

# Bereavement in primary education

## A study of a group of schools



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**WE ARE AWARE THAT** it is not only necessary but also healthy to be open about death, but taboos about this subject persist, particularly in western society. With this paradox in mind, a project was set up to look at issues relating to bereavement in the primary schools of an area of SE England, and investigate some of the relevant resources available locally. The study was partly based on a similar one by John Holland in 1993<sup>1</sup> and this report compares the two sets of findings.

Questionnaires were used to research the attitudes to bereavement in 46 primary schools, chosen at random in the Medway area near London in 2003. Structured interviews were held with eight teachers at four of the schools, and questionnaires were also sent to some of the training and educational options potentially available to the schools.

### The schools

Of the schools contacted, 29 responded (63%). Church schools made up 26% of those approached and 21% of the responders. There was a bereaved child in 75% of the schools which took part. John Holland had approached a larger random sample (75) of infant, junior and primary schools in the Humberside area of NE England and had an 86% response, of which 70% had a bereaved child attending. The percentage of schools with a bereaved child on the roll in the two areas is similar.

### Important influences after a death

All the Medway schools rated parents as the main influence on the bereaved child, with the school in second place, thus suggesting teachers do perceive themselves as an important element in the bereavement process. The school's role may be even more significant when the parents themselves are under considerable pressure. The church and family general practitioner were placed third equal in importance here. Perhaps

surprisingly, only two of the church schools rated the church as of first importance. An explanation for this may be that even within church schools there is a mixture of cultures, and some schools made the point that their rating would depend on the faith of the child. Holland's study had also found parents were considered the most important influence, followed by the school, then the church. Holland was surprised that the church was rated so highly in such relatively secular times, although he thought this might be because churches would have well-established community links

### Bereavement awareness and training

On the whole, the Medway schools rated the importance of bereavement awareness highly. Nonetheless, an analysis of the questionnaires showed only 45% had guidelines on bereavement. When asked if training would be helpful the majority (83%) said yes.

The Humberside schools had also rated the subject of bereavement highly, particularly those which had a bereaved child on the roll. Over 60% of schools where children had directly experienced bereavement felt that further training in this area was needed, compared with around 40% in schools where pupils had not had this experience.

Schools may consider a planned procedure to deal with a death to be too rigid and to ignore the uniqueness of each bereavement, but Holland suggested that this attitude was related

### EDITOR'S NOTE

*This article provides a snapshot of the views of some schools towards bereavement which would be of interest to anyone planning or already providing services to schools or children. It is sobering and disappointing to be made aware of the lack of bereavement training provided for teachers, and this becomes somewhat worrying given that the recently published NICE guidelines on depression in children and young people rely on professionals such as teachers to provide the first line of assessment and intervention following a bereavement. Many areas have local bereavement services for children which could provide training to schools; alternatively there are various organisations that offer such training nationally including Cruse Bereavement Care, Winston's Wish, or the Child Bereavement Trust. DT*

to a lack of bereavement training. The present study gives some support for this. Holland had identified what he referred to as a 'training gap', with only five teachers from five schools having received bereavement training.

### The teachers

#### Bereavement in the curriculum

Four schools (two church and two secular) offered two teachers each to take part in semi-structured interviews. For each school one volunteer had ten years or more teaching experience and the other, five years or less. In these

interviews, the two more experienced teachers from church schools felt bereavement and religion could not be dealt with separately, whereas the two teachers with five years or less experience felt that they could. Interestingly, the opposite was found in non-church schools: the more experienced teachers thought that bereavement and religion could be dealt with separately, while those with less experience felt that, although it might be possible, it would be extremely difficult.

Of the eight teachers who took part in the semi-structured interviews, seven had no formal training in bereavement and one had put herself on a bereavement course to help support a bereaved child in her school.

### Training options

Looking at where suitable training might be found, questionnaires were sent to two educational psychologists and the leading UK bereavement charity, Cruse Bereavement Care.

Cruse responded that it had sometimes received referrals for staff training. There was probably a need for more bereavement training for teachers and others in schools which Cruse would be happy to provide, but it could only do so when funding and resources allowed. One of the psychologists had had no referrals of this kind, was not in a position to comment on the need and would need further training to provide it. The second psychologist said that referrals were a possibility and that she might offer training. This psychologist felt that the most important issue to address with schools was co-ordination and communication with outside agencies, so that teachers knew whom to approach for what support.

