The wooden shelf was bedecked with soft toys, and a lovely little coffin was in the middle of the room. We tucked him in and left, sadly, for home.

We all visited Cian each day he was there. On Sunday, however, concerned that his appearance might change significantly before the burial on Wednesday, we kissed him goodbye and placed the lid on the coffin. The four of us then took a butterfly nut each and, once the children had finished arguing over which corner to take, we sealed it shut.

We had decided to bury Cian in a small babies' section at Pleasington Cemetery and, with the complete agreement of our families and friends, that only Ita and I and the two children would be there.

Wednesday arrived with a clear blue sky and warm sunshine. It was a spring-like day. We drove to a local flower shop and the four of us each selected flowers to place on Cian's grave. Then we collected Cian from the funeral home and drove to the cemetery with Ita and the children holding the coffin on their laps. Our two chosen priests —Catholic and Anglican—were waiting for us at the graveside and the manager of the funeral service stood by. We lowered Cian's coffin into the grave and the priests conducted a ceremony lasting only about five minutes. We finished, at Ita's request, by singing three verses from 'All Things Bright and Beautiful.' Then the grave was filled in and the four of us were left in the warm sunshine to tidy it at our leisure. Ita and I cried quietly, the children played and then we took photographs. It was a sad but lovely day.

Sam and Orla spent that day much as they might any other. They accepted Cian's death as another interesting event in a life full of fascinating things. The stillness and stiffness of his body, the cemetery and the burial held no fear for them. They participated fully in all aspects of Cian's life and death, and they now visit his grave with us quite happily—as long as it doesn't mean missing 'Tom and Jerry'.

There have been no delayed reactions in the months since he died. Notwithstanding our own uncertainties, we have emphasised to them that: 'It was only Cian's poorly body we buried—he is fine now and happy in heaven with Jesus.' They talk about him and look at photographs quite happily, showing full awareness that he is not coming back. 'Does Jesus have a pram?' Orla once asked. 'Of course he does!' we replied and she smiled, quite happy.

Ita and I have no doubt that for Sam, Orla and ourselves, "twas better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all'. We are sure that we were right to involve the children as we did. Our actions were informed in part by psychological principles but were based above all on our understanding of our own children. We do not assume that what was right for us would necessarily be right for others; we would hope they would be allowed to find the right road for them, just as we were. We were able to enjoy the short time that Cian was with us. We hope, too, that his quality of life was such that 'twas better to have lived and lost than never to have lived at all.

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Bereaved Children and their Teachers

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There are few studies in which children's own responses to the loss of a parent through death form any part of the research. Where children's responses are noted, the sample has tended to be drawn from clinic populations of children already psychiatrically disturbed. Beverley Raphael (1982)[1] studied 'normal' children and included responses from the children themselves, but she commented on the difficulties of the research which included obstacles to contact with the families. 'Few (professionals) denied that bereaved children might have needs, but many showed a reluctance toward any method of finding out what those needs might be.'[1] The reluctance of the adult world to acknowledge the pain of grief in childhood is likely to have been a factor in the dearth of research involving 'normal' children's responses, and in obtaining accurate representations of their experience.

Children need to feel safe enough to broach their distress and sadness, but this opportunity is often not available to them in the family. The surviving parent may be unable to respond to the child's grief at this time because of his or her own distress, or the family as a whole may deny the possibility of grief in young children. It is clear from the literature that the presence and help of caring adults is paramount if the child is to survive the experience of the death of a parent without pathological outcome. But are the other adults in a child's life able to comprehend or facilitate the child's grief reactions?

In discussing the impact of the death of a parent on children aged 8-12 years, Raphael[2] comments on the importance of teachers to children in this age group. The study described below set out to discover the extent to which teachers are aware of the bereavement issues which are important to children who have lost a parent through death[3].

Aim and method

The experiment was designed to compare the way groups of children and teachers ranked seven categories of bereavement issues in terms of their importance to a bereaved child. The groups were: bereaved children; the teachers of those children; and a random sample of teachers working with children of comparable ages and schools.

Thirteen children took part, seven boys and six girls. All were past or present members of Maidstone 'Young Cruse' a special ongoing group run for children whose parents attend the Parents' Circle at the Maidstone branch of Cruse —Bereavement Care, a national

UK voluntary organisation. The children attend this group at their own request.

The children's ages ranged between 7 and 14 years (mean 10.92 years, SD 2.46 years). The time since their mother or father had died ranged from three months to seven years (mean 3.1 years, SD 2.56 years). Six had lost a parent one year ago or less, seven of them two years ago or more. A brother and sister had lost their mother; the 11 others (including two brothers) had lost their father. All the children were at different schools, eight at primary and five at secondary schools.

