

# Songwriting for grief and loss: An intergenerational project between hospice patients and primary school children

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## Background

In 2019, as part of its expanding community engagement and health promotion work, the Arts and the Family Support services of St Columba's Hospice in collaboration with Fischy Music implemented an innovative intergenerational project raising death and dying awareness.

### Why music?

The arts play a vital role in enabling hospices to engage with their local communities and to promote healthier attitudes towards death and dying. In diverse forms, formats, and media, ranging from one-off performances to long-term projects, the arts can bring people together in creative and non-threatening ways (Hartley, 2011, 2014). With diverse applications in palliative and bereavement care, music and songwriting in particular can be a powerful way to express, articulate and share experiences of loss and change as well as to change perception and to build emotional resilience and social bonding (Heath & Lings, 2012; Tsiris et al., 2011).

### Why working with schools?

Children and young people are catalysts in any sustainable social change. Working with schools is crucial not only for shaping healthier attitudes towards death and dying awareness in society, but also for raising childhood grief awareness and equipping school communities to support children. This seems particularly important considering that around 111 children are bereaved of a parent every day in the UK (Child Bereavement UK, 2017).



## The project: Processes and outcomes

Hospice patients and children from Victoria Primary School were brought together to explore, express and share through music their experiences of grief, change and loss in life. Structured in six main steps, the project involved both school-wide input for students and staff as well as more focused songwriting work with a group of ten P5-6 children self-named 'The Victoria Rockers'.



"Loved meeting and remembering people"  
Child

"Meeting B. – We both had the same sadness"  
Child

"Sharing names [with patients] and how they were feeling. How they were happy even though they had cancer and were dying"  
Child

"I will introduce it [loss] as a subject that should be talked about and tell the class it's OK to talk about it"  
School staff

"Being lifted, had a great time, good to mingle with lovely children"  
Patient

"Honest talk about death"  
School staff

### Change Matters By The Victoria Rockers

Time is passing by, something's got to change  
Time is passing by, you'll still be the same

Trapped in a bubble of space and time  
Stuck in a time-wave, don't know where to go  
Tied in a web of worries and regrets  
Somewhere in the world, someone feels the same

Seasons change around us  
Day and night, day and night  
Sun is shining bright

There's a war of emotions in my head  
Thinking about it, waking in my bed  
Breaking through the darkness with happiness  
Following the path of light and dreams

Seasons change around us [ . . . ]

Clouds are passing by nothing has to change  
Clouds are passing by you'll never feel the same

## Future directions

Contributing to the growing field and evidence base of the role of the arts, including the arts therapies, in palliative and bereavement care (e.g., Clements-Cortes, 2016; Wood, Jacobson & Cridford, 2019), this project has served as a pilot. Its outcomes highlight the importance of promoting and supporting conversations about death and dying for children, and they feed into the development of similar intergenerational projects with other schools, community groups and arts organisations within the hospice's catchment area.

Looking ahead, such intergenerational arts projects can help hospices to re-imagine and expand their role. This includes re-positioning hospices as resource hubs for their local communities by fostering partnerships and opportunities for open dialogue and creative action around death, dying, change and loss.

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