

The impact of bereavement in an early years setting

Di Stubbs



Question:-

☼ Why do children grow up in one parent families?





Statistics in context

☼ Around 60 British children were bereaved of a parent "in 9/11"





Statistics in context

- ✧ Around 60 British children were bereaved of a parent “in” 9/11
- ✧ Around 110 other British children were bereaved of a parent “on” 9/11



Statistics in context

- ✧ Around 60 British children were bereaved of a parent “in” 9/11
- ✧ Around 110 other British children were bereaved of a parent “on” 9/11
- ✧ Around 110 British children were bereaved of a parent “on” 9/12: and 9/13 and yesterday.....



Statistics

- ✧ 110 children a day are bereaved of a parent
- ✧ Every 22 minutes a child is bereaved of a parent – approx 40,000 bereaved children a year
- ✧ Many more will be bereaved of a sibling or other close family member
- ✧ 309,000 (3.5% of) children in Great Britain aged 5 to 16 have experienced the death of a parent or sibling



Deaths affecting an early years' setting

☼ **Death of a child's parent or sibling**

- ☼ Death of a child / friend
- ☼ Death of a teacher / T.A. / etc
- ☼ Death of a group of children (eg minibus crash)
- ☼ Deaths in the news (especially those affecting children)



Deaths affecting an early years' setting

- ☼ How children make sense of what has happened will depend on a number of factors, including their stage of development
- ☼ Note other developmental factors



What children need

- ☼ To have their loss acknowledged
- ☼ Information and understanding
- ☼ To explore and express their feelings and thoughts
- ☼ Memories and the opportunities to remember
- ☼ To say goodbye/ 'rituals'
- ☼ A continuing bond – over time
- ☼ 'Coping strategies'



What children need

- ✧ To have their loss acknowledged





What children need

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- ✧ Information and understanding





Developing concepts of death

- ✧ Immobility
- ✧ Non-functionality
- ✧ Insensitivity
- ✧ Irreversibility
- ✧ Causality
- ✧ Universality
- ✧ Appearance
- ✧ Separation





Concepts of death

- ✘ The hamster isn't moving
- ✘ The hamster is this thing called 'dead'
- ✘ Grandpa is this thing called 'dead' but will he still take me to football?
- ✘ Grandpa is dead and he'll never take me to football again
- ✘ Grandma is old and will die
- ✘ Mum and Dad will die
- ✘ Everyone dies ...
- ✘ ...and not only when they're old
- ✘ I will die
- ✘ I can kill myself



Up to 6 months

Concepts:

- ✘ withdrawal of care and nourishment from a familiar person
- ✘ aware of emotional withdrawal of key carer
- ✘ loss and abandonment synonymous



Likely feelings and behaviours:

- ✘ abandonment
- ✘ insecurity / being unsettled
- ✘ fretful
- ✘ cries in protest
- ✘ disrupted sleep and feeding routine



Up to 6 months

Ways of helping:

- ✘ A surrogate carer to maintain basic care and 'holding' to give continued sense of security
- ✘ Maintain routines as much as possible
- ✘ Some physical, comforting link to the person who has died



6 months – 2 years

Concepts:

- ✧ Developing 'object constancy awareness'
- ✧ Begins to have mental image of person when absent and can 'miss' them
- ✧ Loss and abandonment feel the same
- ✧ Acquisition of language



Likely feelings and behaviour:

- ✧ Protest and distress
- ✧ Withdrawal
- ✧ Separation anxiety
- ✧ No/little interest in food or toys
- ✧ Searching behaviour
- ✧ Sleeping difficulties



6 months – 2 years

Ways of helping:

- ✧ Maintenance of daily routine
- ✧ Reassurance from other adults
- ✧ Warmth and cuddling from other adults
- ✧ Some physical, comforting link to the person who has died



2 – 5 years

Concepts:

- ✧ Establishing that he/she is a separate person
- ✧ Interested in the idea of death in birds, animals etc
- ✧ Understands that death is a part of natural order but lacks ability to appreciate its finality and irreversibility
- ✧ Expects the person's return
- ✧ Beginning of 'Magical thinking'
- ✧ 'Puddle jumping'



2 – 5 years

Likely feelings and behaviours

- ✧ Repeated questions
- ✧ Can be fearful of being left alone, even for very short periods
- ✧ Being especially 'good' to compensate for sense of badness, which they believe contributed to the death
- ✧ Or sometimes testing loving relationships / temper tantrums
- ✧ Confidently talks about death but without understanding
- ✧ 'Puddle jumping'



2 – 5 years

Ways of helping:

- ✧ Gently repeat the fact that dead person will not return
- ✧ Use clear, straightforward language
- ✧ Answer their many questions honestly, however many times
- ✧ Do not protect them "because they don't understand"
- ✧ Continue to make links with dead flies, flowers etc
- ✧ Maintain daily routines
- ✧ Be patient with 'accidents', temper, disturbed sleep etc



