# Searching for a Way Through: An Account of Bereavement Work with a Seven-Year-Old Boy

**Joan Cooley, Teacher's Cert.**
Counsellor,
Cruse—Bereavement Care (Oxford Branch)



The Oxford Branch of the UK voluntary organisation, Cruse—Bereavement Care, received an urgent request for help from a woman with four children. The 16- and 14-year-olds were from a previous marriage, and it was the father of the two younger children (Sam, nearly seven, and Peter aged three years), who had committed suicide by means of carbon-monoxide poisoning from his car exhaust. The counsellor working with her reported the mother's particular concern about Sam. He was having nightmares, was bed-wetting, a nervous tic had appeared, and his school was reporting lack of concentration and withdrawn behaviour. He seemed to be blocking any expression of feeling since weeping at the news and stating 'It's all our fault'.

Since my experience as a nursery-school teacher and Educational Home Visitor for the Family Support Project in Slough had made me recognise the value of play as an emotional outlet for the young child, the Branch supervisor suggested that I work directly with Sam. Here was a challenge to try to link this understanding with bereavement-counselling skills.

### Preparatory work with Sam's mother

I devised a checklist focusing on Sam's family relationships and behaviour since his bereavement, which helped me to elicit factual information from the mother and her interpretation of Sam's experience. In her distress she seemed to gain relief in sharing her concern, and this proved to be the start of a trusting relationship for future work.

Now I learnt that she had bravely given a simple but true explanation of the father's suicide after her removal with the children to a women's refuge (a hostel offering shelter to women and their children from violent partners). Though Sam had not seen his father's body, nor attended the funeral, he had been taken to put flowers on the grave two days later. The father's disturbed personality had prevented him from bonding with Sam (though he showed affection to Peter). Sam had witnessed his father's violence to his mother since babyhood and had tried to stand protectively between his parents. In addition, his beloved great grandmother had died six months previously. Later Sam had had to cope with a change of home, school, his mother's continued distress, her migraines and even her stay in hospital for investigations.



*Sam's illustration for his story 'The Witch'*

### Phase 1: Work with Sam, building a relationship

Sessions with Sam started 11 weeks after his father's suicide. They took place in his home once a week apart from holidays and each session lasted about one hour. The number of sessions was left open-ended. Early ones were bland. Play included father as if he were alive. Drawings depicted him, as with the rest of the family, as smiling. Sam was now seven years old. His mother reported that he looked forward to having me to himself, but was puzzled as I had been labelled a play lady—and 'Ladies don't play!' We made a book of his stories which he dictated and illustrated with flair and maturity. These addressed moral issues (good/bad behaviour) but in no way related to the recent trauma.

I read him 'Badger's Parting Gifts'[1] with its theme of death, and left it at his request. In session four we made lists of pleasant and worrying thoughts to accompany his self-portrait. There were no bereavement issues. In the next session there was a loving portrait of Sam holding great grandma's hand. We made a long list of happy memories of their times together. Asked about sad thoughts, he offered: 'I miss cuddling her' and, abruptly, 'I don't want to think about that'.

Before session six, the mother phoned, distressed at Sam's bizarre behaviour. While she was ill upstairs, he had spread tomato ketchup on his arm with the flat side of a sharp kitchen knife to the consternation of his siblings, and with the comment: 'No-one loves me'. It was customary for Sam to watch videos and TV programmes chosen by his older siblings, in which violence was often explicit. I had observed both from his drawings and what he said that the violence excited him. To me, therefore, the gesture, while dramatic and effective as a bid for attention, seemed to be more of an exploratory acting out as there was no intended physical damage.

At our next session I introduced six felt dolls representing a miniature family: four small ones and two larger dolls, which Sam identified as members of his own family. However, play only revealed sibling annoyance and rivalry and I felt I was getting nowhere, apart from our warm relationship.

