

Responding to the needs of schools in supporting bereaved children



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Every year many children in the UK are bereaved, often suddenly and unexpectedly. The families involved may have little in common other than the bereavement, but the school-age children will all share the experience of being in full-time education. To find out how schools in south east London coped with bereaved children, the St Christopher's Candle Project conducted a survey. The results revealed considerable unmet need among teachers for support in helping children cope with bereavement at school.

Children spend about six hours a day in school and will probably see more of their teachers than any other adult outside the immediate family. In an article for *Bereavement Care* in 1988¹ Pynooos wrote about the response of the school being critical to full recovery and made recommendations about preparing pupils and raising awareness in teachers of bereaved children's needs. In a study of 49 adolescents aged 16-18, Weitz² found that respondents would have liked more support from their schools.

Bereavement services for children have been aware of the importance of schools for some years and have offered training courses for teachers. However, the individuals delegated by the Headteacher to attend have often been expected to act as a resource for the whole school on their return, which can present difficulties and feel pressurising for the teacher concerned.

The St Christopher's Candle Project was launched in March 1998, extending the help the bereavement service had always offered to children and families where the death had a connection with the hospice,

to all bereaved children in south east London. At the start of this new project we wanted to learn more from the group of professionals we felt were of great importance in the lives of bereaved children: their teachers. We sent out a

EDITOR'S NOTE

This survey by St Christopher's Hospice Candle Project indicates that bereavement within schools is ubiquitous (nearly four fifths of schools had had a child bereaved within the previous two years) and the teaching staff generally lack confidence about how to help the children affected. The Gulbenkian Foundation distributed Yule and Gold's invaluable book, *Wise before the Event*², to all schools in 1993 but presumably it gathers dust in some corner of the Headteacher's room in many cases, for few of the teachers seemed to know of it or other sources of advice. Bereavement services should consider contacting schools in their area to make known their services and provide on a regular basis – say every year – information about what is available to help bereaved children.

brief questionnaire to all schools in the catchment area of the project to accompany the initial publicity material, asking them about their experiences of working with bereaved children and their identified needs for resources and help.

METHODS

The questionnaire, on two sides of A4 paper, included closed and open questions to identify the numbers of children bereaved within schools, difficulties experienced by teachers, help received and support needs. This was sent, followed by one reminder, to the Headteacher of 545 infant, nursery and primary, 110 secondary and 43 special schools. A summary of main responses to closed questions was undertaken, together with an analysis of main themes arising from open questions, using standardised software packages in both cases (SPSSpc and Atlas.ti respectively).

RESULTS

Responses were received from 325 schools (46.6%), which included 45.3% (247/545) of the nursery, infant and primary schools, 52.7% (58/110) of the secondary schools and 46.5% (20/43) of the special schools.

Most respondents (79.8%;256) said that they had had children bereaved by death at school within the last two years and comments were made on the impact of bereavement:

'A death of a child is a numbing experience for the school community. The grieving process needs to be handled with such care. I was grateful that I was able to talk to one of your counsellors if only to check that we were doing the right thing.'

'We felt inexperienced and hoped we were dealing with the situation appropriately – we could have done with guidance.'

Just under half of 232 respondents (48.7%; 113) reported having one or two bereaved children at school; almost a quarter (23.7%; 55) reported 3-4, and 27.6% (64) reported 5 or more. Significantly more secondary schools reported bereaved children (52.0%; 25/48) than primary (20.0%; 34/170) or special schools (35.7%; 5/14). The types of bereavement that teachers reported included the deaths of parents, siblings, grandparents, pupils, teachers, and for two schools, pets.

Difficulties in working with bereaved children

Over half of responding teachers (56.5%;175/309) said that they had experienced difficulty working with bereaved children, for example in coping with emotions, knowing what to say and how to say it.

'(The) questionnaire arrived on my desk on the morning that one of our pupils had died...I felt completely at a loss as to how to deal with both adults' and children's feelings. I also feel there is no-one to support me...'

'Knowing what to say – I usually resort to just cuddling or showing sympathy in a physical way.'

