Bereavement round up

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Denise Brady presents a round-up of recent research literature and other publications related to bereavement. This issue she discusses some articles on helping bereaved children around the world, examining school provision in Norway; support groups in Britain (a rare example of a large scale quantitative study); an Australian programme for refugee children; and a project to provide memory books to orphaned children in South Africa.

Helping bereaved children at school

Dyregrov K, Endsjø M, Idsøe T, Dyregrov A (2014). Suggestions for the ideal follow-up for bereaved students as seen by school personnel. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*. DOI:10.1080/13632752.2014.955676 (Published ahead of print and accessed 17 October 2014).

This Norwegian study is one of a series on how children can be helped to adjust to bereavement in their school environment. In this paper the questions concerned teachers' views on what constitutes ideal follow-up at school for bereaved pupils as well as their opinions on what support measures should be in place in every school. The questions were posed in seven focus groups and one individual interview. It included 17 teachers and 5 head teachers. There was an equal mix of primary and secondary school teachers.

All interviews were transcribed and five main themes were identified. They were then interpreted in relation to the issues under investigation, theory and previous research.
The themes that emerged were:

a) *Action plans and written routines.* All teachers were aware that routines existed but rarely knew what they contained or where they were kept. They also emphasised the importance of a balance between written procedures, experience and common sense.
b) *Resources and clarifications of roles.* The teachers stressed the importance of using resources both inside and outside the school. Apart from key teachers, the importance of the school nurse was alluded to. It was agreed that a designated teacher, often the head teacher, would liaise with the parents. Outside the school, resources could be organisations that support bereaved people or offer emotional or practical support in the local community.
c) *Basic help principles*. Teachers discussed the importance of care, availability and good communication. They also considered that pupils should be allowed to decide with which teacher they would share their grief.
d) *Key help measures*. This involved a discussion of the difference between supporting an individual student whose relative had died and more comprehensive support if the dead person was known to everyone in a class or in the entire school community. It also involved considerations of flexibility that might allow, amongst other measures, more absences than usual for the pupil or being exempt from some tests or examinations that were not essential.
e) *Recommended improvements*. As bereavement is inevitably a common occurrence in any school, it should be a regular part of teacher education days and all teachers should have some knowledge of grief that would enable them to deal confidently with pupils at such times. They also needed to know more precisely how bereavement might affect a pupil's school performance.

The above only briefly provides insights to an article that as a whole offers sound, thoughtful and common sense advice with regard to organisational and individual ways in which a school can help bereaved pupils. In itself, it could be used as a starting point to review school policies on bereavement. Though based in Norway, similar issues are likely to be replicated in many schools in different countries around the world.

Evaluation of a child bereavement support group

Siddaway AP, Wood AM, Schulz J, Trickey D (2015). Evaluation of the CHUMS child bereavement group: a pilot study examining statistical and clinical change. *Death Studies* 39(2) 99-110

CHUMS is a British child bereavement service. Group work is the principal service it offers. This consists of three 'workshops' over three weekends offered to those aged 3-12 and five evening 'workshops' to those aged 13-19. Topics covered in the group work sessions are described. Parent groups also form part of the service and they are structured in a variety of ways.

The writers start with a discussion and literature review of the evidence of the effectiveness of childhood bereavement services and conclude it is very patchy. They indicate that a number of

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quantitative research studies have been conducted in the US but only four in the UK. The authors believe this is the largest quantitative study in childhood bereavement to date.

Subjects in the CHUMS study were 168 children who attended one of these groupwork sessions between 2009 and 2011 and where a child, parent or teacher completed at least some of the requested questionnaires. This was routinely collected information and involved the completion of a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at the start and end of the full programme. This questionnaire is also used in some other childhood bereavement services and in many paediatric mental health services in the UK.

The qualitative data is well described. For example, while 13% to 18% of the young people were assessed as having "recovered" statistically, the authors indicate the majority of the children showed little "improvement". However it is also noteworthy that, for the majority, their initial score on the SDQ showed they had minimal psychological problems. They were assessed as needing the service but this did not involve an initial assessment using this questionnaire. It is a 'universal' service – and I understand from this they mean that no child is turned away.

The authors suggest that practitioners need to be aware of discrepancies between self-perceptions and what they – and others – may see as observable distress.

The results in fact suggest that most young people adjust to bereavement without difficulty. The authors also suggest that this assessment measure (carefully selected by the service and validated as it is) may not be able to capture the more precise psychological elements of adapting to bereavement over time. It was also intriguing that parents may have held a view about their children's recovery based on their own mental health problems. The authors suggest that practitioners need to be aware of discrepancies between self-perceptions and what they – and others – may see as observable distress.