I contacted my supervisor, who suggested an appointment with our consultant child psychiatrist. A focused approach was recommended: I should clarify my role with Sam, and for background reading I was referred to Beverley Raphael[2]. As for the knife episode, the psychiatrist reflected that the family had set up a model in which a furore of attention surrounded the father's suicide. This was discussed with my supervisor, who suggested I take time to rethink and prepare this new approach.

Before the three older children went on holiday to Wales with relations, I was able to clarify my role as someone coming especially to work with a child troubled by the death of a member of the family, and to help him share his feelings instead of bottling them up inside.

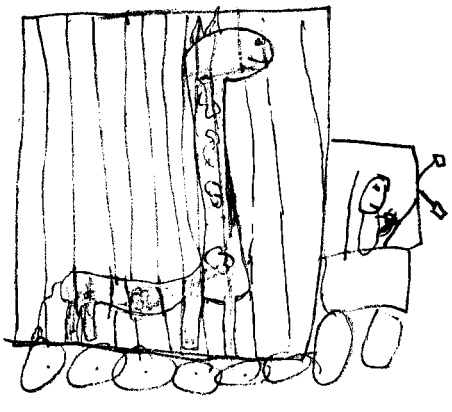
Sam's play with the miniature family on this occasion was on a hide-and-seek theme, reflecting anxiety about disappearances and failure to return. When I commented on this and on his father's being depicted as alive in his drawings and play, although now dead, he rejected these activities and demanded something new. It was now that I introduced 'squiggle' drawings[3], with both of us participating (this is a variation on verbal 'free association'). As hoped, the new activity helped Sam to relax, and he took the initiative, revealing aggression in manner and content, as well as a grasp of the permanence of death—a theme to discuss. From now onwards, squiggle drawings became a firm favourite, demanded as a reward at the end of each session.

During Sam's holiday, I was fortunate to discover Claudia Jewett's book[4], which was to prove my lifeline. Now I could absorb and plan a new focused approach. Sam was reported happy with his relations, but he wept bitterly on the homeward journey without being able to say why. (Bidding goodbye to loved ones meant a further loss perhaps, and a return to painful memories?)

**Phase 2: Breakthrough, moving on**

From session nine onwards I built up each programme to address the reality of the past, selecting which miniature family members should face each other (they were now turned into puppets with the addition of elastic for flexibility of movement). The furniture was now excluded as it was limiting the flow of Sam's imagination.

To address the recognition and naming of feelings, we used one of Jewett's practical devices, firstly by 'making faces' at each other to represent inner feelings of sadness, anger, loneliness, happiness and anxiety. These Sam translated, drawing them onto cardboard with intense care, then cutting them out. We found a variety of words to describe the feelings, and labelled the back of each face. We now shared a vocabulary and symbols to place alongside each puppet as a scene progressed. Sam suggested that snips at the side of each face plus a rubber band would mean they could be fixed onto the puppet and changed appropriately. He raced in to tell his mother: 'You can tell how people feel by the look on their face', as if this were a real discovery.



*Sam's drawing of a giraffe*

Another successful device of Jewett's proved to be the use of 'secret' boxes. In these we secured the written themes which now emerged from the puppet confrontations. Sam insisted I took them home each time for safe-keeping. I could comment that it felt a safe thing to do, to talk with someone about worrying feelings instead of keeping them all inside.

In these ways we played out the situations that troubled him. Such symbolic representation gave meaning and expression to feelings which he was too immature to express adequately in words. It released him to play-act, to draw, and even to take a lead. Perhaps, too, the timing was right. We had already built up a trusting relationship; the holiday had distanced the disturbing, tightly-blocked experiences, and his weeping at his return had opened the potential for him to move on in safety.

Now Sam drew comparative pictures with written examples of 'Daddy happy', 'Daddy angry', or 'Sometimes I miss Daddy', and 'Sometimes I don't'. The last he could illustrate in detail with his father throwing boiling hot tea in his mother's face—mother weeping, father in profile (considered to be a symbol of a child's maturation) and all in black. My comment 'He must have been in a black mood' gave Sam satisfaction, and he wanted this inscribed.

