



Exploring Grief's Landscape: A National Research Perspective

Bereavement touches all of us at some point - and for a surprising number of us, it is first experienced all too early in life. Yet bereavement, with its associated feelings of grief, is a phenomenon that few of us have the will to examine close up - despite much evidence that grief has, for many, a life-long impact. As caring communities - and as caring individuals - we must recognize that it is long past time to recognize the grieving among us, and give their grief the concern and attention it so deeply deserves.

The irony of our shared reticence to deeply examine grief is that -- at the beginning - grief is the most public of afflictions.

In loss' immediate aftermath, grief's face is plain to the bereaved one's family, friends and casual acquaintances alike. It is on full display, minute to minute, in pained gatherings at home, in solemn memorial services, in every hushed and halting conversation about what has just occurred.

As life inevitably re-asserts itself, the "occasions" of grief soon pass. But for all too many of the bereaved, grief itself - especially grief rooted in childhood -- never fully fades. It endures, in the shadows of one's life, nurtured by silence.

Far more than a transient emotion, grief is actually a sweeping and complex landscape of anxiety, struggle, regret and memory, painfully traversed over a lifetime. It is pervasive as well as lasting - but yet, the focus of relatively little of our collective attention. It is, in fact, one of society's most intractable issues. And its impact on the bereaved is profound and far-reaching.

The professionals of Comfort Zone Camp have been exploring grief's landscape for nearly a dozen years, as the nation's largest non-profit provider of bereavement camps for children. The mission of Comfort Zone Camp (CZC) is to provide grieving



children with a voice, a place and a community in which they can heal, grow and lead more fulfilling lives.

CZC's long experience suggests that grief is a burden typically borne alone - and most painfully by children. But grief is lived out within families; for every grieving child, there is almost certainly a surviving parent or caregiver and, very likely, siblings who share the loss. These grieving children and their families must live out their lives in communities that, while perhaps aware of their loss, are typically ill-equipped to truly understand the dimensions of their grief, and help ease it.

CZC believes that individual grief after the loss of a loved one is truly a problem for families and communities to address - and that we all must share responsibility for the provision of support and care that eases the grief burden.

Knowledge and awareness about grief - yielding better guidance for the formation of a caring response - are key. But to this point, there has been scant examination of precisely how grief is experienced by children, within families, and among the population at large, both immediately and over the long term.

Recently, Comfort Zone Camp resolved to fill this knowledge void. In late 2009, CZC, with critical support from the New York Life Foundation, worked with the national research firm Mathew Greenwald & Associates to conduct a nationwide poll of adults regarding their experiences with and attitudes about bereavement, especially loss in childhood. CZC also developed insights into the experiences of children and adults who have suffered a loss through separate surveys of children who have attended a CZC-sponsored bereavement camp and of campers' parents. (For full details of the survey methodology and sample, please see the Appendix of this report.)



The research findings validate many of CZC's observations of the grief experience developed through its years of working with bereaved children and their families. But the research also provides many new insights into how loss is borne by these children and their parents/caregivers, the enduring impact of loss well into adulthood - and perhaps most importantly, the steps that individuals and communities at large can take to help bereaved individuals along their "grief journey."

This report presents the key findings of the CZC research.

Bereavement's Impact: Widespread, Shattering, Lingering

One of the most striking findings of the CZC research is just how widespread across society the experience of childhood bereavement is - and how long the experience's troubling impact persists in memory.

One of nine (11%) of the adults polled nationally for CZC lost a parent before age 20; more than one in seven (15%) lost a parent or sibling before turning 20.

Many more adults have at least some familiarity with childhood bereavement: About half of respondents said they have a close friend, a relative or a co-worker who, in childhood, lost a parent.

The CZC findings are consistent with other estimates of bereavement's scope. According to another study, one out of every 20 children in the United States will experience the death of one or both parents before the age of 15.¹ Of "traditional-aged" (i.e., between 18 and 22 years old) college undergraduates, 41% are likely to have experienced the death of a loved one within any given 12-month period.²

Putting the experience of childhood bereavement into context with another devastating childhood occurrence, for every one child diagnosed with cancer this year,



at least 35 children will lose a parent, according to an estimate by Mathew Greenwald & Associates.

For adults who lost a parent in childhood, memories of the difficulties they had coping with the loss are lasting and strong.

Nearly six of 10 adults bereaved as children say that “losing a parent as a kid was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to deal with.” About three quarters agreed that their life would have been much better if their parent hadn’t died when they were so young.

Losing a loved one is a shattering experience for parents and children alike. Eight of 10 bereaved parents say that their loss is “the worst thing” that ever happened to them, a feeling shared by nine in 10 bereaved kids.

