more than a couple of hours) then a playleader would be, or a nurse, or a doctor, or the ward clerk, or someone. Fortunately the organisation of psychosocial support on our ward is such that I could promse this, knowing that it would be arranged.

The three year old and the thirteen year old are easy. Much harder is the 6 to 8 year old and I hope that the research outlines in this paper have both emphasised the difficulties and outlined some guidelines.

This paper is based on a talk given to the 1985 Cruse Conference of Branches.

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WIDOWED PARENTS' CIRCLES

By Dr. DORA BLACK, MB, FRCPsych, DPM

Chairman, Cruse Training Sub-Committee

"I was describing to a friend that being widowed so suddenly was like being shipwrecked on a wild, stormy, black sea. Thinking further on this feeling, I decided that discovering Cruse was like finding a patch of calm water and the Parents' Circle a landlocked harbour from which to take short journeys out to sea again, knowing you can return time and time again to gain more courage and strength from the strength and courage that comes from the group itself. Gradually the journeys get longer and one can go further afield. It is lovely to be ab'e to relax, have coffee and talk in pleasant, warm surroundings, knowing the children are being entertained by caring, understanding people".*

*From Maidstone Cruse Parents' Circle leaflet, with permission.

In the early days of Cruse Parents' Circles were started by Margaret Torrie, Cruse's founder, with the help of her husband, Dr. Alfred Torrie, because they recognised that widowed mothers might now have no one with whom to share the joys and sorrows of child-rearing and to talk over the problems that inevitably arise in family life. In this article I will discuss the patterns that have evolved in these groups and try to put forward guidelines for their establishment and conduct which may be useful to Cruse Branches and others working with bereaved families.

Bereaved children can sometimes be forgotten. The reasons are understandable when we appreciate the pain involved for a child in losing a parent. People may need to defend themselves against recognising this pain by ignoring the needs of the child, passing them off as insignificant or in some cases by becoming hostile. It is important for any organisation which aims to counsel bereaved people to make sure that the children in the family are not forgotten. Children have special difficulty in grieving and in expressing their feelings of deprivation and usually need help to do so and to come to terms with their situation. There are two ways in which help can reach them—directly through individual or group counselling or therapy and indirectly through helping their widowed parent either alone or in groups, so that she or he can then respond more appropriately to his/her child's needs. All these services should be available to orphaned children but in this article I am going to concentrate on group meetings for widowed parents.

Child rearing is not an easy task and most parents have mixed feelings about their children: at times feeling loving and proud, at others hateful, ashamed, guilty and incompetent. When there are two parents, the chances are that they will not both feel angry or loving with a child at the same time or to the same degree so that the intensity of emotion can be modified by the other. This acts as a protection for children which goes when only one parent rears them. Parents have a special interest in their children. Grandparents are interested too but in a different, less intense way, as are other relatives, friends and teachers. So that the sharing of joys and sorrows between parents is unique.

A Parents' Circle can help by providing a safe setting where widows and widowers can talk about their children, and ventilate and alleviate some of their feelings. For the setting to be safe and therefore helpful certain principles need to be observed. Attention must be given to the physical setting, the membership, the leadership and the organisational details. The content of meetings and how they are structured and led is in the hands of the leaders and will be discussed later.

Physical Setting

Meetings should be held regularly in the same place and at the same time. The room should be warm, softly lit with comfortable chairs arranged in a circle, and there should be facilities in a separate room for making coffee. Such rooms can be found in health centres, probation and social services offices, child guidance centres and many other places and may often be loaned free of charge or for a small fee. It is important

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that someone gets there early to welcome newcomers and show them the way. It may be tempting to meet in members' or counsellors' houses but the problems usually outweigh the benefits and it is not recommended. It is best if the meeting starts informally with coffee and chat and then becomes slightly more structured with the arrival of the group leaders.

Leadership

The sensitive selection of leaders is what makes a good Parents' Circle. Cruse has found from experience that it is best to have a man and a woman and that they should between them have children of varying ages including adolescents. Whether they should be widowed or not is debatable. There are advantages and disadvantages. To have leaders who are not widowed and are married (not necessarily to each other) enables them to help the group distinguish 'normal' difficulties from those related to bereavement. Since they act as role models it helps if they can say 'my son went through a moody or bolshie patch, too', which helps the group to accept that such behaviour isn't necessarily due to the absence of father. On the other hand some widowed parents feel that any one who has not shared their experience of bereavement cannot possibly understand and help them. My view is that what matters most is the skill, knowledge and personalities of the leaders and that should weigh more heavily than other factors. The fact is that an empathic and experienced leader can soon establish with the group members that he/she can listen, understand and help them make sense of their experience without having had to have been personally widowed.

