

systems approach to the dying and bereaved is the book by Sutcliffe, Tufnell and Cornish (in Further Reading below). This describes in detail work with a bereaved family and also challenge our ideas of the mourning process using a systems perspective.

The 'family bereavement program' of Sandler and his colleagues in Arizona¹⁵ is a well-researched intervention programme, designed to improve the variables in the family environment which had been found to affect child mental health. They found that use of the programme increased parental perceptions of the warmth of their relationship with their children, increased satisfaction with social support, and reduced parental reports of depression and conduct disorders in their older children. There were fewer positive reports from the children and younger children did not seem to benefit significantly.

Probably in our present state of knowledge, the pragmatic use of a mixture of individual and family counselling sessions will best meet the needs of the children and their families when we are asked to help. **EC**

Further reading about family therapy

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editors

One of my clients whose elderly mother died recently was particularly upset after the death of the Queen Mother. Many of the comments she heard and read in the media seem to devalue the loss experienced by members of the royal family, and she remembered similar comments following the death of her own mother.

It is true that the Queen Mother died peacefully following a very long and relatively happy life and such a fact can be accepted with thankfulness. However, the crucial point is not so much how and when she died but that she has been lost to those who loved her, and trying to provide a consolation by repeating such facts can be hurtful and unhelpful. Comments like these contain little empathy or real understanding of the feelings of the bereaved.

The details of a death should not affect the 'entitlement' of a family or friends to grieve. While of course everyone will react differently, feelings of deep sadness will be part of the experience for many and I am concerned that we can be in a sense 'talked out' of what are natural, normal feelings. This was certainly the experience my client had when she was made to feel guilty for being upset by the death of her old mother.

In such situations others can appear to act as 'loss adjusters' - adjusting the loss down to what they consider to be acceptable! This is hardly helpful and may in some instances cause more distress and possibly even harm. The reasons for such comments are too complex to discuss here, but your journal has published some helpful articles on this and related topics. In particular I have found one by Doka¹ and another by Scrutton² useful.

I hope my comments will provoke thought and would be interested to hear of the experience of others on this topic. I should also say that my client has read and approved of the text of this letter.

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Dear Editors

I read with interest Jean Harris-Hendrik's review of the Harry Potter series in the Spring issue of *Bereavement Care* (p11). While I appreciate many children and adults have thoroughly enjoyed these books, I felt I could not let this glowing endorsement of them pass unchallenged.

The books are fun, yes, full of magic and excitement, but they deal almost entirely with a white, middle-class world where

children go to boarding school. As a result many young people may find it difficult to identify with Harry's bereavement in a situation so far removed from their own. I cannot see that these books have much to offer black and other minority ethnic children, such as those who attend the same inner-city school as my 10-year-old daughter, Ruth. In a brief survey she found out that she is the only child in her class who has read them and, although she enjoyed them initially, she recently announced that she has 'gone off' the series.

Not only are the books almost entirely about white children but, apart from a few girl characters, they are mostly about boys. I think this matters because, as the mother of four daughters, I can see how marginalised girls are in so many ways. Books, films, television programmes are rarely about them. All too quickly many girls and boys get the message that what girls think or want does not matter.

What a refreshing change, then, are the books by Jacqueline Wilson, such as *Vicky Angel*, also reviewed by Jean Harris-Hendricks in the same issue (p15). These are about ordinary teenage girls facing and surviving all sorts of issues like death, divorce and not getting on with parents, without the help of magic or wizards or such escape routes as a thrilling boarding school. My daughter can't get enough of them.

The review makes much of the fact that Harry Potter has a head teacher who is 'one of many parent figures whom the school has made available to Harry'. As a social worker in a hospice I, and a colleague, run regular children's bereavement days where many of the children have been bereaved by cancer, HIV/AIDS and accidents. Many have lost their only surviving parent. Very few of them appear to get any support from their schools and, perhaps because of the pressure schools are under these days, those 'parent figures' are often sadly lacking.

I think the series may also have some other unhealthy messages. Why is the nasty Dudley portrayed as being so fat? Lots of children, especially nowadays, are overweight. It might be more helpful to address this issue in a way that does not vilify them.

There may be nothing wrong with reading Harry Potter books as a bit of relaxation but don't let's set them up as great standards of literature or as offering great insights into bereavement. Let's find other books to help our children!

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We would like to hear from readers who know of bereavement resources for young people that are racially and culturally sensitive and appropriate, and which avoid caricatures. Eds