Putting bereaved parents in the frame



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In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the needs of bereaved children, who in the past have been a neglected group. This is reflected in the growing number of books to guide professionals, articles on service provision, and initiatives to help grieving children. However, in our eagerness to help we may have overlooked, or at least minimised, the vital role parents fulfil and the importance of empowering them to play a prominent part.

In Peta Hemmings' recent article in *Bereavement Care*[1], a parent was shown a way to help her young daughter cope with her father's death. It was a good example of a parent and professional working together for the benefit of the child and, although this was not explicit, I believe was also beneficial to the mother. In guiding her to use techniques to help her daughter unleash her guilty feelings about her father, the mother was given the opportunity of working with her daughter, which may not only have brought them closer together but may also have strengthened the mother's belief in her parenting skills.

Parents whose child has died, or who are coping on their own after the death of their partner, have their own unique pain, but they still continue to be parents to their surviving children. It has never been suggested that bereaved children in general, should be removed from their families because of their parents' suffering.

My mother died suddenly when I was a child. My brother and sister were sent to a home and I lived with a succession of housekeepers who knew little of how to cope with a grieving child (although they may not have recognised that children grieve). At weekends only I saw my father, who followed a traditional pattern of stiff upper lip behaviour and expected me to do the same. Any questions, pain or guilt I may have experienced remained securely within myself. In my late twenties, when my first husband took his life leaving me and three very small children, I struggled with the model I had learnt as a child and with my own gut instinct to be open, honest and acknowledging of my own and my children's feelings. I would have greatly valued help and guidance both for myself and for my children.

THE ROLE OF PARENTING

The role of parenting, in general, is a balance between being rigidly authoritarian and overly permissive. It is obviously important for parents to recognise that their children have basic rights, but it is also important to acknowledge that the adults have rights which need to be equally respected and fostered if we are to have balanced parenting and a healthy society in the future.

Much would seem to depend on how parents communicate with children: not making empty threats; sometimes saying very little or even being silent; encouraging; listening; being open about feelings; talking problems through and keeping the lines of communication open[2]. It could be suggested that the same principles apply when parents are supporting bereaved children.

After the death of a child or partner, parents still have to go on with daily living as well as dealing with their own pain and that of their children. Sometimes, especially after the death of a spouse, the secondary losses – such as financial and social difficulties, changes in role or employment – are as difficult or more difficult to deal with than the primary loss[3]. The majority of parents want to be good parents and to know how best to be supportive and loving in a crisis. Many may still believe that children, especially younger ones, do not grieve. When a child has died suddenly, or from a congenital abnormality, parents' guilt may be compounded, especially if they believe they could have prevented the death. In such cases, it is important to restore parents' faith in being good and effective parents to their surviving children.

BEREAVEMENT AS A FAMILY AFFAIR

Watslavick[4] reminds us that:

> Every part of a system is so related to its fellow parts that a change in one part will cause a change in all of them and in the total system. That is, a system behaves not as a simple composite of independent elements but coherently as an inseparable whole.

When a significant member dies, all in the close family will be affected. Shapiro[5] describes grief as a family developmental crisis, interwoven with the family's history and its current development. Just as children's understanding of death is dependent on the historical and social context in which they live, grow and

EDITOR'S NOTE

Bereaved parents may be so distracted by their own grief that they are unable to recognise or acknowledge their children's feelings. Dent here reminds us that when we are asked to help we need to support, rather than replace, the roles of surviving family members.

Behavioural problems in children are common in the first few weeks after the death of a parent or sibling, and these difficulties may persist in a substantial minority[1,2]. Many families have felt that they would benefit from more advice on how to help bereaved siblings[2]. More studies of bereaved children are required to look at the factors responsible for varying outcomes[3]. As Black points out, 'Although the bereaved child has to accept the irreversibility of death, those of us in the helping professions...need not accept the inevitability of its detrimental consequences'.

1. Black D, Urbanowicz MA. Family intervention with bereaved children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 1987; 28(3): 467-476.
2. Dent A, Condon L, Blair P, Fleming P. A study of bereavement care after a sudden and unexpected death. *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 1996; 74: 522-526.
3. Rutter M. Psychosocial adversity and child psychopathology. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 1999; 174: 480-493.
4. Black D, Young B. Bereaved children: risk and preventive intervention. In: Raphael B, Burrows GD (eds). Handbook of Studies on Preventive Psychiatry. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 1995.

develop, the family of which they are part will inevitably influence them. The ways in which they experience and respond to stress are reflected in what they have learnt and experienced in their home environment. It has been argued that it is impossible to talk about children without looking at the family[5,6]. Therefore, as Silverman[6] and Riches[7] point out, we need to attend to how the family system is organised, how roles are defined, how gender differences are reconciled and how the various members react and interact to provide a nourishing environment, not only for the children but for all family members.

