RESPONDING TO LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

A TRAINING RESOURCE TO ASSESS, EVALUATE AND IMPROVE THE SCHOOL RESPONSE

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About the Author

John Holland has been interested in bereavement, children, schools and education for several years and led the 'Lost for Words' project in Humberside, a loss-awareness project produced by educational psychologists and the Dove House Hospice in Hull.

John developed the 'Iceberg' project at the University of York, a doctoral study of the experiences of children and young people after parental death and the book *Understanding Children's Experiences of Parental Bereavement* (Holland 2001).

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Introduction

Responding to Loss and Bereavement in Schools helps you support pupils who have been bereaved or have experienced significant loss, and is based on the author's experience working with schools through training and research.

Although the focus of this book revolves around parental bereavement, the strategies can be adapted to any form of loss experienced in the school community.

For pupil support to be effective there must be awareness of the pupils' needs, and the power to make any changes. Power alone lacks direction and understanding of need; awareness alone lacks the ability to influence systems. The best outcomes are achieved by a combination of power, awareness and commitment of senior staff.

This book includes tools to develop support in the area of loss in schools. An audit of current practice uses a 'survey, analyse, plan and evaluate' cycle to help test the robustness of systems and identify 'bugs'. This is an active process, with evaluation of responses and modifications made.

The audit tool and questionnaire in Chapter 2 can identify gaps in knowledge and training, and these can be addressed though the exercises within the book, which provide basic training. It can help identify individuals with skills, experiences and interest, as well as raise awareness around the issue of loss and the need to respond and engage with pupils.

A swift 'light touch' intervention for pupils is preferable to the likely costly medium- or longer-term involvement of outside agencies. Speedy intervention safeguards pupils against the short-term effects of significant loss, increasing their chances of better life outcomes in the longer term. In terms of economics this makes sense in saving resources.

Research shows the long-term difficulties for some bereaved children, including reduced life chances if they disengage with education. Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop (2005) found some bereaved pupils withdrew from peers and others became involved in criminal behaviour; Cross (2005) found that bereaved children were at a greater risk of abuse.

For some pupils, parental death led to additional responsibilities at home, including child care and extra chores, and the dilution of childhood (Holland 2001). Bereaved children tend to leave home early, experience earlier sexual and partnering activities, and have parents who remarry. Teenage pregnancy, criminal or disruptive behaviours, depression and decline in self-esteem were all reported in the 'Iceberg' study.

'Iceberg' was a doctoral project at the University of York, carried out by the author into the effects of parental bereavement on children and described in *Understanding the Effects of Parental Bereavement* (Holland 2001), published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Pupil behaviour may not be recognised as grieving and may increase the pupil's risk of exclusion and alienation from the school system if misinterpreted as wilful. School is a potential point of stability in children's lives and they and their families can be helped through this difficult period. Parental death is significant, and the effect on children and young people may be accentuated because of their lack of life experiences, control and understanding.

In the past, infant mortality was high and children gained understanding by involvement with death rites and first-hand observation of dying, through social learning theory (Bandura 1962). Today, adults may protect children, exclude them from involvement in the rites after death and deprive them of vicarious learning. Chadwick (2012) found that children may be 'shut out' of things, gathering half-truths and fantasies that are probably worse than the reality. At best this may only postpone children's grieving, leaving them confused and mistrustful of adults.

Parental bereavement is relatively frequent; Harrison and Harrington (2001) calculated that 2–6 per cent of children under 18 years of age are affected. Many schools have a pupil recently bereaved of a parent on roll, as did 35 per cent of North Yorkshire schools (Holland and McLennan 2015a); McGuinness (2009) found that 10 per cent of the adult workforce may be affected by a significant bereavement, and there may well be a similar level of bereaved staff in schools.

