



# When Words Aren't Enough...

exploring young people's grief, loss and change through art

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Like mementoes locked in a drawer memories and feelings can be hidden from sight, avoided or pushed from consciousness. Sometimes this can cause sorrow, or confusion, challenging feelings which may seem beyond words. This poster outlines an innovative pilot project run by St Columba's Hospice Care in 2020 in a High School in East Lothian, to support pupils who had experienced loss, grief or change. Delivered collaboratively by Community Artist, Hans K Clausen and Child and Family Worker, Donna Hastings, the project aimed to provide an empathic creative space for young people to share and explore their experiences and feelings through facilitated conversations and guided art activity. The programme was delivered in line with the guiding principles of the Bereavement Charter for Children and Adults in Scotland which states that good bereavement care is a human right.

Related publications – **The Bereavement Charter Scotland**  
[www.scottishcare.org/bereavement](http://www.scottishcare.org/bereavement)

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**The conceptual framework** was a domestic chest of drawers, an unremarkable item of furniture that could exist in any home and the exterior of which gives little away about what might lie within. Group members each took an empty drawer from a chest of drawers and used it as a blank canvas within which they could visually express an aspect of their loss. For some this would become a cathartic statement of personal feeling, or a place to visualise their story, for others it would take the form of a memorial to someone who had died. Participants were invited to use a variety of materials and techniques including; collage, assemblage, drawing, painting, and encouraged to include personal mementoes, photographs and text.

**The approach** was founded on the facilitator's knowledge and understanding of group work and young people's grief in collaboration with the participants lived experiences, feelings and insights.

**The programme** was delivered over six weeks in a safe and creative space in the school and followed a structured model of group activities, peer sharing and guided creative art-making. Young people attended on a voluntary basis.

**The focus** for the sessions was the creation of artworks to give voice to the individual and collective experiences of grief, loss and change brought by the young people. The starting point for each young person's expressive artwork was an empty drawer...



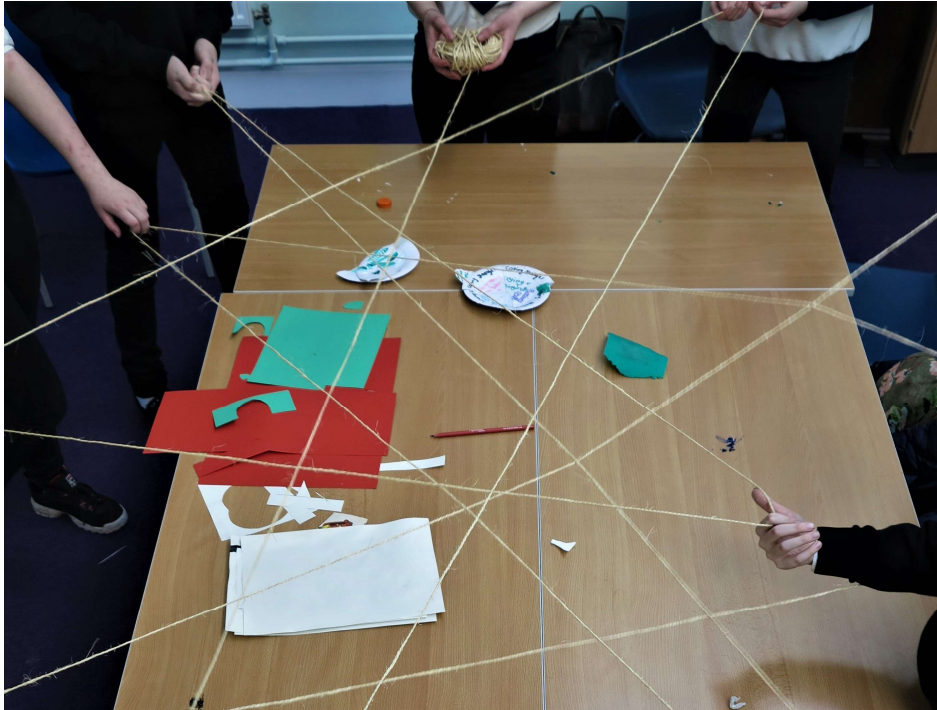
Each drawer is a unique artwork reflecting one young person's experiences; **collectively the chest of drawers is a compendium of visual stories of grief.**

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*"Imaginative play, is the place where children can express their defiance, confusion, sadness, and try to make sense of their own particular world, and what it feels like to live there...To play in the presence of someone who listens and can share their story, can be healing"*

A. Cattanach (2003, in *Introduction to Play Therapy*)

# Reflections

**The Childhood Bereavement Service Outcomes Framework,** [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk) provides a summary of key outcomes many of which were highlighted in this project including;

## Environments:

A shared experience with others in a similar situation.

A safe space to explore, express and communicate needs and feelings.

## Processes:

Helping children and young people to understand grief.

Giving opportunities to remember the person who has died:

## Outcomes of using a service:

Able to recognise others grief.

Understands and accepts own feelings as valid.

## Outcomes over time:

Has a sense of growth through this experience.

Has a sense of mastery or control.



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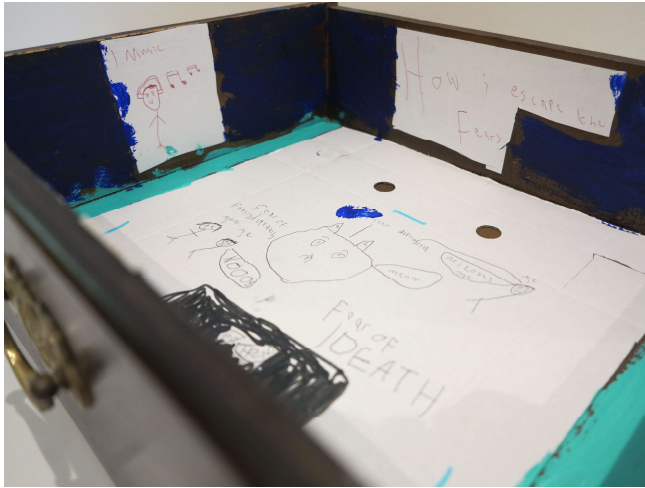
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# Final *words* from the artists

**A / F(14)** - *"I didn't really want to make my box personal so I had this idea that I would use a lock that would symbolise a person (me) and the key represented a memory or a smell or something that reminds you of someone that you've lost. When the key goes into the lock it is like you remembering a feeling or a memory and the wings (which have words written on them) are all the feelings you get from the memories."*



**E / F(16)** - *"I didn't manage to finish my box the way I wanted... My box is all about my dad. It struck me that in life you don't always get to finish and my dad's life was like that – he finished before he was meant to. The twig is from a Rowan tree it's a kind of memorial"*

**S / M(12)** - *"This is my past and my fears. I can tell people about my past but not my fears... I keep these inside."*

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With huge respect and thanks to all the young people who had the courage to share their experiences even when their words weren't enough.

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