What is essential is that they should have expertise in child development and the psychology and psychopathology of children and their families and that they should have had training and experience in the running of groups. In practice this means drawing on people in the psychological professions (child psychologists, social workers, probation officers, psychotherapists, etc.) They may need to supplement their knowledge by further training or by seeking supervision in running groups. It is also important that they understand that these groups are different from therapist groups (see Black 1976) and that the sharing of their experiences of child-rearing makes them a different kind of group from analytic groups.

The support that Cruse Parents' Circle leaders themselves need can be provided within the support and supervision structure of a Cruse Branch.

The Leader's Tasks

The most important is to facilitate group interaction. It is the group which is the agent of change and the leader's expertise must be to recognise this and not to lecture or primarily to give information. He/she wishes to help the individual to find her own solutions to problems and not foster dependency. In a secondary role the leader also acts as a model and is the source of a normal standard. The leaders must prevent the group from becoming leader-centred. This can be achieved by turning questions back to the group, intervening when the group needs a change of direction because the content is too emotionally loaded or because too much individual pathology is emerging which may need dealing with in individual counselling. They will also intervene when the group is avoiding something it would be helpful for members to face, such as anger.

The leaders have the important task of making it safe for people to experience and cope with emotions which may at times be very intense. The leaders must share this emotion, "hold" it and not be destroyed by it. In this they present a model for parents to share with their children and accept the communication of strong emotion without making them feel fearful, guilty or destructive.

Leaders should avoid dogmatism and help groups to find solutions to the problems of their members from within their own resources where possible rather than imposing their own.

Finally leaders have to help members to relinquish the group when they no longer need it.

It is often argued that "ordinary" people with experience of life and rearing children are all that are necessary for running a group and that by bringing in people with expertise and special skills one is turning group members into patients. Experts are ordinary people who have submitted themselves to the discipline of acquiring knowledge and skills and those attributes are placed at the service of those who need them. It is no service to the widowed parent who comes to a group with a pressing problem, having travelled far and pa'd money for a baby-sitter if she can't be heard because a member is hogging the stage and the leader lacks the skill to prevent it. Or the group takes flight from a painful issue or is shocked by a revelation which a more skilful leader could have avoided or tempered. A vital part of the leader's ability is knowing the limits of group help and when another approach is needed —referral to social services, child guidance, family therapist, etc.



Membership

In my view newly bereaved people need the flexibility of individual counselling and should only join a group when the first pangs of grief are subsiding. After that it should be their choice to join the Parents' Circle and they should be free to use it as and when they need it. A new member may come for half-a-dozen sessions, stop and return when adolescent problems hit his or her family. Or they may

choose to come more regularly. It is for the group leader to sense when it is not helpful for that member (or rarely, for the group) to continue, and help him/her to leave, after preparation. There is no reason why members should not stay for the whole of the child rearing years and help newer members from their own experience. It will probably be found convenient to have an upper age limit, such as when children leave home or cease full-time schooling. It can always be stretched if necessary. Sometimes members who have been widowed longer wish to discuss themes which may be painful or irrelevant for the newly widowed. The problem of meeting sexual needs is one. One way of dealing with this is for the group to split in two on one or more evenings.

Closed or Open Groups?

An open group is one that admits new members as it goes along. A closed group which meets regularly is able to develop an intimacy which is more difficult in open groups, and can therefore deal with more painful, shameful, perhaps, issues because trust develops more quickly. However, often it is not possible to mobilise enough leaders (or members) to make closed groups practical, and there are many opportunities in open groups for members to help each other when they are at different stages of widowhood and family life.

A Time Limit?

Sometimes groups set a time limit, such as one year. In my view this is inappropriate. Problems arise with children at any stage in their development and a group should be in existence to give prompt help to a widowed parent.

Mixed or Single Sexed Groups?

There are far more widowed mothers than widowed fathers, and mixed groups sometimes contain only one or two men. Problems can arise if there appears to be competition for them and men's child-rearing problems (and housekeeping problems) often appear, to them at least, to be so pressing that they may monopolise group time. All these problems can be coped with by skilled and sensitive leaders and the advantages of fathers and mothers sharing their areas of expertise probably outweigh these disadvantages.

What Size Group?

It may be difficult for all to have a reasonable time to be heard if the group is larger than 10-12, but a larger group is manageable if some of the members are of longer standing and can help others. Open groups mean that numbers may be unpredictable, but having two leaders means that the opportunity for forming two groups is possible if numbers are large.