### Including bereavement in the curriculum

The school curriculum offers many opportunities for discussion on bereavement, which can be an aspect of such subjects as history, science or art. For instance, Harris<sup>4</sup> successfully used West Norwood Cemetery as a teaching resource for part of a local history project for 11-year-olds.

As part of the research, short questionnaires were sent to a local funeral director and a bereavement service

manager at a crematorium to assess their response to the possibility of school visits. The crematorium welcomed young people of 13+, and indeed two local secondary schools had projects running at the time, related to geography, history and maths, but primary school children were considered too young for such a visit.

The funeral director had already been contacted by teachers for advice and training. He considered 10- or 11-year-olds suitable for talks on bereavement issues but pointed out that, in his experience, not many young children take part in the funeral process. The crematorium was seen as being interesting operationally, while cemeteries were more interesting physically, though there could be problems with this last as some children see cemeteries as playgrounds, and vandalism and misuse can result.

### Other studies

A number of other studies have looked at how we teach children about death. Lecky<sup>2</sup> studied the attitudes and responses of teachers to death education, interviewing 168 teachers from 27 primary schools in Belfast, Northern Ireland. More than three-quarters of the staff thought they had a role to play in helping children develop an understanding of death. These teachers were more likely to include death education in their teaching when appropriate, although only 30% of the schools had a defined policy which included opportunities for discussion on bereavement.

Reed<sup>3</sup> also studied issues relating to bereaved children and how they are supported in schools and suggested that teachers' failure to respond to bereaved children was most likely to be due to lack of training. She pointed out that awareness of bereavement issues among staff is particularly important since referrals of young people to agencies are usually the schools' responsibility, a system which relies on the teacher to recognise the need for support and know whom to contact.

### Discussion

Reed's conclusion is important as there are many types of agencies and counselling services available and not all will be suitable for every child, reinforcing the

need mentioned by one of the psychologists for accessible good information about services for schools. Siblings, in particular may benefit from different interventions, and children in one-parent families bereaved of that parent may suffer multiple losses. More research is needed on the needs of these special groups and how schools can help.

The comment by the funeral director about children not participating in funerals brings us back to how we as a society perceive and deal with death. Children learn by example, and a healthy outlook is important in coming to terms with bereavement. It is, of course, not an easy subject for most people to talk about but quite often it is our own fears we project on to our children. This may suggest that no matter what is the school ethos, bereavement will always struggle to find a place on the curriculum. ●

### References

1. Holland J. Child bereavement in Humber-side primary schools. *Educational Research* 1993; 35(3): 289-297.
2. Lecky J. Attitudes and responses to death education of a sample of primary school teachers in Belfast. *Bereavement Care* 1991; 10(2): 22-23.
3. Reid J. Supporting the bereaved child in primary education. In: *Philosophy and Spirituality*, PS30. Available from: [http://www.farmington.ac.uk/documents/reports/framed/phil\\_spir.html](http://www.farmington.ac.uk/documents/reports/framed/phil_spir.html) Accessed 3 Oct 05.
4. Harris J. Trailing the cemetery with children. *Bereavement Care* 1995; 14(2): 16-17.

### EVENTS IN 2006

**Mind matters.** 13th annual conference of the Manchester Area Bereavement Forum. 14 Sept. Manchester, UK. Speakers include Ted Bowman, Marion Gibson. Tel: [0]161 371 8860; [www.mabf.org.uk](http://www.mabf.org.uk)

**Support after murder and manslaughter.** Rose Dixon. 7 Sept. **Bereavement intervention.** Henk Schut. 4 Oct. Open meetings. London. Tel [0]20 8768 4656; [education@stchristophers.org.uk](mailto:education@stchristophers.org.uk)

**Challenging issues in the bereavement research process.** 4th Bereavement Research Forum conference. 16-17 Nov. St Albans, Herts, UK. Speakers, Sheila Payne, Jane Ribbens-McCarthy. Tel [0]20 8525 6031; [www.brforum.org.uk](http://www.brforum.org.uk)

**Sustaining and supporting families and caregivers.** 5-6 Oct. Presentations and discussion groups. Markyate, Herts, UK. Contact Amanda Cullens, tel [0]1582 707469; [chums.cbs@luton-pct.nhs.uk](mailto:chums.cbs@luton-pct.nhs.uk)