

# where's mum

# my now?



When faced with a bereaved child, how best can a teacher react? **Brian Cranwell**

identifies the issues of import and offers advice on this oft overlooked aspect of the profession...

**"S**chool, it really helped me...Miss Hake, she gets me doing reading jobs. I'm a reading tutor to other children." (David, 11)

*"I got bullied, like, two years in a row. 'Ho ho. You haven't got a dad.' The teachers didn't do anything about it."* (Sarah, 10)

Just two quotations from the first research in the UK to take such data from bereaved children. Every 27 minutes in this country a child has a parent die, and at any one time some two million children aged 5–15 have experienced the death of a parent, grandparent, sibling or friend.

A study of 235 schools in 2003 showed that nearly 80% had children bereaved during the previous two years, but 60% of teachers commented on lack of training in this area, and of such children experiencing behavioural difficulties such as aggression, school phobias, or difficulties with peers. Fewer than 10% of the schools had any bereavement policy.

## Find out more

Brian Cranwell, a bereavement support worker for 20 years, is the author of *Where's my mum now?* Children's perspectives on helps and hindrances to their grief (AuthorHouse). To purchase a copy, or for more information, visit [briancranwell.co.uk](http://briancranwell.co.uk)



## Health and social issues

The need for appropriate responses to these children is primarily for the good health of the child. Research shows that in the first year, bereaved children:

- have emotional and/or physical health problems, finding difficulty in everyday functioning;
- consult GPs more frequently;
- experience bodily complaints such as sore muscles, headaches, bed wetting and stomach upsets.

One in five show no immediate difficulties in the weeks following but do so two years later.

While health is a prime concern, there are also social consequences of inappropriate responses:

- One study showed 22% of children excluded from school had bereavement problems compared with 16% of other children.
- 47% of children losing a parent had tried drugs.
- Girls losing a parent in childhood are 40% more likely to become pregnant before the age of 18.
- 20% of children had experienced bullying at school arising directly from parental death.

## Back to school

Most of the children who took part in the research wanted to get back to school quickly – the girls to be with their friends, the boys not wanting to be seen as 'different'. Half felt they'd received useful support from staff; the rest divided between those who felt teachers hardly acknowledged their loss and those who expressed sympathy but made no effort to identify problems such as concentration difficulties, or negative peer responses.

Some of the positive responses included:

- Warning the class (without the child present) that this was a sad time, to not treat him/her differently, and that there may be times when they need to leave the room.
- Giving the child permission to leave class for short breaks when overwhelmed by feelings, and having a visual system on the child's desk (red/green card or stone) to show their need (no reported abuse).
- Staff trained in bereavement work.

Negative responses included:

- A teacher telling a class to make Father's Day cards, *"But not you Jimmy, you haven't got one."*
- *"They gave me a lot of attention at first, but then lost interest."* (Mac, 10)
- *"If the teacher says something like 'Ask your mum to sign this form for the school trip', some people turn round and look at me, expecting me to burst into tears."* (Sandy, 12)

## The right reaction

### BE WARY OF COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS...

Teachers can have a major influence on bereaved children. Unfortunately, without the necessary information, many will be operating according to misconceptions prevalent in society. Assumptions to avoid include:

- An active playing child is not a grieving child.
- Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.
- Adults (teachers, clergy) are always qualified to give instant explanations about loss, grief and spirituality.
- Grief problems disappear after the first anniversary of the death.

While a staff member trained in grief support is useful, class teachers' responses are of primary importance. Recognising extreme grief symptoms, being alert for unpleasant speech or bullying, ensuring there is someone a child can talk to, and having awareness of helpful local resources and publications is an asset. If a child dies, leaving their empty desk in position until the end of term prevents the impression that the staff do not miss them.

## Beyond the classroom

There are matters on which teachers can advise parents. For example, following a bereavement children are helped if they're told what to expect. Local Authorities will give guided tours of crematoria, and clergy will help describe a funeral. A parent feeling unable to cope with a child's grief as well as their own could ask another relative or friend to be with the child, rather than exclude him/her. Children frequently express amazement and admiration at the numbers present:

*"I was really proud, because the church was jam packed full with people. I didn't know she was that popular!"* (Ricky, 12)

Others expressed appreciation of the

presence of their teacher and classmates. Children given the chance to view the deceased also cope well. Abigail (10) reflected on her mum who'd had cancer:

*"I was glad I went in. All the pain had gone from her face."*

While 80% of children in the USA have this opportunity, the number here is far less, about 10%.

When a school is aware of an impending death in a child's family, it's also useful to be able to advise parents of how children who know the truth experience a sense of freedom in talking to the dying and tell of conversations they will remember all their lives:

*"My mum said 'You're my beautiful girl, and I'm very proud of you'."* (Pat, 9)

The importance of clear language and telling the truth also came across from many of the children. Pat (10) reflected on her early life fears after hearing her grandma had 'gone to sleep':

*"When I was about six I used to think...oooooooooooo...do I have to go to sleep, can't I just stay up?"*

And metaphors too can mystify young children:

*"I knew what they meant when they said 'passed away', but my young brother was a bit confused."* (Alan, 11)

## Putting children first

Some children go through unnecessary distress through adults taking decisions without consulting them. Some parents make things difficult for school staff by denying the need for the child to be treated as bereaved. One head, who had a dinner lady die suddenly, with two children in her school, was refused cooperation by the child's father for a memorial service, but decided the needs of the school community were paramount.

The encouraging factor in the study mentioned was the way so many children came through their experience, despite some of these difficulties, feeling stronger, older than their peers and with enhanced self-esteem. Asked why they agreed to take part in this investigation, several replied, "If it will help other children to get through this, I will be pleased".

**Short courses for school staff and literature for staff and children are available from The Child Bereavement Charity ([www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)), Winston's Wish ([winstonswish.org.uk](http://winstonswish.org.uk)), and the Gone Forever Trust ([goneforever.org.uk](http://goneforever.org.uk))**