Losses linger in the memory of the bereaved – frequently well into adulthood. About seven of 10 adults who lost a parent growing up say they still think of their parent frequently – a sentiment that holds true regardless of how long ago the loss occurred. For many, however, those memories are often insufficient and fading -- about eight of 10 say they wish they had more memories of their parent.

The desire to have one more moment with the lost one runs deep: More than half of adults bereaved as children say they would trade a year of their life for one more day with their lost parent.

Bereavement Isolates - and Impedes the “Grief Conversation”

The experience of bereavement is so traumatic that it seems to immediately set the bereaved apart, parents as well as kids – both in their own minds as well as in the minds of their peers. The belief and perception that the bereaved are somehow



“different” both impedes conversation around grief and forces an isolation of the bereaved from peers.

Bereaved parents agree that after their loss, they felt like they were “different” from other adults in the community, a feeling shared by their children.

Such feelings of “difference” can only exacerbate grief’s pain, especially for adolescents, who are differentiated from their peers at precisely the time in their lives when they most desperately want to “fit in” (half of adults bereaved as kids polled by CZC lost their parent between the ages of 15 and 19).

But for the bereaved generally, being perceived as different has an even more insidious effect: It seems to foster feelings of discomfort and unease that inhibit contact and conversation about their loss with others, even friends, at a time when maintaining connections is vital.

Many bereaved parents agree that, following their loss, some of their friends or co-workers seemed uncomfortable around them, and some friends stopped talking to them or socializing with them.

About half of parents say that “most adults don’t know how to talk to me or my kids when we run into them.” The vast majority of the kids we talked to agree that “most people don’t know how” to talk to them about their loss, and about as many say they hardly ever, or never talk to teachers or adults about their loss.

Many adults bereaved as children well remember this “failure to communicate” when it comes to grief. About one third say that after their parent died, they remember “feeling like there was no one I could talk to.”



The difficulties of supporting a necessary - and more public - conversation around bereavement are mirrored in the population at large. Only about one in four adults say that they'd feel very comfortable consoling or talking to a close friend, neighbor or close co-worker who lost a spouse or a child.

Clearly, many of the bereaved feel the want of opportunities for straightforward interaction with friends and acquaintances about their loss. Simple communication stands out as a critical first step in ensuring that the bereaved feel part of caring communities, at a time when such support is desperately needed.

A Silence within Families

Ironically, the grief conversation also seems to be constrained exactly where it should be the most comfortable - within the bereaved family. Parents and kids alike express concern that, in speaking about their own feelings of loss, they risk sharpening the pain of other family members.

Nearly half of recently bereaved parents say that the lost one often comes up in conversation with their kids. But nearly half also find it very or somewhat hard to have these conversations. And many parents and kids alike say they avoid talking to each other about their grief out of concern for the upset it might cause.

The silence that often attends grief is yet another enduring memory for many adults bereaved as kids. More than four in 10 say that as a child, they frequently pretended to be okay so as not to upset their surviving parent; many say that "we never talked much" about their parent in the house after the loss.

In the face of overwhelming grief, many parents and kids just avoid talking to each other about their loss - a reticence that can deepen and extend the grief cycle.



Small wonder that about half of bereaved parents say they wish they could talk more with their kids about “our loss.”

There’s no question that society at large needs to become more at ease talking about grief. But the need is even more urgent within families. Too many parents and kids persist in suffering alone, struggling day to day with the seemingly simple exercise of talking about their shared pain.

The Impact on Women

Childhood loss is not a women’s issue per se, but it is an issue with particular poignancy for women. The CZC national survey indicates that for women, the effects tend to be more immediate, more profound and more enduring than they are for men.

Among adults bereaved as kids, women are more likely than men to report feelings of insecurity attributed to parental loss in childhood. For their part, men are more likely than women to strike a stoic pose about death, agreeing more frequently with the statement that “death is a part of life; people need to get over it.”

Not only do women struggle with childhood loss to a greater degree than men, they are also the ones more likely to be the surviving parent and caregiver. Among adults surveyed by CZC who lost a parent growing up, nearly three quarters lost their father while one quarter lost their mother. Children, in fact, are more likely to lose a father than a mother before they reach adulthood simply because men between the ages of 25 and 49 die at rates 2.5 times higher than same-aged women.³

Because women more often than not are the surviving parent, they must do double duty as both mother and father in their household, coping with their own grief even as they provide support - emotional, financial, and every other way - for their kids.



The Challenges of Finding Support

Getting the critical support they need to deal with their grief journey is an ongoing challenge for families.

The support gaps are sorely felt by bereaved parents. Only about one in five agrees that there are plenty of resources to help kids who have lost parents; just three of 10 say there are plenty of resources for parents who have lost a spouse or partner. Nearly half say their workplace wasn't prepared to help them deal with their loss.

