or written, and these petals were then given to the person concerned. Once everyone had received all their petals, they pasted them to the centre and made up their flowers, which were put in the envelopes and kept safely. While most of the thoughts on the petals were openly shared, each person sealed their envelope and the children stamped theirs 'SECRET'.

The act of giving good thoughts to each other was a positive and uncommon experience for this family. Adults can find it hard to write good things about themselves: when the Dad in this family was struggling, the children quickly offered their ideas to help him complete his flower. To share and, at the same time, to have acknowledged their need to keep things hidden, gave the family permission for change but at a rate that they could control.

The need to care for and tend to each other were clear messages from the metaphor. How many other meanings each person got from that exercise only they would know; suffice to say that each of them keenly agreed to my coming back and doing more, including the adults for whom the exercise was probably most difficult as it involved a medium which might have seemed more relevant to children.

This was the start of the garden metaphor. It may go on to explore the roots below the soil, the different needs of each plant, the bugs that hinder growth, the hidden things under the stones. However it grows, the seed of how good it can be to talk together has been sown and, with time, may produce a garden in full bloom. BC

## REVIEW

### VIDEO AND WORKPACK

#### WHEN A CHILD GRIEVES

*Jenni Thomas, Caroline Jay, Ann Couldrick*  
Henley Road, Marlow, Bucks SL7 2DX, UK: *The Child Bereavement Trust, 1997. Double video, £25.00; workpack, £5.00*

This training pack is the best of its kind that I have seen. Excellent for professionals and other concerned adults, the videos can also be viewed by bereaved children and families but, I would suggest, only in the presence of a professional able to pick up on any issues raised.

The first section of the double video, *When a Child Grieves* (30 mins), is for professionals and portrays the needs of the bereaved child, with enlightening contributions from parents. Experienced professionals give clear, easy to understand accounts of the needs of these children, as well as offering practical suggestions about how these needs can best be met. The video presents

nothing new, but it reinforces in a compassionate yet powerful way what those experienced in this area of work know to be important in helping children grieve.

The youngsters featured make compelling viewing for anyone faced with the challenge of working with this age group: they are extremely articulate and speak naturally and spontaneously about their experiences, unlike those in other videos where responses often appear stage-managed to fit the theoretical model being presented. The stories and experiences are powerfully presented, with lots of important detail such as the child's age and relationship to the dead person. Loss in a school setting is also discussed with plenty of suggestions for teachers.

The second part, *Someone Died - 'It Happened to Me'* (25 mins) is also available separately at £15.00. It is intended for bereaved children and teenagers and shows young people sharing their experiences of death, giving moving accounts of how they were told about it, the way they felt and what their reactions were. Important

issues, such as seeing the body, attending the funeral, returning to school and living with the loss, are explored in detail, and the young people say what helped and what did not. Professionals are shown using a variety of techniques to help the young people express their feelings, and parents share their perceptions and understanding of their child's behaviour following the death. My only criticism is of the short interludes when an animated character, 'Gill the Gull', is used; I found these irritating and felt they detracted from the powerful messages being given.

The training and activity pack offers lots of ideas to help children and families explore and express their feelings – very useful for a variety of groupwork settings.

I congratulate the authors on producing such a moving and informative educational resource and highly recommend it to all who work with bereaved children.

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