



# Coping with grief, bereavement and loss

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# Introduction

**Coronavirus has turned life upside down for all of us, but it has affected some children and families more than others. Thousands of vulnerable children are facing a new reality after lockdown. In many cases, young people have lost a loved one, but many others have lost opportunities they were about to take up or their normal support systems. These losses could lead to many more children, young people and families, as well as those supporting them, experiencing grief.**

Grief can affect anyone, at any time, and in different ways. It is a normal process of reacting to loss. Whilst this can be loss as the result of the death of a loved one, it can also be due to loss of a job or opportunity, or the loss of support<sup>1</sup>. Lockdown resulted in the loss of relationships, recreation, social support - and the loss of emotional and physical intimacy because of social distancing<sup>2</sup>. So far this year 41,608<sup>3</sup> people have died of COVID-19<sup>4</sup>, and this is before accounting for excess deaths caused indirectly by the pandemic. This means many more children and young people are mourning the loss of someone important to them. Some communities are disproportionately at risk of becoming seriously ill or dying from the virus, such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>5</sup> communities or those living in areas of high deprivation<sup>6</sup> and, as a result, are at greater risk of bereavement and grief. Bereavement is recognised as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), which can have long-term implications for children's development and life chances, without timely access to the right support.

For many people in normal circumstances the feelings of grief and loss dissipate over time, but this is not a normal time. Right now, without those things that help us heal like hugs and being able to be with others, some young people will find grief affects



their mental and physical health<sup>7</sup>. Children experience similar feelings to adults when dealing with grief, such as shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness and fear, but might express them differently. We know from our work with children who have experienced bereavement that though initially they may appear to accept it, over time they can become very distressed.

As children across the UK return to school, we know how important it will be for teachers and school staff to have the resources and expertise to support children who have experienced grief and bereavement. Barnardo's can support schools to create a compassionate and nurturing environment, so that children are given the opportunity to express their feelings of grief and heal in their own time. Coming to terms with their experiences is a precondition for thriving in the classroom and working towards a positive future.

## Key Facts

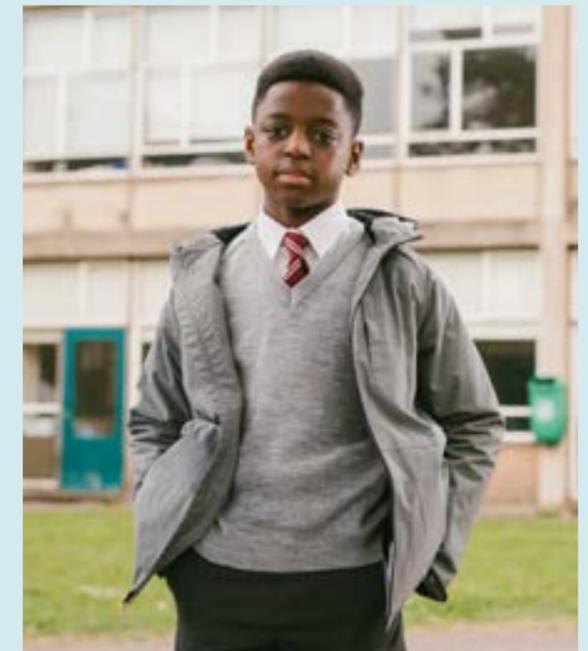
- Before COVID-19, official stats showed 1 in 29 children aged 5-16 years old have been bereaved of a parent or sibling - that's at least one child in every average class<sup>8</sup>.
- 41,608 people have died of COVID-19 so far in 2020 (as of September 2020)<sup>9</sup>, leaving more children and young people experiencing bereavement.
- But some already vulnerable communities will be particularly affected:-
  - Excess deaths rates are more than twice the UK average for 19 English councils, with poorer areas hardest hit. London boroughs Brent and Harrow had deaths rates three times the UK average<sup>10</sup>.
  - Black people are more than four times more likely, and Bangladeshi/Pakistani people three-and-a-half times more likely, to die from COVID-19 than white people<sup>11</sup>.

***There is evidence to suggest that COVID-19 is negatively affecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing:***

- In May, Barnardo's found that at least a third of children and young people had experienced an increase in mental health and wellbeing issues including stress, loneliness and worry<sup>12</sup>.
- 69% of Barnardo's frontline workers surveyed in April were supporting someone experiencing an increase in

mental health issues due to the COVID-19 crisis - including increased anxiety, sleep dysregulation and stress. This rose to 81% when we surveyed frontline workers in July<sup>14</sup>.

- 80% of children and young people with a history of mental health issues have experienced worsening mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and 87% said they had felt lonely or isolated<sup>15</sup>.
- The online mental health counselling provider Kooth has found a 26.6% increase in BAME children contacting them with suicidal thoughts, compared to 18.1% for white children as a result of COVID-19<sup>16</sup>.



1 <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=83860>

2 Zhai Y, Du X. Loss and grief amidst COVID-19: A path to adaptation and resilience. *Brain Behav Immun.* 2020;87:80-81. doi:10.1016/j.bbi.2020.04.053

3 Accurate as of 11th September 2020

4 Gov.UK <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>

5 Individuals may choose to identify themselves in different ways, including as Black, Brown, BAME, as 'people of colour' and/or as members of Global South Communities.

