

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER JULY 2017



Welcome to the July newsletter of the Family Bereavement Support Programme. We hope that in reading the newsletters and being a part of the groups you will find connection with other parents, support and encouragement to help sustain you as you grieve for your child.

“The stories we tell and the meaning we make of them”

On the third Thursday in July the parent bereavement group met again with a number of parents, some who have come before and some attending only their first or second group. As always some parents found it hard to share their story and preferred to mostly listen and others were able to share their experiences and their feelings more readily.

Tonight we explored the stories of the children's lives, the family story they are part of and the ways

in which their life and death have altered the expected trajectory of the family story. We also explored stories and understandings of what happens when someone dies. As was expressed in the previous group, sharing the story of your child is a precious gift, which may be neither appreciated nor recognised by everyone.

A parent in the group told us about how she can tell the story of her son's death to her nephew in a way she could never tell it to an adult. She





explained that her nephew is a similar age to her son. **"He asked, 'what did he die of'.**

We googled the condition. He then asked 'did you put him down?' He likened withdrawing treatment to putting down their dog recently... I got out pictures and was able to go into things in depth... Moments like that take you right back". Having children asking questions so openly without any judgement, just curiosity and a genuine wish to understand allows you to tell the story in a refreshingly honest way.

Another parent told us that she writes about her child every day. She explained that this is her way of raising awareness of congenital heart disease. She said ***"It is my outlet, to tell his story. I like talking about my story. Sometimes I feel like I force other people to listen"***. She also commented that as the anniversary of his death and his first birthday draw nearer she feels that people

are feeling "enough is enough".

The parents in the group also talked about how their child's story continues after they have died. Do you continue to think of your child as the age they were when they were alive or as the age they would be now? A parent said: ***"I would have a nearly 2 year old. I google what a 2 year old would be like. I am still buying him clothes"***.

Another parent told us a story about when she returned to work and a colleague brought in her 6 month old and she suddenly realised that her baby would not have been 6 weeks old anymore. ***"I thought, a 6 month old baby is not tiny. It had not occurred to me what a 6 months old baby would be like... in my head he is a baby. I see a 7 year old I think, that's how tall he might be now"***. One of the hard things is that there is no obvious signs of the child growing older – ***"There is no evidence he got older – no grown out of clothes, no photos. There is no evidence that 7 1/2 years has gone by. The family story goes on and his story has evolved. There is no evidence...The photos say we have a 6 week old, a 3 and a 6 year old"***.

Still on the theme of the child aging, a parent talked about organising her daughter's birthday 5 years on. It is upsetting that there are no new photos, no photos of her as a child about to have her 11th birthday – **"The invitation is for an 11 year old birthday party but the photo is of a little girl"**. For another parent, their second child getting the 3 year old kinder photo reminded her that there will never be three year old kinder photos of their youngest child. She said **"I am scared his story ends with his death. I hate this idea"**.

Parents in the group talked of other children being cheated by the death of the child – children who did not have a big brother or sister, or could not be the older brother or sister they were supposed to be, and cousins who did not have a cousin of the same age to grow up with. This has been particularly difficult for one child who believes his life would be much easier if he had his older sister around to help him and be there for him as he sees other older sisters doing for their younger siblings. He told his mother **"If she was in school, she would look after me... It's not fair, other children have brothers or sisters**

and I don't have one". Although he said looking at his sister's photos made him sad he said he would be sadder if they were taken down and he could not look at them. He also appears to believe that she was a perfect child and sometimes asks if his sister was ever naughty. He is told the truth, that she could be just as naughty as any other child. His mother said **"He has been cheated too. He is seeking out protection from his older sister. His story has been altered too"**. It really doesn't matter if his sister would have protected him or not, in his story she would have been a fabulous big sister and his life would have been easier.

Many parents have a very real sense of their child at different times and in different ways. A parent in the group told us that her daughter comes to her in dreams – **"She comes to us in our dreams, always as a 3 year old"**. She has



come to another person in a dream also but as an older child – older than she was when she died. Other parents said that the orange and black Monarch butterflies appear whenever they are thinking of their child. Another parent told us **"I hear his song 'I will love you for a thousand years'. Often I'll be thinking of him and the song just comes on. It's not like it is a popular song now"**. Many

parents and people close to the child will feel their presence. A parent in the group told us that he had read that 36% of people who are bereaved will see a

vision of the deceased person and find that comforting. He told us **"I swear I heard him crying. It was a happy cry. Little things remind me"**.

The group went on to talk about the stories of where the child is now. For one parent of Christian faith she was very clear – **"She is in heaven. She is up there having a ball and we will all see her when we go to heaven. She is running around feeling so loved,**



all encompassing love". This belief brings comfort – knowing she is safe and happy and that they will all be reunited eventually is very positive – **"We talk about her being alive in heaven in a different form"**. Another parent shared the belief in heaven. She told us that her second child wants to know what heaven is like. She said **"When we get to heaven we heal"**. She likes to think of her

child running around in heaven and causing as much mischief as possible, as much as his siblings are causing down here.

One of the parents in the group told us she is an atheist and she envies people who do have a belief. She had no story about where her son had gone – **"I so badly wanted to have a story"**. She told us she is glad that members of her family do have a faith and a belief about where he is now. She thinks this is very comforting for them. At one time she wanted to force herself to believe. She told us the story of a medium coming to the cemetery one day when she was there and

talking to her – **"She said he misses me. She spoke about my son and said he is up in the stars. I have a solar system in his nursery"**. Another parent had also seen a medium: **"She knew so much. She told me she is happy and misses me. I needed to know she is okay. She watches all we do, it brings me peace"**. Another parent said **"It is nice to have something to believe in"**.

