

It is important for care providers to recognise their losses and grief responses to the dying and death of their patients, and to feel assured that they can rely upon a network of colleagues who will provide and offer each other various forms of support¹⁵. This could be progressively achieved through basic education, professional training and ongoing support to meet the individual and collective needs of members of a specific team, at a given time. In this way, quality services can be ensured and professionals can derive a deep sense of satisfaction by contributing meaningfully and creatively to the living and dying of their fellow humans. **BC**

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COUNSELLING BEREAVED CHILDREN

Button sculpting

AGE RANGE
5-6 to adult

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All human relationships are imperfect and, when someone dies, it is the imperfections that are the hardest things to mourn. We all have regrets about what we have or have not done or said during the person's lifetime and these are often the elements of the relationship which trouble us most. It is these aspects that evoke the 'If only ...' statements that express the longing for things to have been otherwise. Our inability to make it different, have another chance to make amends, is absolute and the process of mourning is, in part, about recognising these flaws and reviewing the reality of the relationship, warts and all.

The review depends upon having a degree of clarity about the nature of the relationship and personal honesty about its less positive aspects. One of the key factors in this process is the ability to form an objective overview of the context of the relationship and the dynamics at play. Clearly all these elements present immense difficulties to children and young people, not least because of their cognitive immaturity and limited ability to have insight into other people's behaviours.

Button sculpting offers a simple technique which enables a child to begin to explore someone's personal characteristics, analyse the quality and significant features of their relationship with them and look at the effect other relationships had upon them both. From there it is a considerably smaller step to piece together a clearer understanding of the nature of the

relationship and the meaning of what has been lost. The technique can also be used with families and in supervision, to explore and explain family dynamics.

All you need for this exercise is a sheet of A4 paper and a box of assorted buttons. It is helpful to have a range of buttons that include some from baby clothes (eg bunnies, decorated etc), some ornate, glittery buttons (eg diamanté, gold etc) and some from a range of outdoor wear (eg toggles, leather, metal etc). If possible include some sequins, keys, twigs, conkers, shells, small pebbles, feathers, in fact anything which is inanimate and of a similar size to the main collection of items.

It is advisable to model to the child what the exercise entails rather than try to explain it verbally. I suggest you think of someone you both know and with whom the child has no emotional relationship, perhaps a character from a television programme, film or book etc. Together you can explore that person's defining personal qualities – general mood, sense of humour, friendliness – and some of the activities associated with them – sport, talents, interests – as a way of building up a picture of who they are and significant things they do. As you are identifying each element, look for a button or object in the collection that could stand for each one and place them close together on the paper. Sometimes the qualities identified might lead to one button overlapping or being placed on top of another. By the end of the activity there will

be a cluster of objects that describe the chosen person.

This preparatory activity defines the exercise and enables the child to go ahead and choose someone from the family and analyse and construct them similarly. Once one person is on the page it naturally leads the child on to putting the rest of the family around them. Remember, pets are often important members of a child's family too.

The ways in which children choose buttons, searching carefully for one which is either just right or good enough, is fascinating and demonstrates their involvement with the exercise. The patterning of family members on the paper, particularly the spaces in between, can reveal an insight into the child's perception of his family which words could never describe. The process makes concrete the child's view and facilitates a conversation alongside the activity which is indirectly determined by the child's initiative. The process can enhance the child's appreciation of the different relationships within the family and their own place within it. In addition lines can be drawn between the different people to represent the strength and quality of the relationships within the group.

Anyone else looking at the page would only see a pile of buttons but you both know it has a much greater significance. **BC**

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