

# CHILDREN AND BEREAVEMENT

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CHILDHOOD SHOULD BE A WONDERFUL TIME. It is a time for setting out on the exciting adventure of being alive. It is a time of new horizons, a time of hope, a time of optimistic dreams. It is, however, also a time of fragility, a time which needs careful handling as young lives are formed and nurtured. The experiences of childhood are crucial, affecting not only the present but also the future. Childhood experiences shape the future and are carried through the years into adult life.

In the first formative years of life, children require love, security, affirmation, a sense of belonging and a range of experiences which foster the development of imagination, creativity, wonder and reflection. If these basic human needs are not met, the long-term consequences for healthy psychological, emotional and spiritual growth and development can be profoundly affected.

For many children and young people the stability and security of childhood are shaken or denied through the experience of bereavement. Loss is one of the most difficult and painful human experiences anyone has to endure. An important and significant loss, even for adults who have faced other losses and have the experienced knowledge that the subsequent pain eventually does ease, causes deep inner turmoil which shakes and challenges a person's sense of identity, emotional security and spiritual beliefs. The process of grieving which inevitably and naturally follows any significant loss is not only an adult experience; it is one which is also experienced by children, though in slightly different ways.

The main difference is that a child's periods of *intense grief* are shorter (we've all seen tears turn into laughter in moments) but the *grieving period* may last much longer. 'Children get over things so quickly,' you will hear. Yet long after the adults in the family are living with their changed lives with calm acceptance of a tragedy, a child can suffer despairing sadness. For as she reaches new levels of understanding, each new experience she faces arouses aspects of grief: 'My first day at school made me notice all the mothers, and there I was with daddy.'<sup>1</sup>

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Yet the depth of this experience is often denied, ignored, unappreciated or unnoticed, in the family, in school or in the parish, by the adults from whom the children might expect understanding, support and healing. This may be due to a number of reasons. In the family, the adults may be so wrapped in their own pain that they cannot see or deal with the pain of others. In school there may not be a real appreciation of the grief of a bereaved child; there may be a well-intentioned desire to try to restore 'normality' into the child's life; or there may be, even among those who are experienced in working with children, a sense of helplessness and a consequent fear or inability to broach the subject. In the parish, with a few exceptions, the issue simply has not been addressed, though through the work of certain organizations an awareness is beginning to develop. Whatever the reasons may be, too often children are the hidden and silent mourners in a family's grief.

The experience of grief in children is more common than many would imagine, for grieving follows any significant loss. Grief does not only follow a loss through death; it is also a consequence of loss through physical or emotional separation. Many children are thrown into the grieving process following the death of a loved one, but there are also many children who have to go through a similar process because of the break-up of the family unit caused by parental separation and divorce. This latter grieving is one which is endured by an increasing number of children in our society as the rate of family separation and divorce has risen over the last few decades.

Divorce statistics do not, however, represent the complete picture of children's loss caused by family break-up. There is a growing number of parents who enter into long-term relationships but who do not go through any form of marriage. Even though there is no marriage bond, there is a family unit which provides for the needs of children. The break-up of such relationships, while not recorded in divorce statistics, causes the same grief for the children as the ending of a marriage relationship.

While the number of children experiencing the loss of a parent through death has declined over the years, the rate of loss through separation and divorce has increased. This phenomenon has affected the Roman Catholic community as much as the wider society, and ministering to children's grief must now be considered as an urgent pastoral need in the Church. In order to undertake this work it is necessary to understand the grieving process and the ways in which children react to the death of or separation from a loved one. In this article the focus will be on parental loss. While the grieving process is

broadly similar in every loss, the reactions to and the challenges presented by the loss of a sibling, a peer, a grandparent or others who are not at the centre of the intimate family unit are different.

The work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is now well known and her schema of the grieving process identified in *On death and dying* (Tavistock Publications, 1970) is widely accepted. In considering the schema presented, it must be remembered that the one who is grieving does not follow the pattern in a linear progression. It is possible to be in more than one of the stages at the same time and to revert to stages which might have been thought to be completed.