Organisation

As essential as skilled leaders, is a committed group organiser who reminds members of dates and times of meetings, arranges premises, coffee (not necessarily making it but ensuring its provision) and transport, etc. She may be able to arrange for baby-sitting (by the older widowed perhaps) or in some cases, provide a crêche on the premises. Several Cruse Branches have a concomitant circle for children and teenagers, where they can play and share some of their experiences. Groups are, not unexpectedly, finding play experience extremely valuable to children needing to express aspects of separation and loss. As one 10 year old wrote, "Cruse makes me think I am not the only one without a daddy."

The organiser can also arrange individual counselling for members whom the leaders feel need more help than the group can provide, or where the leaders recognise that for a member, issues were left unresolved that cannot wait till the next group meeting. All members should have the phone number of the organiser.

Meetings: Frequency, Content & Structure

The frequency of meetings may be determined by the commitment of the leaders and organiser but should not be less than once a month and could be fortnightly or three-weekly with advantage.

The leaders are responsible for "boundary-keeping", that is beginning and ending on time (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours is average) and ensuring that emotion is 'held', and individual issues do not swamp ones of general interest and importance. The content and style of sessions will depend on discussion between the leaders and members. A "free" session will leave members to introduce issues which are concerning them although leaders will want to check whether issues from previous sessions are still of concern. Note-taking is of great help here and might be done by the organiser or a volunteer. Occasionally a theme can be decided on in advance and it may be that a special speaker might be invited—say from DHSS on benefits or a probation officer on delinquency, etc. Such special topics should probably be covered only once or twice a year and might be in addition to the regular meetings.

Long Term Benefits

In the longer term, there are likely to be bonuses for many Parents' Circle members, both men and women, by way of opportunities for new, but compatible social contacts, and adult companionship on outings and possibly holidays.

Conclusion

An opportunity for widowed parents to meet regularly with skilled group leaders who are experts on children should be part of the provision a caring society makes for its members. At present it is provided by voluntary organisations, often supported in part by statutory funds. All branches of Cruse should be encouraged to have a Parents' Circle. About one child in 60 is orphaned. In any conurbation of 200,000 people there will be about 400 widowed parents. Some of them will be well supported by family, neighbours and friends but there will be enough widowed parents needing the help of a Parents' Circle to justify the creation of one in every borough or town. Other services are needed too, and the efficacy of such provision needs evaluation. Parkes (1981) review of bereavement counselling has shown its effectiveness. Groups are economical, sociable and friendly settings for helping widowed parents. It is my belief that they are at least as effective as the forms of counselling reviewed by Parkes and the family counselling I recently evaluated. (Black 1984). Let our 10 year old quoted above have the last word. "Our mums have a chat and a cup of tea in the big house. I think the mothers talk about us . . . I think that Mummy feels that as other people have coped, that she will cope too."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Mrs. M. Torrie for her invaluable writings on Parents' Circles. The ideas expressed here are my own, however.

*From Maidstone Cruse Parents' Circle leaflet, quoted with permission.

For References, see page 14.

BEREAVEMENT CARE is published for all Cruse workers and others who wish to deepen their understanding of bereavement. It is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be re-sold, reproduced in part or in entirety, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's consent.

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Since our last issue, Cruse Branches have opened at:

Newark: Mrs. Sue Gregory, 8 Chapel Lane, Spalford, N. Scarle, Newark, Notts. Tel. Spalford 315.
Aberystwyth: Mr. John Jose, Maesnewydd, New Cross, Aberystwyth. Tel. Cross Wood 521.

There are Steering Committees currently working at:

Archway, Aylesbury & District, Barry, Bracknell, Cambridge, Chester-le-Street, Dumbarton, Dundee, Durham, Felixstowe, Great Yarmouth, Grantham, Inverness, Lincoln, Romford, Shrewsbury, Sudbury, Swindon, Stirling, Wellingborough, Wrexham.

Cruse Vacancies

Three new Area Organisers will be required by Cruse to start work in the autumn. There will be a full-time vacancy in Scotland, and half-time posts in North-Eastern England, and in South and West Wales.

Area Organisers are responsible for work with Branches, and the development of new ones. Skills in organisation, communication, motivation and committee work are essential, as is the ability to manage one's own timetable and work well with others. There is a lot of travel, and some evening and weekend commitments.

Further details from Derek Nuttall at Cruse House.

The Miscarriage Association

The Association has recently changed its address. The new address is: 18 Stoneybrook Close, West Bretton, Wakefield, W. Yorkshire WF4 4TP. Tel: Bretton (092485) 515. The secretary is Mrs. Kathryn Ladley.