6 Public Health England (2020). Disparities in the risks and outcomes of COVID-19. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/892085/disparities\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892085/disparities_review.pdf)

7 Ibid

8 Child Bereavement UK: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/death-bereavement-statistics#:~:text=A%20parent%20of%20children%20under,child%20in%20every%20average%20class.>

9 Gov.UK <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>

10 The Guardian (2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/18/covid-19-excess-death-rates-more-than-twice-uk-average-for-19-english-councils>

11 Office of National Statistics (2020) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020>

12 According to Barnardo's Big Conversation poll of 4,000 children and young people in May aged eight to 24 years across the UK.

13 Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioners Survey in April 2020 based on 615 responses from Barnardo's practitioners.

14 Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioners Survey in June 2020 based on 447 responses from Barnardo's practitioners.

15 Young Minds (2020) <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

16 Cambell, D. (2020) Covid-19 affects BAME youth mental health more than white peers - study. *The Guardian*

# What needs to change

## Prioritise children and young people's mental health and wellbeing

Children and young people have told us they want decision makers to prioritise their mental health and wellbeing. Our recent [\*In Our Own Words\*](#) report was produced with young people and sets out how decision makers can improve mental health and wellbeing support in the aftermath of COVID-19. We know that this will be vital to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people's futures in the longer term, and should therefore be at the heart of national and local 'recovery' plans.

But we also want to go further. Before the pandemic, the system was failing far too many children and young people, so COVID-19 must be a catalyst for systemic change. This means the development of integrated, accessible (in person and digital) and non-stigmatising services, including access to alternative therapies. We need a truly 0-25 system, as promised in the NHS Long-Term Plan, ending the 'cliff edge' at 18.

## Invest in local communities and services, prioritising early intervention

Children who have experienced grief, bereavement and loss in childhood can be at increased risk of poor mental and physical health, affecting development and behaviour later in life. But it doesn't need to be this way. With the right support at the right time, children and young people can achieve positive outcomes. This requires investment in local community based support, which prioritises early intervention, such as building better connections to support networks and services.

## Involve children and young people in decision making

Nobody knows better than children and young people what their lives are like and what support they need - and we believe they must be involved in designing services and support that will help them overcome life's challenges, including grief, loss and bereavement.

## Put mental health and wellbeing at the heart of the education system

Schools and the wider education system are vital in supporting children and young people's mental health. As pupils return to their education settings, we are likely to start to see the impact of bereavement, grief and

loss on pupils and the staff who teach and support them in schools. Ensuring schools are places of safety, offer a nurturing learning environment, and are linked to specialist services that can support children and young people through this difficult time will be key. Supporting school staff with their mental health and wellbeing will also be fundamental in enabling them to support their pupils. **In the longer term we need to rebalance the education system as a whole, so that wellbeing is on a par with academic attainment.**

### About Barnardo's

As the UK's largest national children's charity, Barnardo's supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services in 2018/19. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this we work with partners, including health, local authorities and schools, to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Supporting good mental health and wellbeing runs through everything we do. Our services support children affected by almost all the vulnerabilities identified as risk factors for poor mental health and wellbeing. We work with commissioners of services across health and social care sectors to ensure a holistic approach to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable.

In 2018/19, we supported over 40,000 children, young people, parents and carers through our mental health services, including 28,700 children supported through our school-based programmes, aimed at improving social and emotional learning.

# Sharliny's story

**Sharliny, aged 17, is a young person who was previously supported by Barnardo's Harrow Horizons service. She told us about how one-to-one sessions with her Harrow Horizons worker, Emma, supported her while she was having a tough time at school in the years after losing her father.**

"I came to Harrow Horizons when I was at secondary school in the summer of 2018. I was going through quite a difficult period in my life. Unlike a lot of other counselling services that I had already used, Harrow Horizons was different because it gave me a new-found confidence in myself and a sense of hope that I could come out of the situation I was in.

My entire family was grieving the loss of my father and although it happened several years ago, the impact of this was something that would continue to affect me and my family in different ways. I have always been a hard-working student, but the added pressure to perform well at school along with what my family was going through seemed to overwhelm me. It's difficult for any young person when they start GCSEs to do well with all the expectations that are placed on them from teachers and your peers.

If you have also lost a parent then life can seem even harder which is why Harrow Horizons was so vital for me because it provided me with time and space to manage my own stress and to work out what really matters.

I enjoy being in the open air so I started having the sessions outside in a nearby field. Before you open up about anything you need to be able to trust that person. Emma made me feel really comfortable and this meant I was able to share my feelings. Sometimes you have counsellors who just want to ask what the problem is to tick a box, but Emma was not like that. She wanted to get to know me as a person and gave me the freedom and space to talk. She was more like a friend trying to listen than a professional with a title.



A lot of other services would just write you off and say 'Oh you're not that bad, you don't need support', but Harrow Horizons showed incredible compassion and realised I needed help. Even when I completed my course of sessions they still went out of their way to make sure I had support in school and gave me a contact number that I could call if I felt that I ever needed to speak to someone."

In February 2020 Sharliny became a Barnardo's Youth Colleague volunteer which means she is actively helping to shape and improve our work at Harrow Horizons. Sharliny said, "This year I helped Barnardo's by taking part in a youth panel interview where I was able to ask questions to the new director of strategic partnerships. The panel training was really fun and it was very interesting to see what it's like to actually be in an interview situation where a candidate is presenting themselves for a job... Children and young people often see the world very differently to adults and can see solutions that adults sometimes miss, and this [is] why I really love Barnardo's approach to collaboration."

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