### *Denial*

The first stage of grieving often experienced by the bereaved is that of denial, an involuntary refusal to accept the reality of what has happened. This can, when expressed by children, be confusing for adults. Very young children have difficulty in grasping the permanence of death. Even though they may use the words 'death' or 'dead', they do not truly comprehend the meaning of them.

Children younger than five do not understand that death is final . . . Death is reversible for them, and they do not grasp that all functions have ceased . . . Even though smaller children's concept is not fully developed, there is no reason to doubt that they react strongly to loss at this age.<sup>2</sup>

In working with children who have not yet reached the stage of being able to appreciate the finality of death, it is important to provide them with the hard words. Painful though this can be, it helps to bring the children to a realization of the meaning of death. Euphemisms and soft words are to be avoided; they do not bring the truth into the open or, at later stages of a children's development when they are able to comprehend the reality, they can be used to hide behind and thus avoid the facts. Words like 'gone', 'lost' or 'passed away', rather than helping can:

leave children confused and may cause them to believe their relative is still out there somewhere and may indeed be 'found' again. Try not to use ambiguous remarks, be clear and tell the truth, but be sensitive.<sup>3</sup>

A not uncommon reaction among younger children is of appearing to be untouched by the news of a death. It is not unusual for a child, having been told of a death, to ask abruptly to be allowed to play. This

kind of reaction may be due to incomprehension or to an involuntary refusal to comprehend the enormity of the fact which has to be faced. Children, like adults, need time to absorb the truth but, because it can take much longer for this to happen than it takes for an adult, there is a danger that adults interpret the response as meaning that children are either unaffected or have a resilience which enables them to recover from the experience very quickly.

When the loss is due to parental separation, the denial in which the children can live may last for a very long time. While the fact that the parent has left the family home cannot be denied, the permanence of that situation can be. Many children enter a fantasy world in which they dream of the day when their parents will be reunited and the family unit restored. This fantasy may even continue after the remarriage of one or both parents, and may be a source of tension and difficulty within these new relationships.

A very strong reaction, one that can persist for many years, is not accepting the fact that their parents are divorced. Fantasies of their being reunited, of all living together again are very strong . . . Even after remarriage to a new partner children are heard to keep up the hope of a reconciliation. All sorts of ploys are used. Jenny thought if she behaved badly towards her stepmother she would go away and her own mother come back. Tim hoped that if he passed his exams his father would come to live at home again.

These are not unusual feelings, and are often strengthened when one or both parents have themselves not yet been able to accept the reality of their divorce.<sup>4</sup>

### *Bargaining*

Children see themselves as the centre of the world, and young children often have a belief that in some way they control the world around them (older children can revert to this way of thinking when they are grieving). This has a number of consequences. Children will often believe that they in some way were responsible for the loss which has occurred in their family. There is some debate as to the extent of this feeling, but there is no doubt that a number of children live with feelings of guilt and self-blame for a parent's death or parental separation. Children may also believe that, if they behave in particular ways, the situation with which they are faced may alter. Others believe that, if they behave in particular ways, they may retain the love of the parent now absent from the family home. This can put children under enormous stress. They have difficulty in believing that they are of

worth and value as they are; they feel that they have to work and behave in certain ways to gain and keep love.

For those with a religious faith, prayer is a natural response to crisis in the family. This prayer is often a form of bargaining with God. Cries such as 'Please don't let it happen, please don't let it be true' have been uttered countless times by people facing the pain of loss. Often, however, the prayer appears to go unanswered. This is the reality for many children who, reared on images of God as loving, caring and giving, have turned to God in prayer. Inevitably, then, the pain of loss presents the child with deep faith questions about the nature of God and about the way in which God is at work in their lives.