Bereavement is far from the only significant loss pupils may experience; other losses include parents' separation, divorce, re-partnering, imprisonment, illness, disability, moves of house and school, and the death of pets. A child being taken into public care has implications for them and their birth family and involves significant losses. Transitions affect all pupils as they move classes or schools, and the impact of all these changes may be underestimated by adults. The birth of a child, a young person leaving to go to university or a move of house may all have an impact to a greater or lesser degree and sometimes not as predicted.

Problems that can arise after loss
Family chaos

A significant loss or change causes disequilibrium within the family system until stability is restored. A major change in the family will be a significant event and they will take time to absorb the news. The family may initially be in a state of shock and overwhelmed. This period of instability may be sudden and problematic, and the family may need support, with new roles and changes implicitly or explicitly negotiated.

After a parental death, separation or loss, children may become 'clingy', concerned that the surviving parent may also die or leave, as they have become primed suddenly to the fragility of life. Peer group awareness and anxieties may be raised, and issues relating to previous losses may again surface.

The parenting team will have been halved by the death of the mother or father, and the surviving parent may work longer hours to support the family, and be less available to the children. Family members are normally a source of support and social learning, but after a death may not be emotionally available to the children, as they work through their own issues of loss.

Pupils who are 'looked after' may have experienced family chaos as well as moves of foster family, neighbourhood or area, and may have suffered physical or emotional harm as well as the loss of their birth family.

Tertiary losses

The death or separation of a parent is the presenting loss, and may be the only one recognised by many. There are potentially consequences that may flow indirectly from a death or parental separation. Further losses may take place whose ramifications and effect on the children are not so obvious. Loss is rarely simple and one-dimensional, and the effect of death may be complex, and more like a spider's web rather than a length of string. Unpredictable secondary losses may flow from the presenting loss, as ripples flow out when a stone is thrown into a pond, with implications over time and space. These tertiary effects may go unrecognised and include economic and social effects.

Economic consequences

There may be financial consequences after a death or separation, especially if the main earner has died or left home. The family may have a lower standard of living, which is accentuated if more child care is needed. The family may have to move house, perhaps even area. Life insurance cover may help to reduce the difficulties in the case of death.

If the family moves area, links in the local community will be lost. Children may lose contact with their familiar surroundings and support systems, such as friends, neighbours, school, doctors, clubs, organisations and church. Children may already feel isolated and different after the death, but more so if their new peers have a different accent or language. The death of a parent or carer is less common than separation although this may have similar consequences, such as children losing contact with a parent, moving house or school and having step-parents.

Psychological issues

Change and loss are lifelong human experiences and it is only when they are overwhelming that there may be problems. Babies are aware of separation from carers, and research by Bowlby (1963, 1981) showed the importance of secure attachment bonds and effects of loss. Children experiencing significant loss may be left with memories. The adults the child encounters may be oblivious to their background, so although the adults are aware

of emotional markers, such as adverse behaviour or learning, they may not link these to the context of the young person's experiences.

Children's cognitive and emotional responses may not be synchronised after a significant loss. Their cognitive, higher-level functioning may be out of synch with their more primitive emotional reactions. This needs to be borne in mind as anger or withdrawal may be signs of grieving but misunderstood by adults. A pupil showing signs of anger and disruption may be seen simply as a 'naughty' rather than a 'needy' child. A quiet pupil may be sad and feeling emotionally low and drained, but staff may not be alerted to their needs as they are not a problem in class.

The Vygotskian approach (Vygotsky 1978) is to find the pupil's level of understanding and to plan an intervention accordingly, not pitching things as too complex or too simple but 'just right'. The level of understanding needs to be gained to enable work to be carried out in their 'zone of proximal development' (Chaiklin 2003). If this approach is not used, the pupil may feel patronised with too simple assumptions, or feel lost with too complex ones. Children need to understand and it is a challenge to pitch explanations at the right level.

