



# CHILDREN'S GRIEF PROJECT

*"Making a difference in the lives  
of children and young people affected by loss"*



Recipient of Volunteer Ireland  
Award 2012



Recipient of Pride of Ireland  
Lidl Local Hero Award 2014



Recipient of Macalla  
2016 Award



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## Introduction

The Children's Grief Centre was founded in 2009 by Sr. Helen Culhane and a support group of interested individuals with backgrounds in social work, general practice, psychiatry, and education to provide support to children and young people, affected by loss through death, separation or divorce. The Centre provides a space and place for children to explore their experiences of loss associated with bereavement and parental separation. It provides a safe, non-judgmental environment where grieving children and teenagers can express what they feel and learn that they are not alone. In addition, the Centre strives to raise awareness in the community about grieving as an important part of life that is essential to an individual's on-going growth and development.

The Children's Grief Centre provides a place where children and young people can come to begin the process of healing with the support of friends, families and trained volunteers. The service is located in Westbourne, Ashbourne Avenue, SCR, Limerick.

All services are offered free of charge to children and young people and are available for as long as they need them.



*“The Pain of Children is so distressing that it is very much easier to devote our energies to working around them than to working directly with them”*  
(Hopkirk 1998)

## Children & Grief

The demographic profile of families in Ireland has changed substantially over the past few decades and many more children than ever before are experiencing the loss of a parent from the family home, primarily through parental separation. Figures from the 2011 Census indicated that 19% of children are living in households headed by a single parent (Central Statistics Office, 2012a) and in fact the highest rate of marital breakdown occurred in Limerick city (Central Statistics Office, 2012b). Thus, experiences of loss and bereavement are common among the population of children and young people.

The loss of a parent, either through parental death or separation, is one of the most fundamental losses that a child can face, changing the core of the child's existence (Worden, 1996). While children can vary in their emotional and behavioural responses at the time of loss, their reactions are strongly influenced by those of others around them. While the majority of children manage these tasks of grieving in a healthy manner, appropriately one-third of children may exhibit risk for high levels of emotional and behavioural problems, during the first two years after the bereavement (Worden, 1996).

Loss through parental separation, which occurs more commonly, shares some features with loss through parental death, but is distinct in important ways also. As outlined by Worden (1996), when parents separate, it can be difficult for children to believe in the permanence of the situation and may entertain fantasies of re-union, and what they can do to facilitate re-union. Thus, among children whose parents separate, hopes for a reunited family may result in the loss not being made real and so mourning can be difficult. Due to possible ongoing conflicts between parents, children may not receive support in mourning for the parent who has left the family home – the child may not find others with whom to share their grief or they may not be encouraged to grieve. Furthermore, community support is typically more available to families following death than divorce, and the loss inherent in a family undergoing divorce is rarely acknowledged in the same way as when a family is bereaved (Worden, 1996).

While experiences of loss are inevitable in life, the way in which children adapt to loss is to a great extent dependent upon how those around the child support him or her in the grieving process. Among the benefits of formal services perceived by the children and young people were being listened to and understood. Services helped children to better understand their situation and normalised their experiences as they realised that other children shared common experiences.

## The Services Provided

Alongside Sr. Helen, who works full-time on the project, approximately ten trained part-time volunteers provide sessions for children and their parents.

In the majority of cases, children are brought to the service by their parents. In the first session, the parent(s) and child meet with Helen or one of the volunteers, in order to establish reasons for the referral, as well as to gain an insight into where the parent is at in terms of their own grief process pertaining to the separation or loss. Subsequently, the child is met with on an individual basis, although they are always accompanied to the service by a parent/guardian who waits in a separate room. Children's and young people's expression of emotion is facilitated in a number of ways appropriate to their developmental stage and wishes – through talking, as well as through creation and play, including the use of paint, music, workbooks, clay, games and storybooks.

On average, children attend three to five one-hour sessions, although this varies depending upon the complexity of the case and the individual needs of the child. They can attend for as many sessions as they feel they need and are invited back for a follow-up three or four months after the final session. In addition to direct work with children and families, Sr. Helen also engages with schools and community groups in order to provide education and information about bereavement and grief.

## Children's Grief Centre – Profile of Children who use the Service

To date the Children's Grief Centre has seen 900 children avail of its services, with a current waiting list of 120. The children range in age from 4 years to 18 years of age. Of the children and young people who attend for support, 70% are attending due to marital breakdown and 30% due to bereavement.

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### Case Study 1: Bereavement

Tom attended the Children's Grief Centre when he was six years old following his father's death. In school he had become withdrawn but his grades had remained good. He had become aggressive towards his peers and uncooperative at home.