One nine-year-old girl, faced with these questions, was writing a letter to God as one of the activities in her Rainbows support group. (Rainbows is an organization which sets up peer support groups for children going through the grieving process following the death of a parent or following parental separation.) She wrote:

Dear God, if you could would you make me happier? Would you make us all have a good life instead of mums and dads upsetting their children by divorcing?

At this point the child turned to the adult facilitating the group and asked if she could be angry with God. On being told that she could, the child continued writing but the writing became larger and stronger:

Why! Why! Why God, why do you do it? Can you tell me? It really upsets me to see families are splitting up into parts.

I love you.

The implications of this letter are significant for anyone who is working with the increasing number of children who have prayed for a resolution to their fear, anxiety and pain, but who have to face the reality that their prayer has not been answered in the way they wanted. Younger children do not often express their feelings about God, though, if they are given the opportunity to do so, they often have strongly negative views about God. Older children will more easily express feelings.

In dealing with the inevitable faith questions which arise for children, it is vital that adults who are responding to the questions do not provide trite answers and are careful to avoid language which, while appearing to the adult as comforting, can be frightening, confusing or meaningless to children.

No church has magic answers to sorrow. No person, no prayers, no faith can provide the one thing a bereaved child wants – her dead mummy or daddy alive again.<sup>5</sup>

The same can be said for the child who wants mummy and daddy living back at home together again. The adult who ‘acknowledges such helplessness . . . has a far greater chance of being allowed by that child to provide comforting support’.<sup>6</sup>

It is a challenge to adults, whose natural instinct is to shield children from pain, to learn to stand beside them in their pain without answers or solutions. That, however, in the long run, is the only truthful and ultimately consoling thing to be done. For the adults and for the children, what God has permitted (although this is usually thought of as ‘caused’), and God’s apparent distance and silence are a hard mystery in which to live.

### *Anger*

One of the strongest emotions caused by loss and bereavement is that of anger. In children the anger may be expressed in a variety of ways ranging from temper tantrums to sullen withdrawal, from violence to self-destructiveness. The anger may be directed at a number of people: at the person who has died or left the family home; at adults who should, so the children believe, have prevented what happened; at those responsible for what happened; at God; and many feel angry at themselves for what they consider to be their fault for the death or family break-up.

Temper tantrums may be apparent in the form of protest, and beating and kicking parents. Sometimes parents are held responsible for what has happened, and anger is taken out on them. Children’s reactions can sometimes be a way of saving their parents from bottomless grief. Unconsciously (and consciously) they take on the task of keeping their parents from disintegrating as a consequence of the loss. Breaking windows and other unacceptable behaviour can force the parents to focus on the needs of their children, and tear the parents loose from their depression.<sup>7</sup>

The anger which the children are experiencing may be vented against things such as toys, furniture and other inanimate objects. It may be worked out on siblings, friends or adults involved in the children’s lives, thus affecting their social relationships in ways which may, if the expressions of anger continue long enough, permanently

damage these relationships. Often the anger felt towards the absent parent is transferred to the remaining parent, who may have to deal with that anger as well as the anger already focused on them for not having prevented the death or separation, or even for having caused it. In order to help the children in this phase of grieving, it is important that they learn to accept their anger without guilt or shame, and they must be helped to find safe ways of expressing their anger. This can be a considerable difficulty for the children, who usually have been taught that anger is an unacceptable emotion and that it is in some way wrong. The children and the adults who work with them in their grief need to come to understand that the emotion of anger, which almost inevitably comes in the grieving process, is morally neutral. They need to come to understand that the best way to be rid of the emotion is to let it out, to express it in ways which are not damaging to themselves or others.

### *Depression*

The first stages of grief, which usually occur quite quickly after the event which began the bereavement, are marked by their force and power. The first few weeks following the loss are a time of huge turmoil but, when this disturbance begins to subside, there can begin a period of depression which can last for a considerable length of time. This can be expressed by children presenting a variety of physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach pains, by crying, by isolation, by lethargy and a lack of interest in life. In extreme cases this stage of depression can lead to thoughts of or even attempts at committing suicide. Like adults, children will take some time to re-engage with life. While it is not a common reaction, some children lose faith in the future and can carry the feelings of hopelessness into adulthood.