'Knowing what to say to them so that it doesn't contradict what family is telling us.'

Difficulty was also reported where a death was anticipated:

'We have a family at the moment where mum is terminally ill. The children are unaware of this fact. I wonder what the effect will be on the children if they are unprepared.'

Teachers reported children as experiencing difficulties that included behavioural problems, for example arguing or becoming aggressive, losing concentration, learning difficulties, withdrawal or becoming school phobic, difficulty in forming relationships and in expressing emotions.

'I have found the difficulty for some children who have either lost a parent or sibling is that they try to spare their parent any added problems by hiding their own grief and appearing to cope and this therefore finds its outlet in school.'

Help received

Of those teachers who reported bereaved children at school and/or had experienced difficulty in supporting them, 52.7% (144/273) had received help from one or more of the following services:

Educational psychologist	38.2% (55)
Educational social workers	17.4% (25)
Social Services	22.2% (32)
Child Guidance	25.7% (37)
Church/religious body	36.8% (53)

Other sources of help included hospices, the London Educational Authority, Cruse Bereavement Care, a welfare officer, parents and other family members, bereavement counsellors, a school nurse and a Macmillan nurse.

Help requested

While a few schools indicated that they could provide support and counselling

themselves, most commented that they would value additional support. The type of support requested from Candle included:

Written information and resources	69.8% (227)
Individual help for children	63.1% (205)
Consultancy for parents or teachers	61.2% (199)
Help for parents	45.8% (149)
Training for teachers	39.7% (129)
Groups for children	19.7% (64)

The importance of developing bereavement skills in preparation for a bereavement, whether anticipated or not, was highlighted:

'We would need eventually to be prepared to cope with any death, ie to gradually extend our knowledge and expertise to deal with these circumstances. We don't know what will happen to anyone in the future.'

Direct and easy access to help at the time of need was also important, including the benefits of telephone advice:

'There are obviously ongoing needs whilst there will be those that arise suddenly, eg due to sudden deaths, and a helpline advice centre would prove invaluable.'

Most teachers preferred support for the death of a parent (81.2%; 264) but also for death of a sibling (59.4%; 193), death of a pupil (54.5%; 177), and death of a teacher (35.1%; 114). Support was also needed for the death of grandparents, and in two cases, the death of pets. One or more teachers requested help in the following circumstances:

- talking about bereavement with a child and parent
- helping and supporting a bereaved child
- coping with strong emotions
- responding to child behavioural problems
- supporting a whole school after the death of a pupil
- helping children interact with a bereaved child
- supporting other staff
- coping themselves.


CONCLUSION

Most responding teachers had experienced bereavement by death within their school. We do not know of course about the experiences of those who did not respond, and therefore it is likely that the average figures of bereaved children in schools

may be less than those reported here. However, the results show how widespread the effect of bereavement can be at school, including the impact on the child, other pupils, teachers and family.

Over half of responding teachers reported experiencing difficulty and, while many had received some form of help, for most this appeared to be insufficient. The survey indicated an extensive need for better support for teachers working to help children who have suffered a bereavement through death, despite initiatives such as the widespread circulation in 1993 of a book to assist teachers in supporting bereaved children³.

The responses to the questionnaire validated the way we had been approaching work with schools, emphasising flexibility and a swift response to requests for help. We had been offering to attend a regular staff meeting, to be arranged as soon as possible following the request, and to talk briefly about the needs of bereaved children in general, before focusing on the specific instances of children of immediate concern in their school. This approach had received very positive feedback. The meeting with staff would be backed up with more intensive training within an Inset programme, where time and finances allowed. Being available by telephone and always returning calls swiftly was also important, as was the provision of booklists and inexpensive literature for bereaved children and parents.

All bereavement services must be aware of the need to demonstrate efficacy, however difficult this proves to be in practice⁴. With this aim in mind, the Candle project has obtained monies for a research project which will look at the effect of the individual, group and family work provided by the project on the behaviour of the bereaved children in school. The work will be undertaken by the Department of Palliative Care and Policy, King's College, London, and we shall report back on the findings when the work has been completed. 

References

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