

Response from the Childhood Bereavement Network

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1) Identifying the issues

- What kind of traumatic situations are likely to lead to a child being in considerable distress?
- How do we differentiate between the exceptional cases and what is a stressful situation which is common but manageable within a family unit?
- Are there any specific issues that you feel should be considered for inclusion in any revised policy?

The death of a parent, sibling or someone else important is a primary risk factor (Stokes 2011), likely to lead to a child being in considerable distress.

2) The impact on the child and the parent

- From the circumstances identified in question 1, how do the issues manifest themselves in the family unit? What may be the indicators?
- How do they affect (a) the child in distress,

Children's distress at the death of a parent or sibling manifests itself in different ways between children – even siblings in the same family – and over time. While some children will be anxious or worried, others will act out, and still others will withdraw. Some distress will not be obvious in the early stages, but will show itself over time.

Very common reactions to the death of a parent or sibling are anxiety, sleep difficulties, sadness and longing, anger and acting out behaviour, guilt, self-reproach and shame, school problems, and physical complaints. Other reactions include regressive behaviour, social isolation, fantasies, personality changes, pessimism about the future, and preoccupation with cause and meaning (Dyregrov 2008).

35% of children bereaved of a parent score in the clinical range of emotional and behavioural difficulties at some point over the two years following the death (compared to 10% of children in the general population) (Worden 1996).

Children bereaved of a parent and those bereaved of a sibling show similar rates of clinical levels of difficulty during the first year of bereavement (Worden 1996). Comparable data on how siblings react during during the second year is not available, but it is reasonable to assume it would continue to follow a similar pattern.

If children and young people do not receive adequate support following the death, they are at increased risk of poor outcomes in the medium to long term. They are more likely than their non-bereaved peers to

- Experience **somatic symptoms** such as headaches and stomachaches, serious illnesses or accidents (Worden 1996)
- Develop **cancer** in childhood (Momen et al, 2013)
- **Take risks with their personal health** eg smoking, drinking, early sex (Sweeting et al 1998; Parsons 2011), not wear a seat belt, be in a car with someone who had been drinking (Muniz-Cohen et al, 2010)
- **Misuse substances or alcohol** (Brent et al 2009) and be hospitalised for drug or alcohol use (Wilcox et al, 2010)

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- Have **depressive symptoms** both in childhood (Harrison and Harrington 2001) and (in women) at the age of 30 (Parsons 2011). Those bereaved suddenly of a parent are three times more likely to develop diagnosable new-onset depression (Melhem et al 2008).
 - Have **clinical levels of anxiety** (Fauth et al, 2009)
 - Develop new-onset **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder** (Melhem et al 2008)
 - **Attempt suicide** (Jakobsen and Christiansen 2011) and, if bereaved of a parent by suicide, to themselves die by suicide (Wilcox et al 2010)
 - Have **lower concentration** in school and report **difficulties with learning** (Worden 1996). Compared to non-bereaved peers, they also **underachieve at GCSE** (Abdelnoor and Hollins 2004).
 - **Be unemployed at age 30** (Parsons 2011).
 - They are also over-represented in the **criminal justice system** (Boswell 1996, Youth Justice Trust 2003, Vaswani 2008).
- and (b) the family unit?

The main challenge for parents bereaved of a partner or child is that they must support their grieving child while coping with their own grief. The grief of each family member is deeply affected by how others in the family are doing.

Many of the challenges experienced by bereaved children, described above, have an effect on their parent, meaning that they need to monitor and support their child more than before the death. The additional strain of raising children compounds bereaved people's experiences. Widow(er)s with dependent children report more distress than those without children (Lin et al 2004, Worden 1996).

In the opposite direction, studies have consistently found that children's outcomes are very closely related to how their parent manages to function in the face of their own pain, loss and grief (Worden 1996, Christ 2000, Lin et al 2004). Children are more likely to be resilient in families with higher levels of warmth, consistency and discipline, and lower levels of parental mental health difficulty.

- What type of disruption is there likely to be to the family unit?

For families bereaved of a parent, the surviving parent must adjust quickly to their new role as single parent – a role which they have not chosen. Children's need for stability following a parent's death makes it vital for the surviving parent to be able to respond flexibly to them: their adjustment is closely associated with this parent's capacity to care for them, including being physically available to them (Worden 1996). For families bereaved of a child, leaving siblings, the family must reconstitute itself and find new roles moving forwards.

Children bereaved of a parent or sibling often develop separation anxiety about being away from their parent or home. Even two years after the death, 64% express fear for their surviving parent's safety (Worden, 1996). They may find it difficult to be in school the whole day or need a visit from a parent at lunchtime, limiting their parent's availability for work.

Children and young people need as much continuity as possible following a death in the family. Stressful changes and disruptions which accompany or follow a death (such as

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moving house or school, changed household routines and childcare arrangements) are associated with worse mental health in the child (Haine et al 2008) and the longer these changes persist, the greater the effect (Worden 1996).

Childcare and access to flexible working can be a significant barrier to returning to work – both for those who had been working prior to their bereavement, and for those who had previously been stay-at-home primary carers. Compared to separated/divorced couples, childcare may be an even greater barrier, as the other parent is simply not around to share the responsibility. Many widowed parents also report poor ongoing relationships with their in-laws, again reducing the capacity for childcare arrangements to be made within the family.

- What is the likely duration of impact?

There is evidence for a 'late effect' of bereavement, with some children showing new and greater difficulties two or three years after the death of a parent, despite a relatively mild initial reaction (Worden 1998, Christ 2010). By the second anniversary of the death, bereaved young people have lower self-esteem than their non-bereaved peers, greater levels of anxiety or depression, more social problems, and greater worries about how their family is functioning (Worden 1998).

