

Bereavement Care Journal, Spring 2008

Webwatch Review:

Helping With Bereavement In School

With incredible noise, the sea of teenaged children swept into the classroom. As a trainee in my first weeks of teacher training, I felt glad to take a back seat, simply observing a much older, experienced member of staff as he went about his daily. The tumultuous crowd took to their seats as the names on the register were called one by one above the good-natured hum of voices at the start of another school day. Then one name was called and the class fell silent. The mood instantly changed. Nobody replied. The name was called again. Still silence and all eyes now focused on the teacher. After a few moments a boy at the front of the class, his voice filled with suppressed anger said "He died Sir – don't you remember? He died at the end of last term". "Oh yes, so he did!" the teacher replied as he continued marking the register with barely a pause. The class remained silent, staring as the teacher eventually closed the register and casually slipped his pen into his top pocket. A moment later the bell rang to signify the start of lessons. "Right off you go" he ordered. The children left the classroom in a very different manner to the way in which they had entered. With voices barely raised above a whisper, they filed out of the door in an orderly manner and were swallowed up by the jostling crowds in the corridors.

I am sure that incidents such as this, which occurred more than 25 years ago, are very rare in UK schools today. Yet in an article appearing in *Death Studies* in 2000 entitled 'Grief and school communities: the impact of social context, a comparison between Australia and England', the authors found that 94% of 145 sampled Australian schools had a plan in place to manage traumatic incidents and identify good practice and programs related to grief education. This compared to only 15 % of 200 UK schools sampled. Fortunately all UK schools are now required to have a policy detailing their response to a major incident or crisis. When a pupil suffers the loss of a family member or a fellow pupil or member of staff dies, the whole school community is affected. Having a solid workable plan to help staff and pupils cope is vital. There are some useful online resources that can be adapted to suit the needs of individual schools in creating such a plan. The charity Winston's Wish can provide excellent in-school staff training and its website at www.winstonswish.org.uk offers many resources that can be adapted by schools wherever they may be. Click the Schools/Professionals section to access. Here one can download the Schools Information Pack. Written by teachers, it includes advice on talking to pupils and age-related responses. There is also a downloadable Strategy for Schools, offering guidelines on informing staff, governors, pupils and parents about a death, including sample letters.

For Key Stages 1-4 the site has some excellent ideas for lesson plans in a variety of subjects including Art, Music and English. Guidance is given on the creation of Memory Jars, Shields and Walls and there is also a section detailing activities for Christmas. Also available for download is the excellent

30-minute film entitled "School Matters-Coping with Bereavement" detailing how a primary and secondary school have coped with the loss of parents and pupils. Although only available to download here, I have found that the film may be purchased in DVD format directly from the Teachers TV website at www.teachers.tv/video. To access it from the latter site, one needs to create a simple online registration and write "bereavement" in the search bar.

Major incidents such as school shootings like those in Dumblane, Helsinki, Colorado and Virginia are relatively rare but again highlight the need for all schools to have crisis responses in place. Another excellent resource that may help schools plan for crisis and bereavement can be found at www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu. This vast site has been created by the Centre For Mental Health in Schools in the USA. Established in 1986, the School Mental Health Project was created to pursue theory, practice and training related to addressing mental health and psychosocial concerns through school-based interventions. Although not exclusively concerned with bereavement, there is a lot of useful information here dealing with bereavement in schools. On the homepage select Search and Quick Find, then Grief and Bereavement from the drop down menu to access the Resource Aid Packet: Responding to a Crisis at a School. This 148 page downloadable document includes a Crisis Screening Interview, advice on facilitating classroom discussion, aftermath classroom activities for various ages, dealing with the media, organising a school-based crisis team and mapping community resources. It also considers the school's role in addressing reactions to loss, building resilience in children and adolescents, identifying coping strategies, realistic goal setting and helping bereaved students return to school. The site also provides links to many other useful websites and resources.

* Rowling L, Holland J (2000). Grief and school communities: the impact of social context, a comparison between Australia and England. *Death Studies* January.