More than half say it was hard to find counseling resources for their kids, and nearly nine of 10 say they wish there were more resources to help parents with grieving kids.

Schools are on the front lines of providing essential support to bereaved children. But the CZC results suggest that children who have experienced loss spend the bulk of their day in the company of adults who have little experience or training in helping bereaved kids. Virtually all parents said that they spoke with at least some of their kids' teachers immediately after the loss, and most indicated they have continued to have these conversations with teachers each year. But nearly half of parents felt that the schools were not prepared to help.

Adults who suffered loss as children also recalled that schools were of little help; just 7 percent recall talking to a school guidance counselor, and virtually none recall that teachers were particularly helpful.

The acute needs of bereaved parents run from the domestic, to the financial, to the psychological. Following their loss, parents said, they especially needed help with household maintenance and childcare resources/domestic care. About half say they weren't prepared for the financial impact of their loss, and about four in 10 say it's been harder to find someone they can trust for financial advice.



Most bereaved parents indicate that it's been harder to earn enough money to maintain their lifestyle, put money away, and save for their kids' college education. Nearly half say that their loss "has significantly impacted our standard of living."

For a majority of parents, however, among the hardest things has been simply understanding what their grieving child most needs. Nearly six in 10 parents say they "find it hard to know what my child needs from me" and eight of 10 say it's hard to know "what is normal kid behavior vs. what is grief related."

The Community Response

Many adults recognize that the bereaved - especially bereaved children - are not getting the assistance they need. Nearly half agree that kids who lose a parent or sibling at an early age "lack a sufficient network to deal with their grief."

In their way, most people stand ready to help. Virtually all adults say they have been supportive of bereaved family and acquaintances, with most indicating they've participated in "occasions of grief" - going to funerals and wakes, offering words of condolence, visiting the family's home. Still, at the same time, more than eight of 10 conceded that they wished they could have done more to help.

The support that the bereaved get from acquaintances does seem to diminish over time. About four in 10 bereaved parents said they've felt pressure from friends and family to "get over" their loss. About four in 10 adults agreed they felt that after a while, their bereaved family and acquaintances "were on their own."

The message is simple: Bereaved families have a wide range of needs and are often challenged in coping with the most straightforward aspects of pre-bereaved life.



People want to help - but many aren't sure what to do.

There is much that society's institutions should do to alleviate grief, but a good place for society to start is in simple, day to day interactions. Indeed, bereaved parents and kids alike say that talking with friends makes a big difference for them - ample reason to help people develop better insight into ways to conduct a caring conversation around grief.

Surviving Parents Play a Heroic Role

Ultimately, the CZC research indicates, grief is a near-constant pain for many of the bereaved, an ache that might ebb and flow, but never really goes away. Families are struggling to get the support they need -- but in the meantime parents, while shouldering their own considerable grief burden, are making near-heroic efforts to help their kids.

Nine of 10 recently bereaved parents say they try to give their kids a lot of emotional support. They also are striving -- to a degree apparently less common in the past -- to support the entire family in a coping process. To help family members manage their grief, virtually all parents say they are keeping family traditions and rituals and doing activities the family used to do together (compared with just under one half of adults bereaved as kids who say their families did this). And, the difficulties of the family grief conversation notwithstanding, more than two thirds of parents say they have sat down as a family and talked about the death, compared with only about one quarter of adults bereaved as kids.

Even at that, many parents feel their efforts fall short; about six of 10 say they need to be of more help to their kids. But bereaved children generally maintain otherwise: most typically, they laud their parents' efforts to help them deal with problems with friends or at school, to be a good role model, and in many other respects.



Among all their memories of their bereavement experience, adults suffering a loss in childhood remember most especially the exceptional efforts of such parents: Three quarters say their surviving parent “did a great job under the circumstances.”

Perhaps due in no small measure to the support, years before, of these extraordinary parents, many of those bereaved as kids seem in adulthood to have reached a kind of peace with their lives as they are. Better than eight in 10 adults who lost a parent as a kid say they are equally or more resilient than most adults, and nearly six in 10 think they became stronger as a result of their loss.

However, given the other key findings of the CZC research, it seems certain that this resilience was born of a painful resolve to push through years of grief – frequently in silence, often in isolation from friends and even other family members, and with a dearth of meaningful attention and support from society’s institutions.

The bereaved – children and their families – need and deserve more, from all of us.