5 – 8 years

Concepts

- ✧ Age of magical thinking
- ✧ Believe they can influence events with thought and behaviour
- ✧ Developing 'conscience' so can feel guilt about what their supposed power brings about
- ✧ May think independent events at time of death 'caused' it
- ✧ Fuller understanding of concept of death, therefore more anxious about other deaths
- ✧ Death may still be thought of as reversible



5 – 8 years

Likely feelings and behaviour

- ✳ Can fear death of others
- ✳ Especially 'good' to compensate for sense of badness, which they believe contributed to the death
- ✳ Behave badly and, therefore, incur the punishment they 'deserve'
- ✳ Or to 'reset reality'
- ✳ Compulsively caring towards surviving adults or siblings
- ✳ Cover up sadness by behaving as if nothing happened
- ✳ 'Is big now' and fears behaving in an infantile way



5 – 8 years

Ways of helping:

- ✳ Honest, open, matter-of-fact information about death and dying
- ✳ Make clear that the child was in no way responsible
- ✳ Provide opportunities for open communication within the family
- ✳ Provide opportunities for the expression of thoughts and feelings
- ✳ Lots of reassurance
- ✳ Ways to feel connected when apart



Developmental understanding

- ✳ Children and young people develop their understanding of death and dying...
- ✳ ...However, this means a child bereaved at a young age re-experiences / re-comprehends their grief at different ages



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- ✧ Information and understanding



What children need

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- ✧ Information and understanding
- ✧ To explore and express their feelings and thoughts



Some responses to loss

- Fear
- Sadness
- Blame
- Withdrawal
- Numbness
- Confusion/bewilderment
- Arguing
- Drinking/drugs
- Powerlessness
- Anger
- Keeping busy
- Resentment
- Physical reactions
- Feeling detached
- Risk taking
- Shock
- Relief
- Yearning/pining
- Acceptance
- Questioning – why? what if?
- Avoidance
- Indifference
- Anything else?
- Exhaustion
- Anxiety
- Disbelief
- Silence
- Suicidal thoughts
- Hollow ache



Some responses to loss for younger children

Sadness
Fear
Blame
Withdrawal
Numbness
Confusion/bewilderment
Arguing
Drinking/drugs

Anger
Keeping busy
Resentment
Physical reactions
Powerlessness
Feeling detached
Risk taking

Shock
Relief
Yearning/pining
Acceptance
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Anything else?

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Silence
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Memories

- ✧ Preserving any memories
- ✧ 'Re-saving' memories by recalling them
- ✧ Memory boxes
- ✧ Salt jars for older ones
- ✧ Story telling
- ✧ Involving the family and friends
- ✧ Quizzes – what was Dad's favourite cake? Mum's favourite colour? Naughtiest thing they did?



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Funerals...

- ✧ Simple explanations of what happens ... and how people will feel / react
- ✧ If appropriate, offer a choice (but younger children might need decision taken for them)
- ✧ Have a special adult to be their support
- ✧ Memory cards
- ✧ Explanations about the 'wake'
- ✧ Consider taking photographs
- ✧ Alternative funerals / celebrations
- ✧ Culture and faith





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Secondary losses

- ✳ In addition to the death itself, a child may need to face a series of **'secondary losses'**
- ✳ moving house
 - 'losing' bedroom, den, garden etc
- ✳ moving school / nursery
 - 'losing' friends, teacher, corner of playground etc
- ✳ moving area
 - 'losing' clubs, neighbours, routine, park etc

Dear Mum
 How are you getting on? How's it if it's been how long? I think it is scary because I'm scared of heights. I've now got a bedroom of my own. I miss you and wish you was a little so I could move back home. I don't want to move school.
 I've got a play station and I will be taking a few station 2 for my birthday. I wish I could be with you again.
 From
 Ryan
 P.S. ☹️

How to confuse children

Some examples of the language we use:

- ✳ Heart attack



How to confuse children

Some examples of the language we use:

- ✳ Heart attack
- ✳ Stroke



How to confuse children

Some examples of the language we use:

- ✳ Heart attack
- ✳ Stroke
- ✳ Heaven



How to confuse children

Some examples of the language we use:

- ✧ Heart attack
- ✧ Stroke
- ✧ Heaven
- ✧ 'Mummy's up in the sky'



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- ✧ 'Mummy's up in the sky'
- ✧ 'Granny died in her sleep'



How to confuse children

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- ✧ 'Mummy's up in the sky'
- ✧ 'Granny died in her sleep'
- ✧ 'We've lost your father'



How to confuse children

Some examples of the language we use:

- * Heart attack
- * Stroke
- * Heaven
- * 'Mummy's up in the sky'
- * 'Granny died in her sleep'
- * 'We've lost your father'
- * Seeing the body/burying the body



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- * Headstone



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- * Headstone
- * Organ donation



Deaths affecting an early years' setting

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Strategies

- Early Years' setting – some thoughts
 - Acknowledge



Things that might help...