Analysis of a UK cohort (ALSPAC data) found that teenagers who had been bereaved earlier in their childhood had lower emotional well-being at 13 than non-bereaved children, even taking into account their emotional well-being at 10. The authors wrote:

'This indicates that experiencing the death of a parent or family member in childhood may have continuing, worsening effects on a teenager's emotional well-being, long after the event has occurred...family bereavement had continuous, cumulative effects on children's emotional and social well-being' (Jones et al 2013).

Regardless of the age at which they were bereaved, children often revisit and re-experience their grief as they mature cognitively and emotionally (Christ 2010), for example as they come to understand that the person will never come back, or they start see the loss of their loved one in a new way (such as reaching the same age as a sibling who died, making new friends at secondary school and having to explain why they don't have a dad). Additional changes bring new parenting challenges for their parents.

For the parent, the additional stress of raising children following a partners' death persists beyond six months, and for some it worsens: 44% of widowed parents report high levels of depressive symptoms a year after the death – a quarter of these parents did not report such high symptoms in the early months following the death. Those widowed parents who had faced a greater number of life changes following the death (including legal and financial losses and new family responsibilities) were more likely to be depressed (Worden and Silverman).

- Are there any particular circumstances when it may be unreasonable to impose work related conditions on the parent?

Given the distress which children are likely to experience at the death of a parent or sibling – whether immediate or further down the line – and the demands this distress places on their parent, we believe that it would be unreasonable to impose full conditionality on the parent for a period of at least two years following the death. We believe that they could be invited for periodic work-focused interviews during this time.

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We also believe that ad-hoc easements could be strengthened to make it easier for a parent to request a temporary switch-off for a future period because of their child's bereavement distress further down the line, or because of the death of someone else close such as a grandparent who provided much of the childcare.

Many parents will choose to go back to work anyway in these circumstances (see below) but we believe that imposing conditionality when children are distressed would be counter-productive, increasing the risk of the parent being unable to work at all because of their own difficulties, or those of their children.

Obliging parents to seek or take up work while their child is distressed can have a detrimental effect on the children in two ways: by increasing the parent's stress levels and depressive symptoms (strongly correlated with children's emotional and behavioural difficulties) and by reducing the parent's availability to the child (quality of bond and family routines promote children's healthy adjustment). Full conditionality could lead to additional emotional pressures on parents could in turn increase mental health difficulties, putting children's adjustment at greater risk and delaying the parent's return to or entry into the labour market.

- How do we understand the impact on work related requirements and how they apply to each situation?
- We want to make sure that claimants do not become detached long term from the labour market and the job seeking process. How could we ensure this does not happen when work related requirements are relaxed?

We do not see evidence that relaxing work conditionality requirements would lead to claimants becoming detached long term from the labour market.

The government's own research into the impact of the inactive Widowed Parent's Allowance showed that *'for most people the benefits had no impact on whether or not they returned to work, with many stating either that they would have wanted or needed to return to work regardless of the benefits, or they would have felt unable to regardless'* (Oldfield et al 2012).

Most bereaved partners retain, return or enter work within 18 months of bereavement. Women who became non-working sole parents when their partner died had all started thinking relatively soon how they would re-engage with the labour market, and within 12-18 months some were making plans for, or had embarked on further work or training (Corden et al 2008).

Given that most widow(er)s will naturally find their way back to the labour market, even with no involvement with JobCentre Plus, we do not expect that relaxing conditionality to cope with a child's distress is likely to lead to detachment.

Requiring parents to attend periodic work-focused interviews need not be problematic, particularly if an alternative title could be found for these sessions. The purpose of these sessions could be to signpost to other sources of help eg with grief support, financial planning etc, which would be experienced as supportive rather than coercive. Many widowed parents will be thinking about how to adjust their prior working patterns to get the flexibility they need to cope as a lone parent – interviews could help with this.

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3) Evidence to support a decision

- What are the most important factors that should guide advisers when making a decision on applying work related requirements?
- What evidence/information is available to support the decision?

We believe that the fact of a parent's or sibling's death should be enough to trigger the immediate relaxation.

If the parent or sibling was in the same household as the child (affecting or triggering a UC claim) this information should already be available to DWP. If the parent or sibling was not in the same household, the onus will be on the parent to inform DWP.

In the case of the death of another close family member such as a grandparent who provided much of the childcare, the parent would need to provide evidence of the significance of the relationship and the impact the death is having on the child.

- What other organisations could help inform the decision?
- How can the claimant provide the evidence/information to validate the decision?
- What may be a reasonable period to relax requirements? Do different situations need different periods? How do we keep this under review and monitor the situation?

See above

We are keen to add to our evidence base and have some further questions for you to take away and reflect upon:

- a) Are you aware of any research or data that could be provided in support of a case for including particular groups?
- b) What evidence does your organisation have that may help?

Hopefully the research evidence quoted above will help – please contact us if you would like more details of any of the studies evidenced.

We also have a number of case studies of parents whose return to work was made difficult by their child's level of distress.

- c) Are you aware of any other organisations that may be able to contribute to this review?

Yes, and we have forwarded this questionnaire to them

- d) Having reflected on today's session, do you have any other factors that you would like to share with us?

We discussed at the meeting that it might be possible to have some circumstances which would automatically trigger an easement, with no further evidence required than informing DWP that the event had happened (eg the death of a parent or sibling). Other circumstances might need more evidence.

Please return to uc.distressreview@dwp.gsi.gov.uk