POSTBAG

From:
JANET JOHNSTON
Chairman and Parents' Circle Leader, Maidstone Cruse

Your readers may be interested to hear about my experience of the preview of Central Television's series, **"Parents and Teenagers"**. We watched two complete programmes from the current series (and parts of some others).

1. **When Trouble Comes** (No. 7 in the series) which looked at situations where communication breaks down totally within a family and either (a) the child runs away or (b) the child is put into care or (c) the child challenges the father's prescription of his life and is thrown out. This was a mixture of drama and documentary.
2. **Sense of Loss** (No 8 in the series). This was totally documentary and was brilliant! Anthony Lawton interviewed the mothers and daughters—one whose father had died and one whose father had gone to live with another woman.

The bereaved child and her mother were probably, I felt, really communicating for the first time since the father died. I hope they received or will receive help to continue this as they moved on visibly throughout their part but still needed to move on more. (I did suggest in the seminar that this is an obligation that the production team should feel.) Many of the things the girl was saying were very typical of what we hear in Parents' Circles. I am not sure how helpful it would be to the bereaved—but I'm sure it would be helpful to counsellors.

The child separated from her father was a most articulate, sensitive and clearly suffering child who had real insight into her predicament. I found her part the most inspiring of the whole afternoon. I think in many ways our kids in Cruse would get something from her.

Which brings me to the purpose of the day which was to discuss whether these tapes could be used by organisations as training material *with* parents and teenagers. Within our branch here I could not see a place for it unless we made a different slot, such as a four-week session on parenting teenagers/putting up with parents. Overall, though, I would be reluctant to introduce such a volume of material into people's lives when they are already finding life complicated.

However, I could see uses for the **Sense of Loss** episode for educational purposes, particularly to teachers, social workers and also to use any group of people which is looking at loss, maybe also to schoolchildren, and most definitely Cruse counsellors. I thought their handout which they send to people who phone in was quite helpful and their group notes excellent for leaders of Parents' Circles.

Discussions with those attending was not terribly meaningful, as we all had such different agendas, but all were in some way helping people cope with losses of one sort or another and also in helping parents and teenagers to communicate.

The series is to be repeated on the 11th November, 1985 at 12.30 p.m.—so may reach more isolated mums at that time.

The producer, Graham Sellers, thanked me for reminding him of his obligation to care about the impact of the screening on people involved and put a note in his diary to remind him. As it was filmed six months ago he would not have thought about contacting them personally as he is buried in his current work.

Sue Barker from Central TV and Sylvia Sheridan from Thames TV would like to hear from any group that does use any of their material.

Linked with the series is a book, *Parents & Teenagers* **by Anthony Lawton (Unwin Paperbacks, £2.95)**

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION

The Nursing Mirror and the Royal College of Nursing Accident and Emergency Forum are sponsoring the five-day international **Accident and Emergency Conference and Exhibition,** to be held at Imperial College, London, between 23rd and 27th September, 1985. The second day's subject matter, grouped under the title *Crisis Intervention*, will perhaps be the most relevant for many **Bereavement Care** readers. Dr. Murray Parkes and Marjorie Ashdown are the main speakers that day, both on aspects of sudden death. After lunch there are a number of concurrent discussion groups, many with leaders from overseas. The cost is £125 plus VAT for five day (£39 plus VAT for one day). Brochures from the Conference Administrator, Reed Conferences, Room 1313, Surrey House, Throwley Way, Sutton, Surrey SM1 4QQ. Tel: 643 8040/4892.

DAY CONFERENCE

On 5th October, 1985, Chelsea Pastoral Foundation are running a Day Conference for professional and voluntary workers on the subject *Close to Death*. The speakers will be Dr. Tom West, Deputy Medical Director, St. Christopher's Hospice, and Dr. Avril Stedeford, Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist, Sir Michael Sobell House, Oxford. The cost is £20. Applications to the Foundation at: 155a Kings Road, London, S.W.3.

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(from page 19)

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Further Reading

Bion, W. R. (1959). *Experiences in Groups.* London. Tavistock Pubs.
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Loss of a Twin

The Twins Club has set up a Bereavement Support Group for parents who lose a twin. Details from: Susan Scorer, 8 High Beeches, Gerrards Cross, Bucks.

The loss of a twin, whether at birth, in the neonatal period, or later, is discussed briefly in Elizabeth Bryan's book *Twins in the Family: A Parents' Guide* (Constable). The book is mainly written from the parents' point of view, and there are a few paragraphs suggesting how the death may affect the surviving twin. Dr. Bryan is Hon. Consultant Paediatrician at Queen Charlotte's and Hammersmith Hospitals.

Käthe Kollwitz sculptures "Grieving Parents": photograph courtesy of Verkehrsamt, City of Cologne, W. Germany.