



Blessed are those who mourn

Educating for death, loss and bereavement

Tackling the taboo

‘The only thing guaranteed in life is death.’ ‘It’s ironic, when you know that, that they won’t teach you about it.’ These quotes are taken from *A Death in the Lives of...*, a video produced by the Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) in which a group of teenagers discuss their experiences with parents, teachers, and peers following the death of someone close. Though most of the children in this and another video of a group of juniors recognise that many teachers are sensitive to the needs of bereaved children, schools and education in general do not emerge with much credit. What does shine through, especially in the older children’s video, is the importance of their faith in helping them through the worst of their pain.

Serious studies on child bereavement have only really been carried out in the past 10–15 years. With one or two exceptions, very little was written until the 1980s. In 1995 Pennells and Smith, who had been working with bereaved children for 5–6 years, wrote in their book *The Forgotten Mourners* that they were still hearing doubts expressed as to whether children grieve at all and the view that children were only grieving when they were seen to be upset. Barnard, a trauma consultant, still saw the subject as taboo in 1999.

Children’s grief

This means that adults have failed to appreciate that children’s grief is often shown through their behaviour rather than expressed in words. Symptoms of grief range from silence to anger and may include bad dreams and flashbacks. Behaviour changes include concentration difficulties, disruptive or aggressive behaviour and bed-wetting. Research also shows that in the year following the death of a parent a child is twice as likely to be taken to see a GP for symptoms for which no medical cause is apparent eg chest or stomach pains, or sleeplessness.

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Given the lack of adult awareness it is not surprising that several false assumptions have been perpetuated. These are listed by Goldman, one of the pioneers in child grief work, as:

- An active, playing child is not grieving.
- Adults should avoid topics that cause children to cry.
- Adult grief does not impact on children.
- Children are better off not attending funerals.
- Children need to 'get over' their grief and move on.
- Parents, teachers or clergy can give instant explanations about death, loss, grief and spirituality.
- Grief occurs in set phases and processes.
- Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.

As Goldman points out, a child old enough to love is old enough to grieve.

Educational needs

According to Winston's Wish, the Gloucester Royal Infirmary family unit, every 27 minutes in the UK a child under 18 loses a parent through death – 20,000 a year. Dr Dora Black, the Great Ormond Street paediatrician, estimates that as many as 50% of these are likely to experience hindrances in everyday functioning, with one in five likely to need help from outside the family. Other writers express the view that education on the subject would reduce numbers needing medical and psychological help.

The fact is that death and bereavement as such are not on the syllabus for secondary or junior schools. Teachers can include it in PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) or RE (Religious Education), but the emotional processes of grief require more than simply examining rites of passage. Even those teachers who want to spend time on death and



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bereavement find it almost impossible to justify such lessons in the face of mandatory syllabuses, national curriculum targets and overcrowded timetables. In response, the Sheffield-based Gone Forever Project (GFP) has been pressing for death and bereavement to be integral to all Initial Teacher Training schemes.

Research shows that the factors which determine how well a person copes with the death of someone close include the circumstances of the death, the way the news is broken, support given in the immediate aftermath, and the faith beliefs of the survivor. As over half a child's waking time is spent in school for nine months of the year, it is a place where support (or a lack of it) will be keenly felt. Yet John Holland's research in Humberside in 1999 showed children feeling ignored, embarrassed, isolated, uncertain and different on return to school, even though their teachers rated bereavement as an important issue. Some children suffer torment and bullying by peers who do not understand grief.

Grief language is particularly important, and some metaphors and euphemisms are very unhelpful. Told that the deceased has 'gone to sleep' a child may fear going to bed. 'Gone to see Jesus' may lead to the belief that the departure is voluntary. 'God always takes the best first' is a popular (and non-Christian) family classic which can leave a child intent on making sure she/he will not be taken next! Just as important as the language used is the need to speak honestly about the probability of death, the cause of death, and what happens to the dead, as well as being able to say 'I don't know' in answer to a question. Belief in what happens after death is, after all, a matter of faith and children will respect that, while wanting to know what we believe.

As a parish priest I would ask school assemblies how many present had known the death of someone close eg a relative, friend or pet.



More information

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Cruse Bereavement Care (CBC) publishes a journal that includes useful metaphors and visual aids for assemblies, plus a compilation of articles on child grief, with activities. CBC has also produced *Supporting Bereaved Children and Families – a training manual*.

The Gone Forever Project and the **Childhood Bereavement Network** run conferences and training days for teachers, mentors, child nurses, social workers, clergy and any others involved with children.

Typically, every hand would go up. In the ensuing discussions I would hear explanations and metaphors used by parents ranging from pre-Galileo concepts of heaven above the sky and loved ones as God's windows (ie the stars) to outright atheism. While often leaving the session uncertain as to whether I had made any Christian impact, I was frequently encouraged to find someone who had been present seeking me out after a family funeral, or when in distress after meddling with the occult, to tell me something they did not want to reveal to their parents.

Resources

Both the GFP and CBN produce help cards for children, young people, parents, teachers and friends. These are designed to describe to a bereaved child what may happen in grief, and give advice to others around them as to how best to assist them and behave towards them. Classwork can help by taking some of the mystery and 'magical thinking' out of children's perceptions (they frequently believe, usually irrationally, that they have brought about the death in some way) and by normalising the after-effects experienced – shock, guilt, anger, yearning, bargaining or depres-

sion, anxiety about the future, plus the physical reactions detailed earlier.

Most Local Authorities will host visits to crematoria and graveyards to explain the processes and show the respect with which bodies are treated. Most clergy will explain how a funeral is conducted, and they and teachers can discuss the importance of this rite of passage. Such awareness can ease the decision for a parent (often under stress and grieving themselves) to allow a child to participate in family grief rituals when the occasion arises in the future. Being excluded from a funeral is a frequent cause of resentment for years after and can also give rise to challenging behaviour.

This subject gives openings for teachers and pupils to share beliefs about what is important about living, and what happens after death, knowing that nothing and nobody lives forever. Sadly, some adopt the somewhat superstitious position: 'it's asking for trouble'. But if the Christian message is essentially one of hope, as we believe, the Christian teacher can use opportunities that occur to share that hope openly. Children will then be better prepared to face the traumatic occasions, from which none of us are immune.

References

- Black D (1993) *The Bereaved Child: An Overview*. In Sargoni M et al *Supporting Bereaved Children and Families: A Training Manual from Cruse*
- Goldman L (2000) *Life and Loss* Philadelphia, Accelerated Development Inc
- Holland J (2001) *Understanding Children's Experiences of Parental Bereavement* London & Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers



A nine year old boy drew these images to show how his grandparents died in their sleep in a house fire. A coal placed on the fire by the grandfather (picture 2) later flew out and set the settee alight; the grandfather had forgotten to replace the fireguard.

After setting out these images, carried in his mind day and night, the boy was advised to close his eyes, imagine he was watching the pictures on video, stop the tape with his remote control, rewind it, remove it from the video player, and put it in the cupboard. This therapy tool is one which children relate very easily.