

Cluster Group Meeting on Children/Young People's Grief

November 2020

Introduction

On 23rd November 2020, 7 people from 6 organisations attended an online LINKS Cluster Group Meetings on Children/Young People's Grief.

This meeting came about as a result of discussions at the LINKS workshop on Bereavement/Pre-Bereavement Work with Young People in September 2020. The resources for this workshop can be found here:

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/ncb-northern-ireland/links/links-workshops/bereavement-pre-bereavement-work>

At this meeting children and young people's grief was discussed from a number of angles and participants were able to share their expertise and experiences on the difficult subject.

Impacts of grief on YP

- The impacts can vary depending on the closeness of the relationship but also in the type of death. For example, with the death of a terminally ill family member, where the young person has been kept informed, their grieving process has started by the time of death. Sudden deaths can have huge impacts on a young person e.g. behavioural.
- To tell the truth about death is very important. Between the ages of 5 and 8, children will make up their own narratives if they have not been told the truth so it is important to encourage families to have truthful conversations, using the terms 'dead' or 'died' rather than 'lost'.
- One organisation working with families uses mapping or drawing to express emotions.
- COVID-19 has been particularly difficult for grieving families, without the normal rituals of mourning taking place such as visiting the dying, funerals, wakes, the ability to hug and share grief with loved ones outside of bubbles.
- Different rituals around death that youth workers should be aware of and sensitive to. E.g. travellers, different religious beliefs surrounding death.
- Anger around the death of a loved one can be there for a long time. Families need realistic expectations of the grief process. It is not linear and can go back and forth.

Suicide/Mental Health

- In Derry/Londonderry, the Foyle bridge has a huge association with suicide and young people have gathered to celebrate the life of friends which has conflicted responses.
- Additional trauma associated with search parties and the potential of finding bodies.
- COVID-19 has had a huge impact on young people's mental health. They have lost their normal support systems and that has resulted in increased suicide rates.
- 15-17 year old girls are more likely to talk to each other than boys.
- If a young person dies through suicide that you work with, it is very important not to go down the route of blame and for staff to practice self-care (see below).
- Action for Children runs the Blues Programme in schools - <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/children-and-families/good-mental-health/blues-programme/>

How do we help young people?

- Don't make assumptions – you can't assume that a young person will need trauma-informed work. Listen to them and find out how you can support them.
- One organisation approached a young person who had attempted suicide to speak to their young people. They were very honest and the young people were able to listen to a personal experience in a safe way.
- YP need to be educated on the depressive effects of alcohol and the way that it can impact mood.
- It is always important to try and break down the stigma surrounding mental health by being aware of and talking about your own mental health.
- ASIST training – make sure that youth workers have the tools to talk about suicide. Public Health Agency and Action Mental Health deliver ASIST training.
- PAPYRUS – helpline for children and parents to assist with the prevention of young suicide <https://www.papyrus-uk.org/>
- Safetalk training for parents
- Maire Dunne – Hopeful Minds for YP, delivers mental health first aid training <https://hopefulminds.org/marie-dunne/>
- Childhood Bereavement Network hub for supporting bereaved children - <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/>

Self-care for workers

- Youth workers should practice self-care and organisations should look at how they support and keep safe their workers.
- One organisation has counsellors and uses holistic therapies, along with regular supervision.
- Another organisation uses group reflective practice with staff.
- Be mindful of how colleagues are doing, encouraging them and yourself to talk. Be honest with your own feelings.
- Siobhan O'Neill (NI Mental Health Champion) delivered a session on "*Mental health and Well-Being Leadership in our Communities During COVID*". Her tips on coping in a pandemic were:
 - **Practice radical self-care and self-kindness**
 - **Practice gratitude and promote hope**
 - **Seek support**
 - **Control your media exposure**
 - **Manipulate your body to return to a place of safe and social (exercise, meditation, positive self-talk)**
 - **Do things that give you pleasure and remember no pandemic has ever lasted forever**
 - **Maintain daily boundaries and practice cognitive restructuring**