What’s Required: A Concerted Response by Society and Individuals

Society’s institutions must lead: Many of the bereaved describe challenges in finding counsel, guidance and support for themselves and their kids. These challenges are unacceptably daunting and in many cases needless. All of society’s institutions – social service organizations, religious congregations, workplaces and, in particular, schools – need to recognize the pain and pervasiveness of grief and take steps to frame caring responses. Schools have a particular responsibility to ensure that teachers and counselors are well versed in the manifestations of grief – including the hesitancy of most children to articulate and share it – and must educate teachers about how to support the bereaved kids in their midst day to day.

Individuals must offer support: Bereaved parents and kids polled by CZC agree that in their effort to work through their grief, “people don’t have to give me special treatment; I just want to be treated normally.” Even at that, the CZC research indicates a disturbing failure by many of us to simply help the bereaved live their lives as before – whether by



failure to assist with life's small tasks, share a social occasion, or merely engage in conversation. The extent of the grief experience in society suggests that each of us has a responsibility to play a caring role in the lives of the bereaved - so many of them our neighbors, friends, colleagues and co-workers.

Kids must get to remain kids: Nearly seven of 10 bereaved children said their loss made them feel as if "they weren't a kid anymore." The apparent "loss of childhood" is one of bereavement's most poignant effects - with many children feeling thrust all too soon into positions of near-adult responsibility and emotional reserve. Just as all the bereaved long for the experiences of "normal life," so too do kids - even the most stoic and silent in their grief - need opportunities and occasions to shed grief-related worries and simply be kids. Youth focused organizations of all kinds can help enormously in this regard.

A national "grief conversation" must begin: It's time for a national dialogue on grief, particularly as it relates to our children. No aspect of our common humanity is more deeply shared - and more worthy of our collective concern. To resolve the problem of enduring grief, we all must acknowledge it - and begin to talk about it. Grief persists in shadows and silence. We must bring grief into the light and give it voice.

The grieving among us, kids and adults alike, push their lives forward, with struggle and hurt but no small amount of resolve. Knowing that life must endure too, they ask for little more than to be invited back into the lives of family, friends and the community at large, with some modest recognition of what they've lost, the occasional relief of a helping hand and, from time to time, an understanding word.

How will we respond?



APPENDIX

Notes

^{1, 2, 3} "Childhood and Adolescent Bereavement: A Review of the Literature," Monica Durette, M.S., Virginia Commonwealth University, Matt Bisko, Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University Health Systems, 2009.

About the CZC Surveys

The poll of 1,006 adults was conducted via the Internet between November 24th and December 7th, 2009 by the national polling firm of Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc. All respondents were at least 25 years of age. The margin of error for the poll is $\pm 3.2\%$. Of the 1,006 adults surveyed, 110 had lost a parent before the age of 20, and 52 had lost a sibling (13 had lost both). Greenwald then surveyed an additional 298 adults who had lost a parent growing up, for a total over-sample of 408 (110 + 298). The margin of error for the 408 adults who lost a parent before the age of 20 is $\pm 4.6\%$.

The poll of 261 parents who lost a spouse/partner and 108 kids who lost a parent before age 20 was conducted among Comfort Zone campers and parents via the Internet between January 11, 2010 and March 26, 2010 by Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc. Bereaved children responding to the poll all were between 13 and 19 years of age.

About Comfort Zone Camps

The mission of CZC is to provide grieving children with a voice, a place and a community in which to heal, grow and lead more fulfilling lives. As the nation's largest bereavement camp for kids, Comfort Zone Camp has held over 100 camps and served nearly 5000 children in the last 11 years. Comfort Zone Camp envisions a world where grieving children and their families are not forgotten or left to grieve alone, and are supported by a wide community that understands and appreciates them. To learn more, please visit www.comfortzonecamp.org. For more information on the camps (which are offered free of charge) or how to attend or volunteer, please visit www.comfortzonecamp.org or call 866.488.5679.

Comfort Zone Camp has created a dedicated web site - www.hellogrief.org - with basic resources for kids and families in grief and their friends, extended families and other concerned parties. The site includes a wide range of articles on grief, a bulletin board, an on-line social networking community, a bereavement reference section, and a camp referral function.

**About The New York Life Foundation**

Inspired by New York Life's tradition of service and humanity, the New York Life Foundation has, since its founding in 1979, provided more than \$130 million in charitable contributions to national and local nonprofit organizations. Through its focus on "Nurturing the Children," the Foundation supports programs that benefit young people, particularly in the areas of mentoring, safe places to learn and grow, educational enhancement opportunities and childhood bereavement. In the last three years the Foundation has committed more than \$4 million to efforts focused on childhood bereavement. The Foundation also encourages and facilitates the community involvement of employees, agents, and retirees of New York Life through its Volunteers for Life program. To learn more, please visit the Foundation's Web site at www.newyorklifefoundation.org.

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