I CAN'T WRITE TO DADDY

Two seven-year olds I teach at the local primary school were chatting away beside me in class one day.

"I'm writing a letter to my daddy. He lives in France."

"You're lucky. I can't write to *my* daddy."

"Why? Where does he live?"

"In heaven."

My heart went out to the little girls—Kate, whose parents had recently divorced, and Lucy, whose father had died of leukaemia. Both felt a sense of loss, both longed for their parents to be together again, but Lucy belongs to a group of youngsters whose longing can never, ever be satisfied—not at weekends, not in the holidays, not in her wildest hopes.

There is a tendency in the social services and in society in general to lump bereaved children and the children of divorced couples together as members of "one-parent families" but, without minimising the troubles faced by children whose parents have split up, it should be recognised that bereaved children have special problems that must be tackled if these children are not to suffer unduly, perhaps even into adulthood.

Several large-scale population studies link adult psychiatric disorder with the death of a parent in childhood. Dr. Dora Black confirms that "there is a higher incidence of depressive illness in adults who lose a parent before the age of 10 than in those whose parents live longer. Research suggests that the risk of depressive illness can be significantly lowered if the child is encouraged to express grief at the time of loss."

Emotional disturbances

Far from giving vent to her feelings, however, a bereaved child often bottles them up. She may seem unconcerned, even callous, about her loss. At the same time, she may start to misbehave at school and fall behind in class—sometimes for several terms. It's important to understand fully why this is happening and that the child is probably suffering not just from grief but also from shock and a refusal to accept the parent's death. In extreme cases the child may need to be referred to a child guidance clinic for help, but most children respond to an understanding friend, relative or teacher.

After his mother died, six-year-old William had appeared dry-eyed for weeks at the school where I teach. But he was quiet and withdrawn—not at all his usual self. His own teachers avoided talking about his mother for fear of upsetting him and embarrassing themselves. One playtime he took my hand and I sensed that he longed to talk about his mother but just didn't know where to start. I asked him where he went on holiday last summer and he began to tell me. "Did Mummy go swimming?" I asked, and he looked up at me in sudden excitement. "Yes! She had a smashing costume . . . it was red and had only one strap around the neck . . . and we tried surfing . . . and she said . . ." He was off—all the feelings he had been keeping to himself came tumbling out. Every day for weeks William talked to me about his beautiful young mother, and eventually he was able to settle down once more into his school routine.

It is quite normal for a bereaved child to feel anger towards the surviving parent, though of course this can be very distressing for the family.' "Why are you still here?" "What did you do to Mummy/Daddy?" "Why did you let him/her die?"—these are all questions a child might blurt out under stress. The child's anger may even be directed at the dead parent for abandoning her and she may suffer from feelings of guilt—was it her fault that her parent died? This was the case with Sarah, who blamed herself for her father's death. "Dad said he'd work hard to make enough money to buy me a bike for Christmas. Then I heard Aunty say Dad died of overwork!" Guilt and anger are common reactions in anyone who has suffered a bereavement, but a child needs an adult's help to express and overcome these feelings.

Obsession with death

Almost inevitably, at some stage, most bereaved children become obsessed with accidents, illness and death. They may be victims of night-time terrors—the fear that the surviving parent or a sibling might die or the even greater horror of their own death. The sight of a coffin, an ambulance or even a bonfire, could give rise to panic.

In these circumstances the child must be reassured that there is no reason why any other close relative should die suddenly.

No matter how she reacts, there comes a point when she will want

by

ROSEMARY WELLS

some down-to-earth explanation of death. Before the age of four, a child cannot understand that death is final. She only knows that when her parents go out they come back again. "Daddy has gone to heaven" has no more significance for her than "Daddy has gone to London", and she will wait for him to return as usual. When he does not, the child might think he has run away or is lost. This needs gentle, honest discussion. Children have very literal minds and will take euphemistic explanations at face value. It is best not to describe death as "a long sleep", for instance, as they might then fear bedtime. Clinical evidence shows that some children do suffer sleep disturbances when death is discussed in these terms. Even casual remarks can cause trouble. Wendy, aged 11, suddenly started losing her temper with Susie, her little sister. Susie was a lively, mischievous child and their mother used to tell her off, sometimes using the expression "you'll be the death of me". Wendy ended up believing that her sister really would cause their mother's death, and it took very careful probing and listening on the part of an understanding doctor to reassure her.

The role of religion

Religious beliefs may help a child look on death with less fear, but God and "life after death" should only be brought in if religion is already a part of family life. If it is not, the child is likely to be confused by such strange, unfamiliar stories. Better then to explain that death is the end of life and that the parent had an illness which the doctors could not cure.

For a small child from a family where religion is important, an image of heavens in the sky is comforting. One young child was told that her Mummy had gone to heaven "to help God look after Grandpa" which she accepted happily, though of course another child could blame a God who would take her mother away for such a purpose. It is important to get to the bottom of the child's own view of the event and to put right misconceptions.

An adolescent child may already

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have suffered the loss of a relative or friend, but nevertheless she will need help in coming to terms with the death of a parent. A teenager is old enough to worry about practical matters: whether there will be enough money for the family to live on, whether they will have to move house and whether she will be expected to look after the surviving parent for the rest of her own life. She will also want desperately to comfort that parent, but may well be at a loss as how to go about it. It is almost impossible for the mother/father to instil confidence into a bewildered child while trying to face his or her own grief and cope with other problems. In Dr. Black's words, "Bereaved children find themselves alone with a tearful, withdrawn parent whom they cannot contact or comfort and who no longer appears to meet their needs. The conspiracy of silence ran be bewildering."

A friend in need

It may need the help of someone outside the immediate family to sit down with the child and reassure her about practicalities and explain that the remaining parent *will* gradually recover and return to normal. Close friends can play a useful role in encouraging all members of the family to express their sadness and to help them communicate with each other. They can try to ensure that family life continues as normally as possible by bringing a little cheer and fresh air into the household. The important thing to remember, for parent, relative or friend, is that children need to talk about death, to ask questions and express all their feelings and emotions. A frank discussion will enable the family to share their grief, to dispel anxiety and anger and to keep alive the happy memories. It may be that a bereavement, despite the immediate misery it causes, will bring a family closer together.

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She becomes, however unwarrantably, someone who might be a predator. Many widows will attest to this phenomenon.

Widowed people of both sexes need to be able to start new relationships, to experiment and to make mistakes, to pull in their horns and to venture out again, without being worn down by criticism from families, friends or children. Counsellors can be a staunch and vital support for widowed people in these situations.

As counsellors, we should be aware of both this need, and the need to talk about it. We must emphasise that there is no shame in these feelings, and that as other relationships are entered into, the sexual need will probably diminish to a certain extent. Yet it may not necessarily be so. Everyone is different, and so is their sexual drive and need. It therefore follows that no two bereaved people will react in the same way.

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MEMORIALS TO THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CREMATED

A competition called the **Phoenix Awards Scheme** has been set up to stimulate ideas and original thinking on the design of monuments and memorial gardens for commemoration after cremation. For the winner, there is a trophy designed by Stephen Hines, and a cash prize of £1,000. The judges include a crematorium superintendent, a clinical psychologist, an architect, a monumental sculptor, a landscape designer, a clergyman and a committee member of the Victorian Society. The closing date is 31st July, 1985. Official entry forms are available from: The Memorial Advisory Bureau, 139 Kensington High Street, London W18 6SX. Tel. 01-937 0052. (send £5 non-returnable deposit).

Front page picture: A Gentleman with his 2 children (usually called "The Widower") by Moroni. Courtesy National Gallery of Ireland.