Attention should not simply be directed at the psychological responses of individuals but also at the relationship contexts: marriages, families, sibling relationships and surviving children/parent relationships. Failure to identify their direct effects on individual adaptation may reduce the effectiveness of individual counselling support.

HELP FOR PARENTS AFTER SUDDEN CHILD DEATH

In my own research studies[8,9] which considered bereaved parents' perceptions of support after sudden child death, responses from 139 parents in 114 families showed that of their 150 surviving children, they had noticed marked behavioural changes in the majority of them since the death. These ranged from aggressive behaviour, becoming withdrawn, being unable to concentrate, bedwetting, being bullied, bullying and telling fibs. Most parents in both studies would have welcomed guidance from their medical practitioner and/or health visitor in dealing with their children's reactions. However, replies from the 269 health visitors and 186 medical practitioners in the same studies showed that, whilst they recognised the importance of their role in supporting families (especially the health visitors), the majority felt that they would need further training to help bereaved parents to support surviving offspring.

Recently several national helplines for bereaved children have been set up. This seems an excellent initiative, bringing help and comfort to many older children as their grief is acknowledged and someone at the end of the line listens to their story and feelings. However, this does not reach the younger age range who are unable to use the phone or indeed to understand that they need support. For these children, and their parents, other sources of help are needed.

THE DEATH OF A PARENT

Initially, it may not be easy for parents, initially, to experience their children's pain and to see how to comfort them, but children need to hear that this is the case. Knowing what is going on, even if it is only that their parents are overwhelmed, will make them feel more secure[3]. Worden[3] points out that children need support, nurturance, and continuity after the death of a parent. Although the surviving parent may have difficulty in providing these, I would suggest that they should not be denied the opportunity of trying, with support and information from others.

When death has been sudden or violent, it is more likely that children will not attend funerals[3]. So, for instance, it would be helpful if parents were told that children who are not allowed to attend the funeral are likely to be at risk two years later[3]. These children are more likely to show disturbed behaviour, low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. It is also suggested that including children in the planning of the funeral has a positive effect, helping them to feel important and useful at a time when they may otherwise feel powerless. Furthermore, it would help some parents to know that family stressors have been found to have the greatest influence on the experience of bereavement, both for the surviving parent and the children. Passive coping by the surviving parent is also an important risk factor for poor adjustment in the children[3]. We need to provide guidelines so that parents can become aware of these issues.

It is now recognised that bereaved children need:

- adequate information
- their fears and anxieties addressed
- reassurance that they are not to blame
- careful listening
- validation of their feelings
- help with overwhelming emotions
- involvement and inclusion in rituals
- continued routine activities
- others around them to model grieving behaviour
- opportunities to remember the deceased person[3,6,7]

Professionals and volunteers dealing with bereaved children are probably fully aware of all of these needs and can help parents constructively. There is less awareness of the importance of giving parents information and empowering them to support their children in a meaningful and knowledgeable way, whenever possible. Now that we have identified that children grieve and have needs, and will react according to the family model, I would suggest that we are in jeopardy of keeping our newly-learned wisdom to ourselves. By helping parents to consider their bereaved family as a whole and giving them a share of our knowledge, we are enabling them to take some control over a sad and possibly chaotic situation. BC

APPENDIX

To help professionals and others dealing with bereaved families, the following may be of help:

Abrams R. When Parents Die*. London: Charles Letts, 1992.

Dyregrov A. Grief in Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1990.

Hindmarch C. On the Death of a Child. Oxford, UK: Radcliffe Medical Press, 1993.

Grollman E. Talking about death: A dialogue between parent and child. Boston, USA: Beacon, 1970.

Lindsay B, Elsegood J (eds). Working with Children in Grief and Loss. London: Bailliere Tindall, 1996.

Sarnoff Schiff H. The Bereaved Parent*. London: Souvenir Press, 1977.

Smith SC, Pennells M. Interventions with Bereaved Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1995.

Worden JW. Children and Grief. New York: Guildford Press, 1996.

Excellent leaflets on helping bereaved children are available from from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR, UK. info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk

References

1. Hemmings P. Putting the child in the frame. *Bereavement Care* 2001; **20**(1): 12.
2. Quinn M, Quinn T. What Can a Parent Do? Dublin, Ireland: Family Caring Trust, 1986.
3. Worden JW. Children and Grief. New York: The Guildford Press, 1996.
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5. Shapiro ER. Grief as a Family Process: A developmental approach to clinical practice. New York: The Guildford Press, 1994.
6. Silverman P. Never Too Young to Know. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000.
7. Riches G, Dawson P. An Intimate Loneliness: The impact of a child's death on marital relations and its implications for support agencies. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2000.
8. Dent A, Condon L, Blair P, Fleming P. A study of bereavement care after a sudden and unexpected death. *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 1996; **74**: 522-526.
9. Dent A. Support for families whose child dies suddenly from accident or illness. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bristol, 2000.

* Available from Cruse Bereavement Care, address as above