

Including the parents

AGE RANGE
5-11 years old

Reacting creatively to parental concerns

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Barnardo's Orchard Project is a bereavement and serious illness project running a number of support programmes for families with children living within a 30-mile radius of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. During the year 1998-1999 we worked with 243 families, including 177 children. Our main focus has always been on families affected by bereavement, offering them an initial assessment followed by an intervention involving either the children, the parent(s) or the whole family. We feel it is essential to evaluate this programme regularly to ensure that we develop our practice and continue to offer the best possible service. In 1997 we commissioned an independent researcher in the field to do an evaluation study of our work with bereaved children. From our records a sample was selected of 21 families whose cases were closed, and eight of these agreed to be interviewed.

The results were very positive and encouraging, but the study picked up on concerns expressed by some parents who had felt excluded at the time when their child had been involved in individual play sessions with the social worker. It has always been central to our interventions to enhance the parent-child relationship, as well as helping the children to develop their own inner resources. So there was a clear need to consider ways in which we could maintain links with parents and help them to feel

included in our individual work with their children. At the same time, it would be essential to respect the confidentiality that is such an important part of the contract of work with the child².

I considered ways in which parents could be more involved and, with an enormous amount of help from some children, developed the following idea, taking our original concept of the working contract³ one step further by devising a new format for it. Instead of the child and worker designing an individual one-page agreement together, as previously, the child and I now created a booklet in our first session. It contained two pages for each session: one page identified clearly the date, time and number of the session and how many sessions remained; the other page was blank except for the session number as a heading. The purpose of the empty space was for the children to represent thoughts, feelings or the activities they had participated in during the session. I gave each child the choice of working on this project at home or using some time at the end of session. Without exception the children asked to take this booklet home and, in the main, to share the information in it with their parents. I anticipated that the booklet might not return each week and occasionally this did happen. However most of the time the children brought their booklets back to sessions and were always eager to show their representations

to me. The ability of the children to display as art an important part of their bereavement work was incredible and to see it was a very humbling experience; their creativity never ceased to amaze me

For the parents' part, I asked them not to place any pressure on their children to share their work, but to remind them gently that the booklet was available for them to draw or write in if they chose to do so in between sessions. This agreement echoes the general ethos of our work.

The outcome of this development was that children continued to receive a confidential service. They remained in charge, sharing only the details they chose with their parents, and parents felt included in the work throughout the process. This helped to develop communication between parent and child, and to cement the working relationship between all three of us, without compromising the integrity of the therapeutic relationship. The positive comments from both parents and children, and the enthusiasm with which the exercise was carried out, convinced me of the success of this working tool. It is always a privilege to be shown the completed document at the end of a series of session and to see how the concept continues to develop as each child and parent discover new ways of using the booklet together.

References

1. Pugh K. The Orchard Project. An evaluation study, 1997.
2. Smith C, Pennells M. Interventions with Bereaved Children. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley, 1995.
3. Hemmings P. Drawing the boundaries: helping young children to understand the therapeutic relationship and anticipate its ending. *Bereavement Care* 1998; 17(2): 27.

BOOK REVIEW

ON BEREAVEMENT

The culture of grief

Tony Walter

Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1999.
£55.00 hb £17.99 pb

In recent years books on bereavement, whether by psychologists, psychiatrists or the bereaved themselves, have concentrated on the individual, mentioning the social context only in passing, if at all. It is thus refreshing to learn about bereavement from Walter, a sociologist, who places emphasis on culture as a framework to help us to better understand bereavement and grief.

The first part of the book deals with the ways in which human societies – traditional, modern and post-modern – engage with and relate to their dead. Walters looks at the way in which nation, generation and gender shape social responses, and the importance of war this century as a source of multiple bereavement

reactions. He also encourages us to think about social and cultural responses to death in peacetime when it seems that remembering the dead has become a private matter.

Part II considers theories of bereavement and how grief would appear to be 'policed' in modern Western society. In the chapter on bereavement care, Walters writes expansively on mutual help groups, bereavement counsellors and therapists. However, no mention is made of the role of the health care professionals in the National Health Service as potential supporters of the bereaved. My own research*, for instance, found that health visitors, especially, have a vital role in supporting families after the death of a child.

I have benefited greatly from reading this fascinating and informative book, so well researched. Every chapter is filled with thought-provoking material, and further reading matter and questions at the end of each help the reader

consolidate what has been put forward. The whole is like a rich fruit cake which anyone seriously interested in increasing their understanding of bereavement is encouraged to digest. Parkes calls it a *tour de force*, a view I would certainly endorse. BC

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* Dent A, Condon L, Blair P, Fleming P. A study of bereavement care after a sudden and unexpected death. *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 1996; 74 (6): 522-526.

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