

CBN response to the call for evidence on Character and Resilience

Questions in black – CBN answers in blue

Q 10. In this consultation we are defining character as:

- believing that you can achieve
- being able to stick with the task in hand
- seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future, and
- being able to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings to all of us.

To what extent do you agree that character and resilience are important in enabling young people to be successful and to thrive in later life?

Strongly agree

11. Thinking about the aspects of character and resilience that you think are most important in order for people to be successful in life, are there any that you feel are not covered in the list below? If so, please list these and tell us why you feel they are important.

- Believing that you can achieve (e.g. being self-confident, believing in your own abilities)
- Being able to stick with the task in hand
- Seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future (e.g. deferred gratification, being aspirational and ambitious)
- Being able to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings to all of us (resilience)
- Having strong personal qualities and values like kindness, generosity, a sense of justice, respect, integrity and humility.
- Social skills, such as being articulate and able to mix and work easily with others, forming and maintaining long term relationships and commitments

(Please list any missing aspects of character here and say why they are important)

The majority of children and young people will experience the death of someone important to them by the time they leave school. While some bereavements can be seen as a normal part of growing up, others bring a cascade of other changes into children's lives and can be hugely distressing and disruptive (Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop, 2005). Around one child in every classroom has experienced the death of a parent or sibling. To expect children to 'bounce back' suggests that things go back to normal after a death in the close family, and unhelpfully diminishes the challenge of 'transform[ing] the relationship to the parent who died and work[ing] to build a life that incorporates the painful reality of the loss' (Christ 2000, p242). We prefer the phrase 'move forward' or 'live on'. Adults bereaved as children often refer to the death, its aftermath and their learning to live on as the defining experience of their childhood (McLaughlin et al 2019).

Bereavement can threaten other aspects of children's resilience over time as the meaning and repercussions of the loss unfold. As a group they have lower self-esteem and beliefs about what they can control in their lives (Worden et al 1996). Relationships can be strained as family members grieve in different ways or try to protect one another, and peers struggle to know what to say. Children facing multiple losses or bereavement in the context of social disadvantage are at increased

risk of poor physical and mental health, educational underachievement and risky or disruptive behaviours with potentially lifelong consequences.

Yet many bereaved young people also recognise in themselves an increased appreciation of life and relationships, personal growth and altruism (Brewer & Sparkes 2014). [283 words]

12. Which aspects of character do you think are most important in the workplace, or most valued by employers?

- a) Believing you can achieve
- b) Being able to stick with the task in hand
- c) Seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future
- d) Being able to bounce back from knocks
- e) Having strong personal qualities and values like kindness, generosity, a sense of justice, respect, integrity and humility.
- f) Social skills, such as being articulate and able to mix and work easily with others, forming and maintaining long term relationships and commitments
- g) Others (please list)

13. What activities and approaches do you think are most effective in supporting the development of character and resilience? What evidence do you have to support this (for example, any published evaluation studies, or data collection done within your organisation)?

Key factors that help children adjust to a significant bereavement include a strong supportive and consistent social network including the surviving parent, friends and school community; involvement and choice; adequate financial resources (Worden 1996, Haine et al 2008, McLaughlin et al 2019). Controlled evaluations have shown that family-based approaches which seek to enhance or modify these factors can make a significant difference to children's outcomes (e.g. Sandler et al 2010, Christ et al 2005).

Peer support programmes for bereaved children and young people can also target many of these factors. A recent evaluation of Seasons for Growth peer support groups in Scotland found significant improvements in children's understanding of feelings and behaviour; choices about how to behave when they feel angry or sad; talking with people who can help; and concentration. Bereavement peer support programme can also enhance other aspects of resilience e.g. helping others through their bereavement can improve children's self-esteem, and mixing with new peers in a structured way can strengthen social skills (CBN, 2014).

Training and support for school staff to enhance pastoral care for bereaved pupils can help to bolster social support at a time when the wider grieving family may struggle to provide this, and it can also help tackle isolation and bullying (McLaughlin et al 2019, McManus and Paul 2019). Increasing teachers' confidence to deliver a curriculum that prepares children to face change and loss is another key feature of a whole school approach (Rowling 2003).

[242 words].

14. We are keen to understand how access to character building activities can help make the greatest positive difference to groups of children and young people vulnerable to poorer life outcomes, such as those living in poverty/with economic disadvantage, having a disability or SEN, being a young carer, living in care and others. What examples of good practice do you have that demonstrate how barriers to participation in activities can be overcome for these groups?

Children and young people living in disadvantaged circumstances are at increased risk of experiencing the death of a parent or sibling, because of mortality patterns. Patterns of disadvantage may underlie many of the acknowledged associations between bereavement and poor outcomes of physical and mental health, education, relationships and disruptive or criminal behaviour (Ribbens McCarthy 2006, McLaughlin et al 2019).

A family bereavement can also precipitate a family into poverty. Recent changes to the financial support available to widowed parents appears to be increasing pressure on surviving parents to take up work or increase their hours before their children are ready (CBN 2019). While research shows that having hobbies or interests such as sport or music can help bereaved children (Scott et al 2019, Brewer and Sparkes 2014), many widowed parents report having to cut back on their children's hobbies and activities because they can no longer afford them (CBN 2019).

