

Bereavement and death in Western contexts: children and young people as active meaning-makers

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Overview

- Introduction and personal background
- Children and young people, 'childhood' and 'youth'
- Western contexts and theories
- Evidence base: types of death, focus on outcomes, methodological limitations
- Sources of support in everyday lives
- What do children and young people find helpful?
- Who do children and young people talk to? Neil
- Children with multiple difficulties: who do they talk to?
- Conclusions

Personal background

- Family sociologist
- Academic collaborations with Childhood Bereavement Network, Bereavement Care, St Christopher's Hospice, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Focus on 'troubles' as a general part of family lives
- Some 'troubles' disruptive, some troubles may require interventions
- Personal history

Children and young people: 'childhood' and 'youth'

Overall aims today:

- consider what it means to be a 'child' or a 'young person' experiencing a significant death, and how this is shaped by social and cultural context
- consider the power dynamics involved and how this may impact on the bereavement experience
- explore the extent to which children and young people will be actively 'making sense' of the death for themselves
- explore the avenues of support that children and young people say they find helpful
- consider how their positioning may help or hinder children and young people's opportunities to talk, and ask for/find support for their meaning-making

Western contexts and theories

- Childhood and youth as Western institutions and ideals
- Developmental psychology based on WEIRD samples (Henrich et al. 2010)
- Grief regarded as an individual emotional journey
- More recent theories of continuing bonds, dual process model, narratives and meaning making

- Neglect of diverse social, 'family' and religious contexts
- Neglect of material circumstances
- Family deaths in Senegal – position of children and youth

Overview of the evidence base

- Types of death: primarily parental and sibling research
- Primarily anticipated deaths
- Methodological limitations and complexities
- Focus on outcomes:
 - Depression, mental health risks and health behaviours
 - More 'positive' outcomes – self concept and 'growth'
 - Education and employment
 - Disruptive and criminal behaviours
 - Partnering and parenting
 - Physical or somatic responses
- Polarised responses – sink or swim?

Sources of support in everyday lives

- Family – silences or support, mutual protection and anxiety
- Friends and peers – support or bullying, isolation and difference
- Online
- Other adults
- Schools
- Other professionals
- Solitary activities

What do children and young people find helpful?

- Information, explanations, knowing they're not to blame
- Peer relationships, both general and other bereaved
- Variable views on school interventions
- Hugs, talk and listening
- Variable views on whether 'time heals'
- Attention to changes over time, and preparation for these
- Sense of competence and self-esteem
- Help to build their own narratives and strategies
- Solitary activities

Who do children and young people talk to?

'Neil' from Ribbens McCarthy and Sue Sharpe 2006

- Interviewed 5 times aged 17-22 years
- Protestant family in city in Northern Ireland
- Mother died suddenly while he was alone in the house with her
- *I don't think I ever will (get over it) because the picture that's stuck clear in my head, you know, what happened that day...*
- *I noticed that when my mum died they all came round to the house and it was great you know... it just shows you how good friends are like you know - it was great...they helped me through it.*

Three years on:

- *It's changed me as a person. I do think that. You know, I'm not as out-going as I was before...I think I'm a more emotional person now... And I find it hard to get motivated most of the time now...*
- *Maybe the rest of them are just coping with it or looking as if they're coping with it but I'm not. There's times when I really don't cope at all.*
- *But what I did do this year is on the 8th January I sat down at the lap-top and wrote the whole thing out, from start to finish... It took me ten pages to write it but it was so, just like somebody lifting a weight off your shoulders because I kept it in for two years and I just thought right...*
- Five years on: dropped out of education, no longer has a girlfriend, increased isolation, loss of confidence, lack of opportunities to talk.

Children with multiple hardships – who do they talk to?

- In-depth qualitative doctoral study by Debbie Noble Carr 2016
- Children aged 12 and under with multiple difficulties and losses; in Australia
- *Like you really need to just listen to the person and their story and their opinions. (Ellie, aged 11)*
- *I just keep all my tears inside and yeah, I don't really cry, just make a sad face. (Max, aged 6)*
- Needs for: recognition and acknowledgement of extent of overall losses (including pets); engagement with their emotions (including loneliness) through listening (briefly); safe spaces to share their feelings; recognition of their capacities; understanding adult responsibilities.
- *Don't be upset, it's okay, you still have your life. (Max, aged 6)*
- *It's not the end of the world kinda thing and even though it may seem like the worst thing possible in your life now, it will become better... just don't like focus on the loss, like focus on what you gain from the loss. (Vexame, aged 14)*

Conclusions

- Overwhelming emotions, struggle to manage, anxiety
- Sense of difference and isolation
- Lack of opportunities to talk (though not all want to talk)
- Significant risks of negative outcomes, but not inevitable
- Pyramid of need
- Haphazard access to help and services
- Significance of experiences and changes over time
- Significance of social context
- Children and young people's active struggle to make meaning

References

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