THEORIES OF GRIEVING

Theories of grieving are relatively recent. Kubler-Ross (1980) suggested that the bereaved went through emotional stages, such as shock, denial, anger and resolution, which tended to be thought of as lasting around two years. This can be seen as deterministic, as well as pathologising grief, and is extrapolated from research with adults.

Mallon's (1997) division of children's grieving into three phases of protest, disorganisation and re-organisation is useful, as is Fox's (1985) suggestion that children have four tasks after a death: 'understanding', 'grieving', 'commemorating', and 'going on'. This is helpful to frame the needs of children in terms of adults responding to their needs, and links with the thoughts of many of those who took part in 'Iceberg'.

Stroebe and Schut (1999) proposed a dual processing model in which the bereaved oscillate between grieving and restorative work, which perhaps explains why children seem to be sad, then moments later are playing as if nothing has happened. Children are likely to be processing what has happened but need 'time out' from potentially overwhelming loss. Goldman (1996) thought that bereaved children may be caught in 'frozen blocks of time' and need adult support to help them.

Children will learn vicariously through observations (Bandura 1962), and they may lack the encounters and involvement with death compared with children's experiences in our relatively recent past.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

It can be difficult for adults to know what children and young people understand about death. This question was addressed in the 'Iceberg' project. The results give guidance rather than being definitive, and the best way of finding out what children understand is to ask them and gauge their understanding from their responses.

Until around two years old, children will have the notion of separation from an attachment figure rather than the concept of death. Somebody whom they are attached

to is no longer there and this may cause distress. From around the age of two children will be developing their language but tend to think in literal terms and have confusing ideas about death. They may wonder about the physical wellbeing of the deceased person, such as how they eat and go to the toilet. They may know the word 'death' but not understand it fully or think that it applies to them.

Chadwick (2012) quotes a four-year-old child dying in a hospice as saying that he knew what happens after you die – 'Sister flushes you down the toilet' – based on what happened to his tropical fish!

Between the ages of four and eight years old, children develop intellectually and emotionally, and gradually become more aware that death has a cause, cannot be reversed and may happen to anyone. Their language develops and their cognitive understanding is greater, but they may still be literal in their thinking. Children may have fantasies far worse than the reality if not given the facts by adults who are trying to protect them.

Children may have 'magical thinking' and feel responsible for the death, believing that their destructive fantasies, such as wishing someone dead, have come true. They may feel that the death is a form of punishment to them for doing something wrong.

From about eight years of age onwards, most children are developing an adult understanding of death but there may still be signs of magical thinking and confusion. Their own future death gradually becomes more of a reality. During the adolescent stage, young people's concept of death becomes more abstract and they understand more of the consequences and issues involved. It is important to consider children's level of understanding in relation to their age and respond accordingly.

Children's understanding of death	
Age of child	Understanding of death
0–4 years	Emergent
4–8 years	Limited
8–16 years	Fuller

The table above is only a rough guide, as some children will gain a fuller understanding earlier, others later, depending on their cognitive ability and experience. Children with language difficulties or those who are on the autism spectrum and take things more literally may take longer to develop an abstract understanding.

It is helpful to use the correct language with children, such as the word 'death' rather than euphemisms such as 'loss'. Children will find this less confusing, and can 'grow into' the word and build on it with experience. The word 'death' per se does not have the same connotations for young children as it does for adults.

It is likely that children will have a similar level of understanding in relation to the other losses that they may encounter, such as their parents separating or divorcing, having a parent in prison or being in the care system. The Vygotskian notion of finding what children understand about the loss and responding accordingly seems a sensible strategy where children have experienced significant loss. Blackburn (1991) found a mismatch between bereaved children's understanding of death and what their teachers thought they knew.

In Wordsworth's 1798 poem 'We are Seven' (Till 1994), the eight-year-old has a very clear idea of death! This would have probably been similar for children in our relatively recent past, as death was encountered more with a high level of infant mortality.