Believing in God and in heaven did not make it easier to accept the death of the child. **"I want to believe he is in heaven. I feel angry. I question my belief. Why would a 14 month old baby die? On the flip side, though, he was a miracle"**. One parent spoke of the different ways she and her partner have responded in their belief - **"You can't be mad at God, but I am upset that he has taken her. He took her for a reason and I know he is looking after her. My husband struggles to go back to church. As Catholics it is important to go to church**



but he gets riled and is not okay with going to church. He believes in heaven. For me it is a comfort, I believe she is happy".

Some people were not so clear about heaven but still had a belief in a place their child could now be - **"There are so many things that happen, things are corrected in some way. I get a lot of comfort in his death – I am not scared of death"**. Another parent told us **"Children are on loan, you can't control them. Something is looking out for them"**.

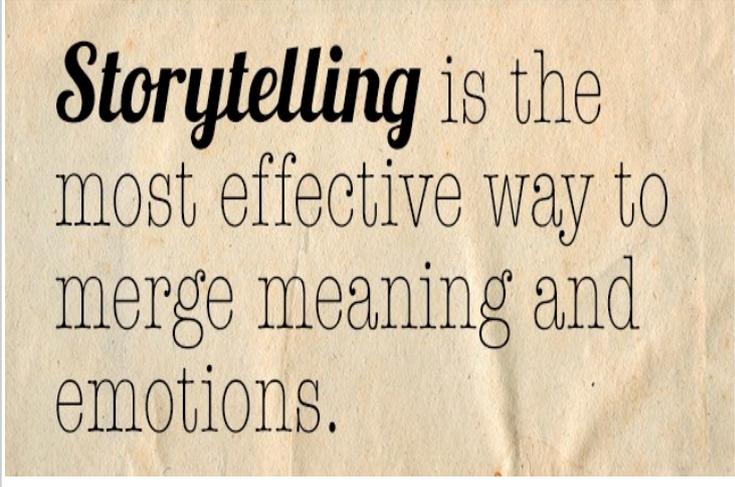
How to go on, to continue the family story without the child is another challenge for parents. Many parents worry about the impact of their grief on their parenting and the impact this will have on their other children. They want their other children to have a good life with happy parents. **"We promised him we would laugh and love... We have done things with the children we never would have done if he hadn't passed away. Some of them**

seem a little crazy". And from another parent. **"I don't want his story to be that he died and we were all sad... I don't want it to be his fault that his mother and father are crap"**. This is a concern shared by many parents when they change from being ordinary parents to being bereaved parents. **"The story has changed. It is hard to parent and get it right"**. Another parent had some reassuring words – **"I doubt my ability as a parent, I second guess everything. I feel I am failing in my parenting, but apparently you only have to get it right as a parent 30% of the time"**. One parent said she feels she places higher expectations on herself as a parent now. Parents felt that their children feel their anxiety and they pick it up, but on the other hand children may also grow up being more emotionally intelligent than their peers. A parent who is finding their young child's behaviour quite challenging at present said **"Have we done the wrong thing because his sister died. We spoiled him, overindulged him"**. Another parent reassured her that children

can be challenging at that age anyway. Someone commented **"As an adult we can't process it, how can a child process it?"** and another comment along the same lines: **"How can his little brain be filled with so many emotions, so many moods, so many arguments?"**

The stories that were shared and explored this evening all varied but shared the theme of grief and the pain of the loss shaping the family story for evermore. This was not always negative – **"This has brought our family closer together, we bond more. We have taken something out of this"**. The stories go on, the child's story goes on, woven into the family story, into the stories of friends, cousins and many, many others whose lives have been influenced by the child who continues to be a part of their lives and their stories.

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**Storytelling** is the most effective way to merge meaning and emotions.



## Birthday in Heaven

I see the tears you are crying  
And the pain that's in your eyes  
But please don't be sad  
Because love never dies.

And though you cannot feel me hold you  
Or give you a quick little kiss  
The sound of my voice and the touch of my hand  
Are the simple things you miss.

So please celebrate my birthday  
Filled with memories and love  
Just close your eyes and realize  
I am celebrating in Heaven above.

And when the sorrow overwhelms you  
Just pray and He will help you be strong  
And you will find the peace He alone can give  
Knowing I am in Heaven where I belong.

## *Our letter box is Waiting!*



Contributions such as responses and reflections on the groups' themes, poems, letters, songs, quotations from parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends, feedback about this newsletter are most welcome. Share your thoughts, experiences, questions with others who are bereaved. Please forward them to:

Family Bereavement Support Programme  
Social Work Department  
Royal Children's Hospital  
50 Flemington Road  
PARKVILLE VIC 3052  
Phone: 03 9345 6111  
Or email:  
bereavement.services@rch.org.au

***\*If you would like to receive  
the newsletter by email  
please send us your email  
details to the provided  
address.\****

The next meeting of the  
Family Bereavement Support Evening Group will be held on:

**Thursday 17th August  
7:30 pm – 9:00 pm  
The RCH Foundation Board Room  
Level 2, 48 Flemington Road  
Parkville, VIC 3052**

Please join us to discuss the topic:

***“Negotiating new relationships – new children,  
new friends, new partner”***

Please join us in August

*The newsletter is always a team effort.  
Thank you to Helen Stewart for guiding the group discussion and for facilitating  
and to Vicki Young for scribing parents' statements.  
Also to the RCH Volunteers & to Jenny Jelic for ensuring  
the newsletter is formatted and distributed to interested people.*

***Social Work Department, RCH***

