

WHAT IMPACT DOES CHILD BEREAVEMENT HAVE ON FUTURE Adulthood?

A thought-provoking film - *How the pain of childhood grief can spur success* - released by the BBC in November, has further highlighted issues around the long term impact of childhood bereavement, both positive and negative, and how it can shape the long term future of the children concerned.

The film is full of fantastic examples of notable leaders, including former US President Barak Obama and the late South African President Nelson Mandela, who suffered the loss of a parent in childhood and went on to forge a positive future in a role where they were able to make a difference in the lives of other people.

It also reveals that, for many people, the impact of the loss is felt just as keenly in adulthood as the day it happened. On his deathbed, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked one of his aides if he had "done enough". The aide highlighted his role in achieving world peace and his leadership of the country during war time - but Churchill simply added "...

enough to make my father proud?" However, while focused mainly on those who have turned their experience into something positive, the film also points out that these leaders are largely the exception, not the norm, and that many more young people struggle to recover from the loss of someone close to them, suffering mental health issues, turning to crime or simply suffering from unresolved grief for the rest of their lives.

Research undertaken in 2018, by child bereavement charity Winston's Wish, into the topic of adults bereaved in childhood revealed an enormity of unresolved grief in adults, with people in their 80s and 90s reporting how they had never come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

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My childhood ended on that day because I needed to look after myself. Everything changed at home, Dad didn't know how to look after me and struggled to cope with his grief too. I was moving from primary school to senior school and there was no support for children like me there.



NAFD President
David Barrington

One of the adults they interviewed, Kate, talked about the lack of support she had experienced: "We had no idea how to deal with the pain and the horror of my mother's death, nor the preceding years of tortuous treatment. We closed down; my brothers moved away, and my father barely spoke to me. Within a year I was self harming. I took myself to the GP (without my father's knowledge) and was prescribed antidepressants. I was not monitored while taking these and regularly took small overdoses."

The film not only highlights the importance of the work done by charities such as Winston's Wish, Child Bereavement UK, Nelson's Journey, Maggie's Centres, Cruse Bereavement Care and Jigsaw South East (to name but a few), but also illustrates the need to help young people to feel more comfortable talking about death generally, to help them build an emotional vocabulary that will better enable them to understand and process their feelings should they become one of the thousands of young people in the UK every year that loses a member of their immediate family.

It may also have benefits in shifting societal attitudes to death more generally. This is something the NAFD has campaigned about over the last 18 months and has made representations on to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) as part of its market investigation. The Association believes that not only is there a profound impact on those children directly affected by loss but, as a society, we are too reticent to confront our mortality, thereby compounding the problems we see in people's lack of planning for our eventual funerals. It also believes that a healthier attitude towards discussing death could make a significant positive impact on many of the issues highlighted by the CMA in its market study report.

Following a workshop on the subject and representations to the Department for Education on the inclusion of bereavement in the curriculum, NAFD Past President Abi Pattenden also recently spoke on the subject at the 14th Death Dying and Disposal Conference organised by the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath. You can read more about her experience in the October edition of this magazine.

Children's Commissioner for the UK and former Great Ormond Street paediatrician, Sir Al Aynsley-Green, is interviewed in the



BBC film and was also involved in the work by Winston's Wish. He has long believed that, as bereavement is a fundamental human experience, "it's time we realised that children and young people are all too frequently exposed, unsupported, to the impact of grief".

Talking to The Independent more than a decade ago about the loss of his own father at the age of 10, he said: "I have come to understand the real impact as I've grown older, and I think probably a lot of the reactions I had have been sublimated or repressed in my thinking".

However, he adds: "There was one very important consequence of that bereavement, which is that I decided at the age of 10 I wanted to be a doctor. It changed my whole way of thinking as a child: I wanted to stop other people dying. It was a very child-like and childish feeling, but it certainly transformed my life."

In last month's edition of *Funeral Director Monthly*, we revealed some supplier firms to the profession that were established following an experience of loss. Abi Pattenden firmly believes that the same is true of funeral directors, with many inspired to enter the profession, or whose approach to funeral directing is shaped by their experience of bereavement as a child.

During the focus group last year, Abi shared the personal experience of watching a school friend suffer the loss of her father and living with the regret, as an adult, that she hadn't been able to support her through it. Said Abi: "When my school friend's dad died

unexpectedly in year 8 we were not given any support, either in what questions this might raise about the mortality of ourselves and our families or even, more importantly, in how to help her. I have always been ashamed that we felt awkward and didn't know how to communicate with her and, as a result, she was ostracised and eventually stopped attending school.

"I now understand that children who are bereaved often have experiences like these and I so wish that there was a proactive curriculum in place in schools which would cover loss, death and bereavement. I am sure that this would help today's children when they inevitably encounter loss, whenever it occurs, so if they are fortunate enough to not have this experience when young, they will still be able to benefit from it later in life."

Also sharing his story at the focus group was current NAFD President David Barrington, whose mum died when he was a boy - something, he said, which shapes the way he cares for bereaved people now that he is a funeral director and was instrumental in his decision to leave his previous career in IT and turn his family carriage masters business into a funeral firm.

"My mum died when I was 11 years old, she was my world and I was hers," said David. "It made me tough emotionally and gave me the resilience to cope with pretty much anything that was thrown at me. Let's face it, nothing worse could happen. I was very guarded, which only really softened when Claire and I had children.

"I also hope that I can understand how other people feel when they are grieving, because it never goes away. It's been 40 years since she died and still hurts. A day doesn't go by that I don't think of her and how proud she would have been to meet Claire, Nell and Anna and see how we've done."

The NAFD is continuing to raise awareness of this issue, wherever possible, and is planning a campaign to coincide with Dying Matters Week 2020.

Find out more

You can watch the BBC video here:

<https://www.bbc.com/ideas/videos/how-the-pain-of-childhood-grief-can-spur-success/p07t1d44>

You can find out more about the NAFD's work to highlight the need for bereavement to be covered by the National Curriculum by visiting this page on the NAFD website:

<https://nafd.org.uk/2018/09/19/educating-tomorrows-bereaved-people-today/>

FACTS ABOUT *Child Bereavement*

- A child loses a parent through death every **22 minutes**
- **1 in 29 children** are bereaved of a parent, brother or sister
- **78% of 11-16-year-olds** experience at least one of their close relatives or friends dying