Religious and cultural issues

The religions of the West – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – have their roots in the Abrahamic traditions of the Middle-East. The Eastern religions include Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Confucianism and Taoism.

It is impossible to generalise about the post-death religious practices, rites and customs, although the Western religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam generally differ from the Eastern religions in terms of treatment of the body. With Islam and Judaism the body is generally buried quickly; cremation has become more common recently in Christianity although there is generally not the same speed of burial. The Eastern religions have different rites and rituals including cremation on pyres, sky burials, and the scattering of ashes on the Ganges.

Religions are not homogenous and there are divisions within them. An example is the broad division within Christianity between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, but there are other subdivisions including Methodists, Baptists and Quakers.

The area of religion and post-death rites is one where offence can easily be unintentionally given and good connections with local religious and community leaders will help to avoid pitfalls, especially as communities are becoming more diverse.

Creating links and communicating with leaders will help you to gain a better understanding of the customs, rites and responsibilities after death. Children will naturally assume that what happens in their home and community is the norm and may be both interested and confused when they encounter other practices.

How to use *Responding to Loss and Bereavement in Schools*: Menu of suggested action

Before beginning analysis or training it is important to gain an overview of the area of pupil bereavement and loss by reading the first part of *Responding to Loss and Bereavement in Schools*, that is, 'The Role of the School'. For greater insights into the experiences of children after the death of a parent you could read *Understanding Children's Experiences of Parental Bereavement* (Holland 2001), based on the doctoral research project 'Iceberg' into the experiences of children after the death of a parent.

Next, critically examine what is currently in place at school, completing the survey of current responses, testing any policy in place and assessing the skill levels of staff. This will help identify any training needed and individuals who could carry out a role. Staff training can then be tailored appropriately.

The topics and exercises can be used for training and to stimulate discussion. The exercises are best delivered in a group, with a facilitator leading with appropriate questions and challenges. Interactive group sessions can help to engage the participants and may be more productive than a purely formal didactic or PowerPoint approach.

Summaries and flipcharts may help visual learners as well as providing reminders to reinforce learning points. *Responding to Loss and Bereavement in Schools* is underpinned by research through projects such as 'Iceberg' and how the needs of children and young people can be met.

The Role of the School

Introduction

Pupils spend significant time at school, which could play a key supporting role for them and their family after a death or other significant loss, and they may contact you for advice.

Holland (1993) identified a 'training gap' in Humberside schools. Schools rated bereavement an important area, but lacked the skills to respond effectively. Lowton and Higginson (2003) found that staff in schools were concerned about doing the 'right thing'; this was echoed in Holland's (2001) findings that teachers wanted to help but were unsure as to how and were wary of causing an upset.

Dyregrov (1991) considered schools well placed to offer support, with knowledge of their pupils and families, and the local religious and cultural context (Oyebode and Owens 2013). Tracey's (2006) study of bereaved daughters showed the positive role that teachers can play after bereavement. Berg *et al.* (2014) stressed the importance of school-based support to help to support school performance The research was a large Swedish study of children experiencing parental death before 15 years of age, comparing their academic results when 15 to 16 years old. Parental death was associated with lower academic grades.

In the 'Iceberg' project, the bereaved pupils themselves thought that schools could have offered better support but that they lacked the knowledge and understanding to help. 'Iceberg' pupils thought that relatively simple strategies, such as acknowledging their loss and allowing time and space for listening, would have helped.

Schools are embedded in the community and Bronfenbrenner's model (1979, 1997) helps frame them as well positioned to support pupils. In Bronfenbrenner's model, the pupil is located in the bull's eye of a series of concentric circles. Parents, carers and the immediate family are in the inner circle, potentially able to offer significant support. The family may in theory be a key support for bereaved pupils, but if things are chaotic after the death they may be struggling with their own grief and unable to support the children.

The next outer concentric circle comprises the neighbourhood, school, community organisations, social, religious or leisure groups and clubs such as the scouts or youth