- ✘ Use simple language – died, dead, death.
- ✘ Something very sad has happened... Alex's Mum has died.
- ✘ And when someone has died, they can't...
- ✘ This is very, very unusual. It's very rare for Mums or Dads to die until they are very old...
- ✘ Alex will be feeling very sad and might not want to...
- ✘ How can we help Alex?



- Early Years' setting – some thoughts
 - Acknowledge
 - Individual support where possible



Strategies



- Early Years' setting – some thoughts
 - Acknowledge
 - Individual support where possible
 - Links with parent/carer (Large & Small; hand-sheet; sewn kiss; 'when I pick...')



Strategies



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 - Activities awareness



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 - Activities awareness
 - Mother's Day/Father's Day/Easter





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 - Activities awareness
 - Mother's Day/Father's Day/Easter
 - Calendar of important dates





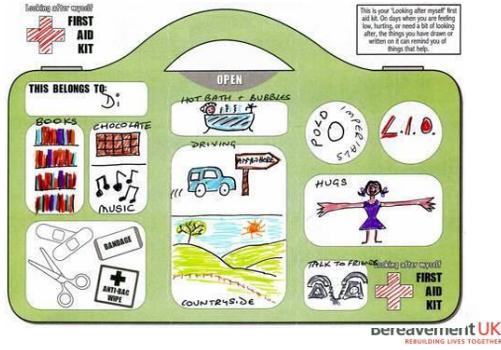
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 - Mother's Day/Father's Day/Easter
 - Calendar of important dates
 - Emotional first aid kits, circles of support* etc



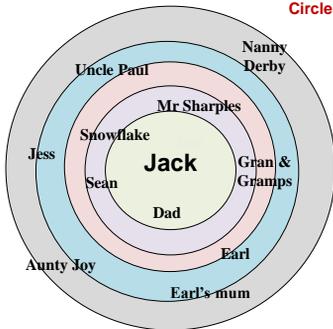


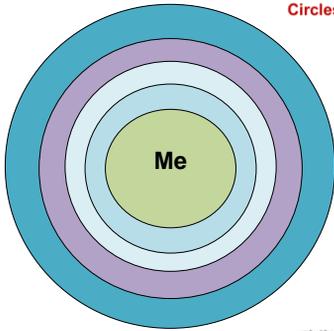
Emotional First Aid Kits





Circles of support





Circles of support



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- Activities awareness
- Mother's Day/Father's Day/Easter
- Calendar of important dates
- Emotional first aid kits, circles of support* etc
- Helping each other / Sharing information



Strategies



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- Calendar of important dates
- Emotional first aid kits, circles of support* etc
- Helping each other / Sharing information
- Information ahead to schools / school allocation



Strategies



- What can stop us helping...
 - "I don't know what to say..."
 - "I don't want to remind them"
 - "I don't know if he knows I know"
 - "It's the wrong time and place"
 - "It's not my role"
 - "I'm not trained"
 - "I'm worried it'll set off the others..."
 - "It also happened to me so I'm concerned I'll get upset"
 - "I'm scared of saying the wrong thing so I end up saying nothing"

In early years settings...



Some additional factors...

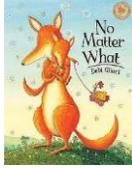
- Family's preferences
- Nature of the death – suicide, murder/manslaughter, armed forces, celebrity
- In context of other factors – media attention, staff changes/ill health
- Additional needs of children with special educational or developmental needs

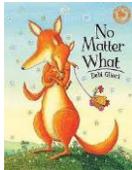


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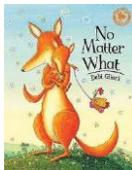
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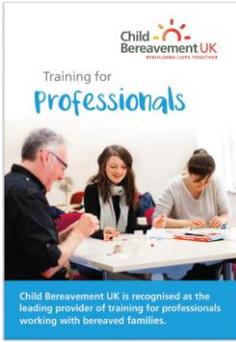
*'But what happens after we are dead and gone?
Does love go on?'*



*'But what happens after we are dead and gone?
Does love go on?'*







Supporting bereaved pupils schools online learning programme

For teachers, head teachers and support staff to meet the needs of grieving families and their children.

- ✧ only takes one hour to complete
- ✧ real life film clips from pupils
- ✧ practical guidance and information
- ✧ unlimited users per school.



Please visit:

www.childbereavementuk.org/onlinelearning

to view short film about the programme and to purchase online or email learning@childbereavementuk.org





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Thank you for listening!