In the first session Tom's support worker asked him why his mum had brought him to the Children's Grief Centre. He appeared nervous and said: "To talk about what is going on in my head." In page six of the workbook Tom read:

'Sometimes love hurts and it hurts when someone you love goes away. It hurts a lot when someone you love dies. Draw a picture of how love hurts.'

Tom shared: "I feel the hurt in my heart and what hurt most is that dad died". Tom drew his heart.

As Tom looked at his drawing, the support worker asked him what he was feeling. He replied: "I am 'heart braking'. Can I write on my heart"? He wrote: "Sad, extremed, upset, angry, shocked, patience, terrible, not alive, anxious, and unhappy". Tom explained each of the feelings. He described sad: "Do you know how you feel happy when you are alive and not sad? I miss dad he was good to me. I feel not alive when I miss dad. When I'm sad I feel not alive. "In explaining 'extremed', he extended his arms and said: "I felt extremed because I felt shocked and upset. I feel shocked dad died so suddenly and so young. My dad was only forty-two. I feel terrible myself."



At the last session the support worker asked Tom to complete an evaluation sheet. What he found most helpful: "Talking about the person. I got used to it and it helped me to talk about it with my family."

What did you most like about coming to the Centre? "I liked writing about my dad. Helen helped me by saying it was OK to cry."

Did the sessions make any difference in your Life? If so, can you describe the difference? "The sessions made a difference to me, I am not as worried as I used to be." Any other comments? "Thank you for helping me."

At the end of each session Tom named his feelings. "I am happy. I am finding it helpful coming in here. You are helping me to understand what happened. I'm happy you are helping me a bit. I learn what is going on. I sort things out. I understand my dad is not alive. I was sad when I started here but I now feel good. I am able to get my words out."

The most powerful validation of the work was when Tom shared: "I am able to get my words out."





## Case study 2: Separation

Mary was four years old when her parents separated and she attended the Children's Grief Centre when she was 17 years old. In the first session she shared that she was sad since she was seven years old and has "struggled with her feelings since then." She shared the difficulties she experienced when her parents' teacher's meetings were held. In asking her mother to attend, she would reply, "Is he coming?" In asking her dad to attend he would reply, "Is she coming?" She recalled in detail her parents' passing 'comments' about each other which hurt her deeply to the present day. Her biggest worry was that "it will never stop – the nasty comments." She explained, "anything said to me in the last seven years is still with me and still upsets me. I feel trapped. I can't leave. I can't get away from it. I feel very tense."

In the last session Mary talked about the benefits of attending the Children's Grief Centre. In her feedback she wrote:

"The sessions have made a huge difference in my life. Being able to talk freely and openly in a safe environment without judgement. Having the power to choose the time and date of the appointments. Being able to talk to someone completely neutral and so understanding.

After the support worker met my parents both were able to form an amicable relationship after years of a very strained one, which was very difficult for me and was the main reason of my upset."



## Fundraising Aims & Objectives

The Sisters of Mercy to date have generously funded the annual running costs of the Children's Grief Centre. However due to our dramatically increased waiting list, we need to pay support workers to undertake additional hours and help us to reduce the waiting list. The increasing waiting lists confirm the increasing need for this service in society today and access to it for our children is and will protect and prepare the adults of society in the future.

In order to meet our fundraising needs we are approaching local organisations we hope will support our objective. Any donations (bank account details provided below) would be greatly appreciated. Or if your organisation would prefer to organise a fundraising event we enclose a fundraising chart which might give you some ideas!

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## Bank Details:

**Account Name:** Children's Grief Project

**Address:** 125, O'Connell Street, Limerick

**IBAN:** IE40 BOFI 9043 1728 9797 08

**Account Number:** 28979708

**Branch Code:** 90-43-09



## Children's Testimonials \*

"I found that talking about it really helped with my anger and my sadness".

"That I got to talk about my feelings and no one else's  
instead of keeping them bottled up".

"I am not getting upset anymore, I can talk now instead of crying".

"I was sad about the separation and I learnt I don't have to be".



## Parent's Testimonials \*

"Mary's (support worker) soft gentle manner and the way she really listens to what my son was trying to express, she had the experience and ability to help him understand and express his feelings/emotions in a safe and fun environment".

"It was great for my daughter to be able to speak and confide in someone other than a parent as she is not very open to sharing her feelings".

"Kevin was very upset at the start before he attended and was very unhappy. After a couple of weeks he was much more content and happy.



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