Twelve of these children's teachers agreed to take part, and two declined. Of the 12 who took part there were three men and nine women, whose teaching experience ranged from one to 30 years (mean 15.0 years, SD 9 70 years). The secondary school teachers were the children's form tutors; they had varying degrees of responsibility for their pastoral care but they did not necessarily teach them. Three were involved with the child at the time of the parent's death; two had been unaware that such a death had occurred.

The random sample consisted of 16 teachers, two men and 14 women. Their experience in teaching ranged from two to 30 years (mean 19.12 years, SD 7.75 years). A forced-choice card-sorting format was used to collect the data. This was developed by Waismann and Rowland[4] and commended itself for use with children as it did not require lengthy concentration or an understanding of the world in abstract terms.

The initial items were obtained in conversation with a small group of children from the Cruse—Bereavement Care support group, three of whom later took part in the study. They had agreed to take part and were used to talking about their experience. Several had expressed the hope that such sharing might help other bereaved children. The resulting tape recording and discussion with the group leaders produced most of the original 81 items. The relevant literature yielded more, transposed into the first person to conform with the items expressed by the children. The items were written on cards and grouped into categories. The 45 items that fitted most consistently into their categories were used and are listed below.

My behaviour:

I got really bolshie and wouldn't do anything I was told
I didn't talk to anyone and wanted to be alone
I cried all the time
Getting upset gets it out of your system
I kept getting angry with everyone

Attitudes—others to me at school:

No one in my class spoke to me after they knew
People at school can be really nasty if you get upset
Even the teacher didn't know what to say
The teacher didn't know what to do
Your friends are afraid you'll get upset

Attitudes—others to me at home:

No one at home would talk about it
I seemed to get the blame when anything went wrong
They don't like talking about it at home even when you want to
No one at home seemed to know what would help me
At home they go 'shhh' but you need to talk sometimes

Comfortable thoughts:

Although I know he won't, it sometimes helps to think he'll come back one day
I like remembering the holidays we all had together
I'm glad I've got his scarf to wear
It's good to have photos around
I treasure the things he gave me when I was little

Uncomfortable thoughts:

I can't remember his voice
I was afraid mum might die too
I was afraid I might die if I went to sleep
It's awkward being a boy when your dad's dead
I couldn't work out where heaven was supposed to be

Feelings at school:

I prefer to be treated at school like I've got a dad
I want to be treated like everyone else at school
It feels bad when they say things like 'Get your mum to help with your costume'
I don't like getting upset in front of my friends
I feel jealous of my friends who haven't got so much responsibility

Feelings at home:

I miss a dad to talk to now I'm older
Everything at home was different
I wanted to protect mum from any more hassle
I felt numb and shut up inside myself
I felt shut out of what was going on

The card-sort itself took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was administered individually. Each person was given one card from each of the seven categories. They were asked to read each card and then arrange them in descending order of importance. Children were asked to put the items in order in terms of importance to them. Teachers were asked to rank them in order of importance as though they were a child whose mother or father had died. The rank order was written down and the cards collected. The exercise was repeated four times using the remaining cards.

Results

When the means of the scores for each group in each category were compared, statistically significant differences were found in three categories: 'attitudes—others to me at home'; 'attitudes—others to me at school'; and 'comfortable thoughts'. Both groups of teachers rated 'attitudes—others to me at home' as being more important than did the children. The children's teachers rated 'attitudes—others to me at school' as more important than the children did, and the children rated 'comfortable thoughts' as more important than did both groups of teachers. When 11 of the children were matched with their own teachers, the comparison demonstrated differences in the same categories and in the same direction. Thus teachers were shown to be unaware of the relative importance children placed on three of the categories. These categories indicated the importance for children of their own inner world, their thoughts and feelings, as opposed to the relative unimportance of attitudes of others towards them.

Discussion

The importance of using children themselves as the primary source of information in the study seems clear. Most studies of bereaved children have relied on adults' observations and interpretations of their behaviour. The results of this study showed, however, that behavioural issues are not very important to children but, as representatives of 'normal' children as opposed to those receiving psychiatric care, the importance of their thoughts and feelings is clear. The study showed that teachers are not aware of this.

The most startling feature of the rank ordering of the mean scores for the groups concerns 'comfortable thoughts'. This category was highly important to the children whereas it came bottom of the list for both groups of teachers. An examination of the raw data reveals that 12 of the 13 children placed the item 'I treasure the things he gave me when I was little' first in their rank order. Although the most recently bereaved children were also concerned with 'uncomfortable thoughts', it is the positive nature of the 'comfortable thoughts' that is of overriding importance to all the children. Perhaps this demonstrates children's capacity to find ways of coping and surviving in bereavement unknown to the adult world around them. These 'comfortable thoughts' are not the same as denial, but they may be tools for survival. The importance for one boy of his father having taught him how to do long multiplication shortly before his death was clear, as the boy described his pleasure in the task performed each day and its associations with his father.

