

## CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT: ELEMENTARY? CROCUS CHILD BEREAVEMENT GROUP, INVERNESS

**Derek Brown**

*Abstract: 'Crocus' is a group based in Inverness, but working throughout Highland Region, which seeks to offer support to bereaved children. This article offers a look at the work of the Crocus Group and its challenges and achievements. Working with children of school age, and using a variety of activities, the Crocus Group's 'Days To Remember' help these children to articulate their losses through play. This article is based on a paper originally submitted to the SJHC 10th Anniversary Conference in Crieff in March of 2007.*

*Key words: Bereavement, Charity, Children, Psychological Support, Spiritual Care*

### What's it all about?

It has always been difficult to explain exactly what death is after you get past the physiological and mechanical process of a body ceasing to function. Because it is simply such a huge subject and one that touches the very heart of what it is to be human it has often been easier to try and lessen the impact it has on us. We can simply ignore it or we can use the power of language to take the sting out of death by referring to it in any number of euphemisms. It is also possible to protect ourselves by not addressing the needs of those for whom we are responsible. This is where children come in to the equation. It is an inescapable fact that children grieve too.

They do this in different ways according to their age and developmental stage ranging from the very concrete thinking of the five year old to the abstract world of the adolescent.

Because of this children won't necessarily exhibit grief in the same way as adults and this is why it can be confusing for people dealing with their own grief and that of their children. All parents instinctively want to protect their children from distress and unpleasantness of any kind and there are few things more distressing and unpleasant than the death of someone close to you.

Society is ambivalent about death. We regularly see footage of atrocities and popular culture is full of violence and death and yet we try to keep it all at arm's length when it comes close to us. It would be good to think that bereavement services like Crocus could help re-establishing the link between life and death by making it more natural to talk through the issues we have about the losses we have endured.

### Why intervene?

Children are no different to adults in that they need to work through the process of grieving. Worden (1996) adapted his four tasks of mourning for children:

- (1) accepting the reality of the loss
- (2) experiencing the pain or emotional aspects of the loss
- (3) adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing
- (4) relocating the person within one's life and finding ways to remember the person.

Many children will be able to complete these tasks and accommodate the loss in their lives without any intervention from professionals. This is what we would hope could happen all the time. However there are times when some children need assistance

to get through a sticky patch. If a child finds it hard to grieve in appropriate ways then problems may arise. A child's behaviour may change. The happy carefree child may become angry and uncooperative or moody and withdrawn. The school may notice a marked deterioration in school work. A child may not be able to express their feelings verbally but they will be made manifest in some other way.

Helping children adjust to the death of someone close to them is an important life skill in its own right and although there is no conclusive proof of intervention helping children cope better with losses later in life, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that the provision of a range of resources at such a critical time can be very effective.

There are no hard and fast rules about when it is appropriate to intervene but there are some signs which children may display which will indicate that they may need assistance. The child may not be able to sleep alone or lose interest in food. An older child's behaviour may regress to that of a less mature child or they may lose interest in friends or normal activities. The child may refuse to attend school or school work may show a marked decline in achievement.

The Crocus Group operates an open referral policy which means that anybody concerned about a bereaved child may refer him or her to the service. Some referrals are not appropriate for the Group, such as when there are underlying psychological problems, and the child would be referred on, always allowing for support through the service at a later date.

### **What does Crocus do?**

The longest running intervention which the Group offers is called '*A day to remember*'. It is an activity based peer support programme which is geared towards the needs of children in primary school. There are usually 6 to 8 days held throughout the year depending on the number of referrals at which there may be anything from 4 to 10 children in the group. At each Day there are at least as many volunteers as there are children and another volunteer spends time with families.

The Day usually begins with making name badges as the children gather and then there is a time of getting to know each other and finding out who each child's special person was. Ground rules are established, like telling the children that it is okay to cry or not to say anything if they don't want to. Children often bring a photo or an item that reminds them of the person who has died and they are invited to speak about them.

