

Building community capacity in end-of-life care and bereavement: An initial evaluation of bereavement training for schools

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Introduction

Engaging communities to change attitudes and develop capacity in end-of-life care and bereavement is emphasised in recent UK policy (Scottish Government 2008, Department of Health 2008). Consequently, a PhD study, funded by Strathcarron Hospice, was undertaken using action research to explore work between the Hospice and school communities. Bereavement training was identified as an area of collaboration and a two hour workshop was designed and piloted to:

- Assist school staff to develop skills, knowledge and confidence in engaging and supporting children experiencing bereavement in school;
- Promote a culture within the school where the needs of bereaved children are acknowledged and embraced.

Methods

- Two workshops were delivered to 47 staff at two primary schools in Forth Valley.
- Questionnaires were administered pre and post workshop to identify learning needs and measure confidence (self efficacy) levels in relation to recognising and responding to bereavement in school.
- Thirty-four pre workshop and Forty post workshop questionnaires were completed.
- Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were collated and thematically analysed.

Main Evaluation Findings

Pre-workshop 48% acknowledged they currently provide support to bereaved children with 12% of participants identifying that their experience was limited. Whilst a lack of confidence in relation to consent from guardians, and the impact of different faiths was raised, overall learning needs focused on understanding grief reactions and strategies for bereavement support with emphasis on a school wide approach.

Post workshop, 98% of participants rated the training as good or excellent in terms of relevance to their role. Specific Learning included:

- Appropriate language to use (65%)
- Strategies and approaches supporting bereaved children (57%)
- The importance of acknowledging bereavement with children (29%)
- Managing emotion (27%)
- The importance of being prepared for a child returning to school (19%)
- Grief reactions in children (12%)
- Managing special days (e.g. Mothers Day) (8.5%)
- The importance of the school showing support to the family (6%)

There was a significant upward trend in all confidence domains compared with pre-workshop scores (see table one).

Table One: Confidence Domains

Confidence domains		High	Average	Low	Not recorded
1. Recognising the support needs of bereaved children within the school	Pre	12%	55%	21%	12%
	Post	72.5%	27.5%		
2. Acknowledging that someone has died with a child	Pre	30%	46%	18%	6%
	Post	80%	20%		
3. Responding/talking to children about their grief feelings	Pre	30%	49%	15%	6%
	Post	72.5%	27.5%		
4. Recognising your own emotions and seeking support when needed	Pre	24%	48%	19%	9%
	Post	65%	32%		3%
5. Talking to parents/guardians about the support needs of children	Pre	12%	64%	15%	9%
	Post	57.5%	32.5%	10%	
6. Challenging the views of others when there are gaps in support	Pre	9%	39%	43%	9%
	Post	41%	56%		3%

Discussion

The training met the learning needs identified by participants and positively influenced confidence in engaging with childhood bereavement in school. The pre workshop questionnaire identified existing awareness of the role of school staff in providing bereavement support coupled with anxiety surrounding the practicalities and skills involved. Confidence increased after participating in the training particularly around recognising, acknowledging and responding to bereavement. Confidence in talking to guardians about bereavement and challenging others where there is a lack of support only slightly improved, suggesting more attention may need to be given to these aspects.

Recommendations/Future Developments

This training suggests that the skills of Hospice staff are well placed to facilitate such work and develop community capacity in bereavement support. Strathcarron Hospice plans to roll out this model of training (free) to all schools in Forth Valley and North Lanarkshire. It is recommended that longitudinal evaluation is carried out to explore the impact of the training in the longer term.

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