None of the children experienced any difficulty with the card-sort, nor did they express or seem to feel any anxiety about it. This was a successful way of collecting the data, offering the chance of conversation and comment but not requiring it. Even the youngest children in the study readily understood the nature of the task and approached it seriously. They thoughtfully and carefully selected the ordering of items, perhaps realising that this was something they know about and where they were the experts.

Most of the children in this study were used to talking about their thoughts and feelings, and many commented that it was important to them to be able to do this. Future studies might involve talking with children who may not have had the opportunities offered by the type of support group provided by Cruse—Bereavement Care. This might well facilitate the therapeutic sharing of thoughts and feelings hitherto unexpressed, but would require the continuing presence of a supportive adult.

Children's grief can be inhibited by the lack of a caring adult able to help them express it, and in these situations a good relationship with an understanding teacher can be of enormous help to a child. It is possible, however, that a teacher might misinterpret the way a child is apparently 'coping well'. Many of the teachers expressed great interest in the items in the card-sort, and in some cases were surprised by them. A few teachers, whose parents had died when they were young, recognised much of the material.

Secondary school children

It was interesting that the secondary school teachers differed from the children in the 'comfortable thoughts' category only. In secondary schools each pupil may have as many as 12 teachers, together with the form or group tutor who may or may not teach the child. In a primary school one teacher is generally responsible for the whole of a child's experience and it might have been expected that these teachers would be more aware of what was important for the bereaved child. This is not, however, supported by the results of this study. An explanation for these findings may lie in the age of the child. It could be argued that by the time pupils are of secondary school age, their communication and social skills are likely to be sufficiently developed for their needs to be made known in some way, and for them to make clear what issues are important. For example, several of the secondary teachers interviewed described essays that children had written describing their bereavement experiences.

Primary school children

For younger children this may not be possible. For the primary school teacher to raise issues of death or grief in conversation with the child might be to risk disturbing the equilibrium of the classroom world (or, indeed, the equilibrium of the teacher). There is a real danger of such children being alone with their grief while their teachers are content with the assumption that they are too young to experience it. Yet as a group, the primary school children in this study ranked 'feelings at school' second only to 'comfortable thoughts' in their rank order of categories. If teachers are not aware of the importance to children of their inner world and if their behaviour appears normal, as it may well do, such children may be at greater risk than older children.

Delayed mourning

Raphael[2] has described bereaved children as 'marking time' until an adult enters their world who will enable them to express their thoughts and feelings and thus facilitate their grief[2]. Mourning may thus be delayed and may occur at any point during the child's school career. Teachers working with the child some time after the death may be quite unaware of the bereavement.

This study showed the importance of their inner world to all the children, some of whom lost a parent as long as six or seven years ago. Even when grief has been expressed normally, some aspects of their bereavement may not become apparent to children until several years after the death of their parent. A possible example of this which occurred in this study was the comment made by a 13-year-old boy with no brothers. He said 'It's awkward being a boy when your dad's dead', and on another occasion, 'You can't play football with your mum'. As a child develops and matures, brief but intense grief reactions may occur in relation to previously unrecognised areas of loss.

Many of the teachers welcomed the opportunity offered by the card-sort exercise to talk about death and bereavement and to relate their own experience. Many of the interviews therefore took far longer than the 15 minutes necessary to collect the data. It seemed that teachers not only welcomed the chance to air their thoughts and feelings about death but needed permission to do so. Perhaps more could be done to help teachers to address their own thoughts and feelings about death and bereavement. By doing so teachers could learn that it helps children to cry and share their grief, and that it does not help if they are protected from the grief of others.

Such help for teachers would assist them when faced not only by the bereaved child but also by his peers, who are likely to be confronted for the first time by the possibility that a parent might die. Bereaved children are often alone in their situation but a teacher is also faced with perhaps 29 other children in whom the death of someone else's mother or father has awakened fears and anxieties. These fears, particularly in younger children, will be unacknowledged unless a situation can be created where they might be shared.

Teachers who are aware of their own feelings, and of what are likely to be the important issues for children, are in a good position to create such a situation. This is especially so if they have already encouraged conversations and discussions about death as part of the children's learning. This would also help the bereaved child's peers to relate to a classmate whom they might otherwise have perceived as 'different'. One teacher in the study commented of the other children's reactions to a bereaved child: 'They seemed to think he had grown two heads'. It is likely that the knowledge of death is acquired at an earlier age than is commonly supposed, and this study confirms Koocher's[5] findings that children are capable of talking about death and seem to want to do so.

The positive nature of the 'comfortable thoughts' which were held to be so important by the children in this study indicate resilience in the face of sadness, and willingness to get to grips with the situation. Teachers could discover that bereavement need not all be tears and sadness, but that there could also be the sharing of much positive remembering.

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