Leonore Terr (1973, 1983) showed how children who experience extreme stress lost their faith in their own future. They may have difficulty envisioning growing up, getting married, and having children . . . The gnawing uncertainty or vulnerability that many children experience can be a signal that pessimism is only a step away.<sup>8</sup>

### *Boys' grief, girls' grief*

While there has not been much research conducted concerning sex differences in grieving, there is evidence indicating that differences do exist. From this research it appears, perhaps not surprisingly, that girls talk more easily than boys about their feelings and are less inhibited in displaying their feelings of sadness. These differences are identifiable even in young children, but become more pronounced in adolescence.

The reasons for such differences are probably various. Boys and girls differ in their play and friendships. Girls play more in pairs, two and two together; their play is more expressive, and their play centres on human relationships (Lever 1976). Through their play they build up a language for feelings. Boys' play focuses more on learning their role in the group, how to stick to rules and not show feelings. Social learning and upbringing is also different for the two sexes, and in many ways this makes boys more helpless in relation to their own feeling. Through active and passive learning they are taught to suppress and deny their feeling (with the exception of aggression) in many areas of life.<sup>9</sup>

In his book, *Caring for the whole child*, John Bradford considers the spirituality of children and identifies spirituality as made up of three parts which are identified as:

human spirituality	the well-being and inter-relatedness of the emotional, cognitive and intuitive self, which include sensitivity to the transcendent <sup>10</sup>
devotional spirituality	the formation of a corporate and personal spiritual life <sup>11</sup>
practical spirituality	refers to the vital principles, frames of mind and activating emotions of a person as they engage and participate in life <sup>12</sup>

These three spiritualities are interrelated in the following schema:

Being	Belonging	Behaving
love	membership	relationships
security	shared norms	resilience
external and internal	corporate and	endeavour and
new experiences	private prayer	reflection
praise	encouragement	development
communal place	service to others	social responsibility <sup>13</sup>

The growth of an integrated and healthy spirituality requires a sound human spirituality which is developed through the experiences listed above under the heading 'Being'. These basic human needs, which Westerhoff identifies as 'experienced faith', are foundational for spiritual growth and should, ideally, be provided in the love, care and nurture given by the family. In the family a child should be able to learn:



that his family's love for him is a love which he does not have to deserve, and which he can therefore count on. The experience of such a love, which shines on the just and the unjust, the responsible and the irresponsible or prodigal, which does not have to be merited, is essential if we are ever to grasp, or be grasped by, the love of God in Christ. It is not itself, of course, religious experience, but it is the vital material out of which Christian understanding is formed.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of parental loss challenges and may temporarily or, if not dealt with effectively, permanently damage this foundational human spirituality and subsequent development will inevitably be affected.

It is clear from the numerous studies conducted that, following the death of a parent or the departure of a parent from the family home, children tend to suffer from a loss of self-esteem. Their sense of personal worth and value are damaged. This diminishment can be rectified if the remaining parent, both parents (though not living together), or other significant adults help the children through the grieving process. In order to do this it is essential:

- for the adults to provide a safe and secure setting in which children can name and give expression to their feelings;
- for the children to have their feelings received without judgement or criticism. Many children experience feelings such as vulnerability, anger and helplessness, which add to their feelings of worthlessness; if disapproval of these feelings is conveyed, the sense of worthlessness is compounded;
- for the adults to allow the feelings to be expressed without restraint (unless, of course, the expression puts the child or others at risk). Tears should be allowed to flow and, when necessary, the children need to be helped to find safe ways to express anger or rage;
- to ensure that there are significant adults available who will accept all that the children wish or need to express.