Through artwork the children can depict how life has changed in their family since they were bereaved and in listening to one of the many helpful children's stories about death they can be helped to a deeper understanding of what has happened. The most popular activity is the memory jar which is made from chalk coloured salt; each colour representing a different memory, such as blue for the colour of dad's car, or yellow for the daffodils that granny loved. In the midst of all this potentially draining work there is time to play some parachute games and let off some steam!

For some children, attendance at one Day to Remember is sufficient to help them see that they are not the only ones who have been through what they have been through and that it is okay to talk about their special person. Some children may require a little more time to adjust and the Group offers what is called '*Seasons for Growth*'. This is an educational programme focussing on loss and change based on the belief that grief is normal and that children need to have opportunities to explore the impact it has on their lives. It runs over an eight week period in sessions lasting no more than an hour. Each two week period is based on one of Worden's four tasks.

Over the past year the Group has also offered the Crocus Club, which is a monthly drop-in meeting. It is mainly for fun there being no specific bereavement work done during this time but volunteers are available to talk if the children wish to do so. It also provides support for the adults who can spend time talking over a cup of coffee.

The Group can, through its service coordinator, offer advice and training to professionals in health, social work and education.

## How are we doing?

In 2006 an audit was carried out to measure both the extent and the effectiveness of the Group's activities. During that year, 8 'Days to Remember' were held, 7 in Inverness and one in Skye attended by 31 primary school children.

13 secondary school children attended a day's workshop on coping with bereavement by suicide with a follow up day a month later.

Two 'Seasons for Growth' programmes were run with a total of 12 children attending. A day conference was held for professionals working with children and this attracted 80 delegates.

The audit revealed that of the 72 referrals made in 2006 the following statistics may help give an idea of the scope of the Group's work:

- 36 male
- 36 female
- 17 years the oldest
- 2 the youngest
- 32% of children referred by their parents
- 26% by school nurses
- 33% of referrals made within 3 months of death
- 63% of referrals made within 12 months of death
- 29% of children referred had previous bereavements affecting family
- There were 646 telephone contacts to the office
- Most popular activity at a Day to Remember: Memory Jar
- Least popular activity at a Day to Remember: Question Time

After each of the Group's activities children and their parents or carers are invited to review the process. Comments from children included "*It helped me remember my dad a bit better.*" and "*It was very good and it was nice to meet other children*"

A very gratifying 100% of parents or carers who replied said that Crocus had helped both the family and the child to cope better with the bereavement. Referrers frequently report better sleeping patterns and normalised behaviour in the children they have referred.

## What now?

The strength of the Crocus Group lies in its child-focussed approach to the difficulties of dealing with bereavement. The needs of each child are carefully explored and the intervention tailored to the child.

For example, some children find it hard to attend a Day to remember because they are nervous about what it entails. In these cases a visit to the Crocus Club before attending the Day can make all the difference to butterflies in the tummy.

The other strength lies in the support that can be offered to the family in conjunction with the work the children are undertaking. An informal network of parents and carers, supported by a Crocus volunteer, is a feature of most of the activities. Like their children, the adults often find that they are not the only ones that the awful event of bereavement has visited.

There are a number of weaknesses that have been evident from the beginning. Finance is one. Highland Council have been very supportive but are unable to commit to long term funding, so energy is diverted to finding funds that could be directed towards helping children.

The geography and demography of the Highlands makes it hard for the Group to reach all those who would want to use the service. The Group has tried to meet these problems by holding events in specific locations where a need has been identified. So 'A Day to Remember' was held in Skye and earlier this year one took place in Forres. A 'Seasons for Growth' programme was held in a Sutherland school. All this requires volunteers willing to go more than the extra mile!

Because the service is dependent on sufficient referrals to make an event fruitful for children there are sometimes longer waiting times to attend an event than would be hoped for.

### **To think about...**

Bereaved children will revisit the death of a loved one afresh at the different stages of their development. As they mature, experts agree, children need to be able to ask questions about the death repeatedly and to work through their developing understanding of such a major event (Christian, 1997). So a child who has accepted the death of a sibling

at the age of five may have a very different reaction to it at thirteen.

It is often said that children are resilient and can cope with tremendous change without too much of a problem. This can only be true if children who have been bereaved have the information that they need and honesty from those that they trust.

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