At his request each session ended with some squiggle drawings. Usually they followed a theme in which he put himself in a powerful, winning position. Bubbles from each character's mouth included comments reinforced by a series of triumphant exclamation marks.

**Phase 3: Final scenes, endings**

I had now included a grey-headed female puppet to double for great grandma and me. With this I introduced discussion about our work not going on for ever. Sam's mother reported less tension in him; he was having fewer nightmares, and was speaking well of his new school.

Sam was able to give a clear account now of how his father committed suicide. There was a most poignant goodbye scene enacted in our penultimate session. I set this up, offering the father and Sam puppets only, together with miniature flowers and a box with a lid. Sam slowly placed father in the box, closed the lid and decorated it lovingly with flowers. There was a pause, he reopened the lid and placed the Sam puppet inside on top of father, arranging his arms round him making kissing noises. He stayed there quietly. He shook his head when I asked if he had something else to say to his father. 'Just goodbye?' I asked. He nodded.

During this session I had commented on how brave he had been to share so much with me, and it felt that our work would soon be over but I would keep his secrets safe. If he became unhappy again, he could ask for me. Couldn't I come to play chess with him, he asked.

After the session he had a most loving episode with his mother, on her lap, kissing and cuddling fervently. He could also say clearly to her: 'Sometimes you ignore me.' (He had acted out this theme with the puppets, and we had talked about her unhappiness and illness.) She was able to explore this with him.

In our final session, the father and Sam puppets were set up facing each other to see if there was anything more they would like to have said. I commented: 'Last week it seemed you wanted to be close to father. Was there something more you wanted to say?' But Sam shook his head, and moved his puppet to sit on father's lap. 'You just wanted to be close?' Sam nodded, and I, too, felt that last week's play had 'said it all'.

I intervened here to say clearly why it seemed that father did not

want to go on living, lest there were feelings of personal guilt unexpressed or buried. I suggested it seemed that father had been ill in his mind and had refused to go to a doctor for help, and that it had not been to do with father feeling 'fed up to the neck' with Sam or his family. (This had been a quote by his father, inscribed by Sam on his illustration of 'Father being angry'.)

Sam now completed his last two highly expressive comparative drawings 'Sam anxious' and 'Sam no longer anxious. He can tell his fears and worries to someone who can listen'.

We finished with the 'me' puppet and Sam talking about how good it felt to share, how hard Sam had worked, and about sadness on parting and missing. We also talked about good memories and fun with squiggle drawings (Sam's special contribution). He told me he wanted to help people who had no homes or food when older. He presented me with a drawing of sunshine and a tree reflected in water, and a card inscribed 'Thank you for being my friend'.

### Seven months later

When I contacted Sam's mother on the anniversary of his father's suicide, she reported that Sam's enuresis and nightmares were rare, his facial tic had abated, he was reading with pleasure, warmly appreciated at school and developing new talents musically. Sam was now more open, even assertive, and sought out his mother to talk, and for affection. A close relationship has been formed with the older children's grandfather and grandmother.

### Author's comments

A young child cannot reflect on events and their effects. He experiences these, together with the atmosphere and reactions of those near him, uniquely and egocentrically. The sense he makes of them depends on earlier experiences, how he feels about himself as reflected back by those closest to him, and the level of his cognitive and verbal development. Magical interpretations, self-blame, fear of further loss and therefore a need to shield himself, not to annoy, can all operate. Defence mechanisms protect when the pain of loss or guilt feelings overwhelm him.

Where verbal skills are immature, other forms of expression—drawing, doll or puppet play, storytelling, bashing or smoothing clay, kicking a ball—can provide outlets for blocked feelings, with opportunities for shared understanding. As with any form of non-verbal communication, the endeavour is to pick up the clues the child offers and to reflect on them together. (For example, my comment 'He must have been in a black mood', in reaction to Sam's drawing of his father, triggered a flash of empathy connected with recognition of underlying feelings.)