Many families do provide this support but, for a variety of reasons, it is not always possible. Where there has been a parental loss in a family, the remaining parent and other adults in the family may be so wrapped in their own pain that they may be incapable of dealing with the pain of the children. Sometimes the remaining parent, deliberately or involuntarily, signals, perhaps through tears or through anger, that the subject is not to be broached. Children may well remain silent because they do not want to add to the pain of the parent. Some are silent because they do not have the words to express the feelings, or they are not given the time in which to share their feelings. Sometimes they may remain silent

because they have been victims of remarks such as, 'You must be brave', or 'You'll have to take care of your dad/mum/brother/sister', and, having taken on a carer's role, suppress their own needs in order to cope with the needs of others in the family. This is when an outside agency, such as the school, parish or youth group, can provide a time and place for children to deal with the feelings and the issues facing them.

### *A practical response*

There is a growing awareness of the grief of children in our society and it was in response to that need that the organization Rainbows For All God's Children was founded in 1983 by Suzy Yehl Marta. From its beginning in the Archdiocese of Chicago, Rainbows has become an international organization providing children and young people with the opportunity to work through the grieving process following the loss of a parent through death or from divorce or family separation. The underlying philosophy of Rainbows is that grieving is a normal and necessary process which must follow any significant loss; hence Rainbows is not a counselling or therapeutic agency. What Rainbows offers is a safe and secure setting in which children and young people can, with the help of a trained adult facilitator, come to name and understand the feelings which they are experiencing. In small groups, with others who are going through a similar experience, the participants work through a structured programme which allows them to explore and express their feelings of grief.

The programme, which consists of weekly meetings and one or two celebration days, extends over a twelve-week period. Rainbows operates in 'sites', which are buildings where children meet, such as schools, youth clubs, or parish facilities, and where the personnel working in the site have an existing credibility in working with children and young people. In the weekly sessions the participants explore themes covering issues such as change, anger, fears and anxieties, step-families, coping-skills, forgiveness and God. After the children and young people have been through the programme, parents report that there is an improvement in behaviour, relationships and communication. Teachers often remark on improvement in school performance and in social relationships. The children themselves speak warmly of Rainbows and of the help which the groups have provided. Among their comments have been statements such as, 'I was sad but now I feel a little better'; 'I can walk fast now. I always used to walk slowly because I was thinking of my mum and dad.'

Rainbows also offers a programme for adult children who perhaps need to revisit childhood loss, and a programme for parents.

### *Conclusion*

Difficult and painful though it is, grieving is a natural and normal process following any significant loss. Though it can be a destructive experience it can also, provided it is dealt with properly, be an opportunity for growth:

They may increase their ability to show compassion and consideration for others (become less self-centred), they may understand their parents better, and they may be proud of being of help.<sup>15</sup>

However, it is only if children are supported and helped through this period of upheaval and transition that a healthy, life-enhancing resolution can result. While many families have the strength within them to respond to the needs of grieving children within the family, there are many who do not. There are also those who value the support of others outside the family in helping bereaved children to move towards the readjustment necessary for continuing their emotional and spiritual growth. The children need adults who can help them to know that it does not have to hurt for ever.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Wells, *Helping children cope with grief* (Sheldon Press, 1988), pp 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> Atle Dyregrov, *Grief in children* (Jessica Kingsley Publications, 1991), pp 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Pennells and Susan S. Smith, *The forgotten mourners* (Jessica Kingsley Publications, 1995), p 17.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Wells, *Helping children cope with divorce* (Sheldon Press, 1989), p 31.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Wells, *Helping children cope with grief*, p 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Atle Dyregrov, *op. cit.*, p 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 26–27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>10</sup> John Bradford, *Caring for the whole child* (The Children's Society, 1995), p 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 34.

<sup>14</sup> British Council of Churches, *Understanding Christian nurture* (1981), Section 142.

<sup>15</sup> Atle Dyregrov, *op. cit.*, p 27.