Based on the research, the authors suggest ways the service could be improved, and suggestions are made for improved interventions for bereaved children.

Even if a reader does not understand the statistics of a quantitative paper, the sections you do understand are usually worth reading. Certainly this is the case with this article. The description of the service, the interpretation of the results, the implications for clinical practice, the discussion, the limitations of the study and the suggestions for future research all illuminate many aspects of the service as well as assessing the effectiveness of the intervention.

Memory books for orphaned children

Braband B J, Faris T (2014). Evaluation of a Memory Book intervention with orphaned children in South Africa. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 29 (4) 337-343.

Like the article below by Phillips, the intervention described in this article aims to assist children who have experienced highly traumatic events. Sometimes the children have been refugees but most often they have lost their nuclear and extended family to AIDS or, even more negatively, they have been ostracised by their extended family *because* their immediate family had AIDS. A literature review considers the effect of losses associated with AIDS in Africa and the relevance of helping to build resilience with bereaved children. One example is the importance of having caring adults who can be present with the children as they process their grief.

The memory book is very briefly described – prompting children, for instance, to tell the story of their family before coming to the children's home. Another section is titled 'I wish' and encourages young people to explore their hopes for the future.

The main aim of the article is an evaluation of the intervention, using qualitative research to elicit the elements of the memory book that were helpful to 22 children. Some had used the memory book for up to seven years. They were interviewed over a two week period in groups of 2-4 and three care workers who knew them were also interviewed. Themes were identified: identity, relationship, emotion, coping mechanisms, and hope. The section on emotion sums up the enormity of helping children in such situations – some were able to laugh as they reviewed their memory book and were happy and eager to show their story book in the interview. Others expressed sadness, silence or a hurried approach to showing the interviewer their book. One young boy would only look at his book alone.

The benefit of follow-up for any child interviewed for this research is not mentioned but would seem appropriate, given some of their reactions. The care workers acknowledged the difficulties of the young people but thought the books help them 'to understand more fully what had happened in their lives'. The authors state that 25,000 memory books have been distributed, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. This research only reflects a tiny proportion of those young people who have been exposed to the intervention. The authors acknowledge this small sample. One can imagine that it takes motivation and confidence on the part of adults caring for these children to utilise the memory books but the idea is a sound one – and one can imagine a sensitive care worker would see it as an opportunity to help children to understand their background, and to work through some painful experiences with them. It has great potential but if care workers are not assisted with training in grief work, only a small proportion of care staff will ever use the intervention.

Loss and grief in refugee children

Phillips M (2014). Children and young people with refugee backgrounds: their experiences of change, loss and grief and the *Seasons for Growth* programme. *Grief Matters* 17(3) 80-84.

The article begins with a definition of a refugee, and reminds readers of the international scale of the problem. Having some understanding of the change and loss experienced by refugee children enables adults to provide support for them. For those who support refugees, the author considers the need to have some knowledge of three possible elements of a refugee's experience:

a) possible major trauma in the witnessing of human rights violations or the impossibility of having a consistent schooling in their country of origin
b) possible initial detention in their new country as well as limited access to health services, and the necessity to learn a new language
c) ongoing challenges of everyday life experiences 'as they manage life through its various stages'.

The author provides a more detailed description of these experiences, including a brief examination of experiences of these young people at individual, family and school levels.

She proceeds to describe a group programme for refugees in Australia. This is called *Seasons for Growth* – it is a loss and grief education programme that aims to help young people adapt to loss and change in their lives. She describes the rationale for this intervention:

a) that loss and change are a normal part of life
b) that young people need this experience to be validated
c) that this, in turn, can build their resilience to the vagaries of life in general.

The programme owes its inspiration to Worden's four tasks of growth and emphasises its active nature – young people do not simply endure a traumatic experience but react to it in positive ways, even as they are also vulnerable. The four tasks are linked symbolically to the seasons of the year and eight sessions provide the participants with the opportunity for conversations with adults and peers who help them to cope with, and make sense of, their major life changes. It is worth noting that the author refers to the fourth edition of Worden's tasks where the final one has changed significantly from the first edition which was 'to withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship' while the fourth edition states it is 'to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life'.

The references at the end of the paper provide readers with the opportunity to gain greater insight as well information and knowledge of a major problem in the world today – in 2012 UNHCR calculated there were over 15.7 million refugees in the world.

Worden WJ (2012). Grief counselling and grief therapy. London: Tavistock, p15.

Worden WJ (2010). Grief counselling and grief therapy. 4th edition, London: Routledge, p50.

UNHCR. Facts and figures about refugees. Available at: http://www.unhcr.org.uk/about-us/key-facts-and-figures.html [accessed 2 March 2015].