As Worden[7] has said, 'Children do mourn and what is needed is to find a model of mourning that fits children rather than imposing an adult model.'

## SUMMARY

### Preparation

For the work to proceed it was essential to put Sam's mother at ease, to listen to her concerns and to help her interpret a young child's behaviour at a time when she was distressed herself. Even a slight shifting of responsibility can help to lessen her burden. The child senses the mother's acceptance of the counselling sessions and is more likely to respond himself. Also I needed feedback from the mother and more objective information.

**Phase 1.** It is rare for a child, especially in a grieving family, to have undivided attention, with his own concerns the focus, yet calmly structured by time and content. Our sessions therefore excluded the ever-demanding little brother. I came to see Sam on his own regularly, and I kept my word. This was a new, perhaps slightly seductive relationship, and it puzzled him until I could define my role. Acceptance and attachment grew. (My supervisor had wisely foreseen that endings with a male counsellor could revive painful loss feelings.)

Because Sam was richly imaginative and his mother placed a high value on strict truthfulness, his fantasies had been labelled by her as lying. She and I discussed his inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality and, as a result, a more appropriate label for his behaviour could be given. She expressed relief as she had been concerned that Sam had inherited his father's traits.

I valued and typed Sam's stories which he illustrated, and together we pasted them down to make his own book. Genuine admiration for his drawings, too, could only help his self-esteem. Reviving memories of his loved great grandmother, reading 'Badger's Parting Gifts'[1], and reflecting on the burial he had depicted in a squiggle drawing, were useful preliminaries for future work and openness.

Sam presented me with a gift of a drawing—a caged lion and giraffe being transported.

**Phase 2.** Work on exploring and naming a variety of feelings gave us insight and an accurate shared vocabulary. Focusing on family members and reflecting on the ensuing puppet play brought events and feelings into the open which, with Phase 1 accomplished, Sam felt safe to do. We could work on ambiguous feelings—of missing and not missing father, and of father's disturbed behaviour.

Keeping secrets concretely in boxes for me to store safely at home freed Sam's expression.

Squiggle drawings gave Sam the opportunity to feel powerful, to lead, make decisions, express anger, to punish; they gave evident relief and delight. He gave me the role of an adult, deserving and receiving as he directed.

Sam presented me with a gift—his drawing of a smiling clown on a tight-rope with a safety net underneath.

**Phase 3.** Work included giving time for grief and its expression, and to saying goodbye to father. I felt that Sam had moved on in his understanding and could receive my statements concerning his father's suicide, how it was father's decision and in no way related to Sam's behaviour.

Interwoven were themes on work well done and saying goodbye to each other, recognising that sharing worries and feelings brings relief.

Sam presented me with his last picture—a tall, growing tree reaching up to the sunshine, with reflections in the river—and I gave him a large cardboard box and some cardboard and string to make his own puppet theatre.

#### Acknowledgements

Sam's mother generously gave permission for this article to be written, hoping it would help others. I am also indebted to Dr. Elizabeth Walters, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, Park Hospital, for her generous professional guidance, and to my supervisor, Clare Holman, for continued support, insight and encouragement. And, especially, to Sam.

#### References

1. Varley S. Badger's Parting Gifts. London: Anderson Press, 1984.
2. Raphael B. The Anatomy of Bereavement. London: Unwin Hyman, 1984.
3. Winnicot DW. Playing and Reality. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
4. Judd D. Give Sorrow Words. London: Free Association Books, 1989.
5. Jewett C. Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss. London: Batsford Academic, 1982.

#### Further Reading

Bowlby J. Attachment and Loss, Vol. 3. Loss. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
Grollman EA. Explaining Death to Children. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
Worden JW. Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy. London: Tavistock Publications, 1983.
Millar S. The Psychology of Play. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.
Mussen P, Conger J, Kagan J. Child Development and Personality. New York: Harper & Row, 1956.
Althea. When Uncle Bob Died. London: Dinosaur Publications, 1982.