Young carers face particular difficulties in accessing activities. When the person they are caring for is expected to die, this adds an extra dimension to choices about how to spend the time that is remaining. Hospices and child bereavement services provide a range of support activities to provide peer support, improve communication and strengthen social networks when a child is facing a future bereavement, and many of these continue after the death (Penny 2018) but families often need support in accessing these.

The bereavement support needs of children with SEND can be overlooked, despite this group being more likely to be bereaved of a peer (Helton 2019).

15. What evidence do you have of specific activities or approaches that can be particularly helpful for these groups of children? Please be specific about which groups and provide details of the evidence you have e.g. references, links.

Effective ways of support bereaved children with autistic spectrum disorders have been helpfully summarised by Koehler 2017. Helton (2019) has recently reported on an international study tour of ways of supporting bereaved children and young people with SEND and made recommendations for the UK. <https://www.wcmt.org.uk/sites/default/files/report-documents/Helton%20S%20Report%202018%20Final.pdf>

The evidence base for supporting children and young people before the death of a sibling or parent has recently been summarised by the Childhood Bereavement Network <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/media/91314/Preparing-the-way.pdf>

Some widowed parents are unaware of the bereavement support payments available to them (with certain criteria) and miss out because they are too late to claim. Schools should be prepared to signpost bereaved families to local and national sources of welfare benefits advice.

16. We are keen to understand how developing character and resilience in children and young people may contribute to reducing the likelihood of gang membership and youth violence (e.g. knife crime), and preventing anti-social attitudes. Are you aware of any character-related work focused on this area?

Nielsen et al (2012) found that bereaved children and young people's reports of having bullied or assaulted others were associated with them not having talked to anyone about their loss. A US study found that suggest that young people whose parent died suddenly are more likely to take risks with their own or others' health including carrying a weapon and fighting (Hamdan et al 2012). In the UK, parentally bereaved children and young people are over-represented in the criminal justice system (Penny and Stubbs, 2015). The pathways to these problematic outcomes are not clear but could be

related to feelings of nihilism, a lack of positive support, or a wish to seek out a sense of belonging in the wake of the loss and troubling, changed relationship with surviving family and friends.

It is for this reason that many bereavement services focus on rebuilding a sense of hope in children and young people, increasing self-esteem including through opportunities to support others in similar circumstances, and strengthening relationships with supportive friends and family members (CBN 2014). A recent small-scale evaluation of a bereavement intervention showed increased hope and sense of mastery among the 49 participants (McGurl et al 2015). Six year follow up of the controlled Family Bereavement Program showed sustained improvements in participants' self-esteem compared to that of their controls (Sandler et al 2010).

19. For schools, colleges and activity providers: Are you responsible for delivering activities or approaches to character education? a. Yes [if Yes, please go on to question 20] b. No [if No, please go on to question 23]

Yes,

20. If you answered yes to question 19, please indicate what sort of activity or activities you offer (tick all that apply)? a. Sport and physical activity b. Creative activities (e.g. coding, writing, musical composition, design) c. Performing arts (e.g. dancing, drama, playing music, public speaking) d. Volunteering and membership (e.g. community action, charity work, uniformed groups, Duke of Edinburgh, National Citizen Service) e. World of work (e.g. work experience, entrepreneurial activities, contact with employers) f. Other (please write in)

Our members across the UK provide a range of activities to help children deal with their loss, often using creative approaches and supporting young people to support one another. Whether offered on a 1:1, family or group basis, activities are largely aimed at

- helping children and young people identify and communicate with supportive family members or friends
- supporting parents and carers to support their child
- helping children and young people to understand grief
- reinforcing and teaching coping skills – giving ideas about how to cope with thoughts and feelings
- helping children and young people to understand what's happened and is happening now
- giving opportunities to remember the person who died

21. If you answered Yes to question 19, what differences have you seen in children and young people as a result of the activities and approaches to character education that you are responsible for?

We have developed a common outcomes framework for the child bereavement sector based on the outcomes that children, parents, service managers and academics believe to be most critical to bereaved children's resilience. These include 'being able to recognise feelings', 'having a range of coping skills', 'feeling understood and accepted' and 'having manageable memories or stories'. For more details of these outcomes, please see

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/media/13682/Child-bereavement-services-outcomes-framework.pdf>

22. If you answered Yes to question 19, how do you know that these activities and approaches are having an impact and how do you evaluate this? If any of your evaluation is published, please provide links.

We have developed a set of standardized questionnaires for children and young people and their parents, to measure changes towards these outcomes. Many of our members are using these measures to report outcomes to their funders and to reflect on and improve their practice. The measure has been initially validated with 262 children and young people and is undergoing a further round of validation currently. More details are available on request.

Other services in the UK have been evaluated using generic mental health measures. A community based, universal preventative group intervention for bereaved young people showed a significant decrease in symptoms (as measured on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) over time (Siddaway et al 2015). An evaluation of a group intervention targeted at those bereaved through murder and manslaughter also found significant reductions in emotional distress, hyperactivity and problem behaviour (Trickey and Nugus 2011). Children, young people and their parents report in qualitative evaluations that services make them feel less isolated, help them to make sense of what has happened, reduce their anxiety, improve communication within the family, improve confidence and parenting, and relieve them through exploring and expressing feelings (Rolls and Payne 2007).

[197 words]