Evaluation of the Children's Grief Project

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Introduction

The Children's Grief Project was established in 2009 in Limerick. The mission of the project is to provide support to children, young people (aged 4-18 years) and their families, affected by loss through death, separation or divorce. The project serves the community of Limerick, although families from neighbouring counties of Tipperary and Clare have also availed of the service. The programme was developed through the work of Sister Helen Culhane, a trained social worker with experience working in bereavement settings. The Project provides a space and place for children to explore their experiences of loss associated with bereavement and parental separation. 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 and in the first session, the parent(s) and child meet with Sr. 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 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. Counselling is not provided, but a listening ear. 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.

In the final session, parents and children are invited to complete evaluation sheets, so that children's and young people's and their parents' perspectives on the Children's Grief Project can be ascertained. Evaluation forms from September 2011 to December 2015 were included in the analysis presented in this report.

Five questions are asked of the children:

1.   What did you find helpful?
2.   What did you find unhelpful?
3.   What did you like most about coming to the Children's Grief Project?
4.   Did the sessions make any difference in your life (if so, can you describe the difference?)
5.   What would you change?

Seven questions are asked of the parents:

1.   Overall how satisfied are you with the service?
2.   What was most helpful about the service?
3.   What was least helpful about the project?
4.   Do you feel the service is well organised?
5.   Do you feel the service is friendly, helpful and accessible?

6. Do you feel the support you received helped you and your child understand and come to terms with your situation?
7. Have you noticed a difference in your child's behaviour? If so, what?

This report provides a summary of feedback obtained from parents and children who have attended the Children's Grief Project (from 2011 to 2015). Prior to outlining the findings, the next section considers the extent to which children in Ireland experience bereavement and very briefly discusses some international and Irish research related to children and parental separation and bereavement.

Children & Grief

As is the case in many Western countries, 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 their parent from the family home, primarily through parental separation. Figures from the most recent Census, conducted in 2011 indicated that 19% of children are living in households headed by a single parent (Central Statistics Office, 2012a), a figure which has remained stable since the previous Census in 2006. The proportion of children who find themselves in a single parent family due to the death of a parent has decreased over the decades, with data from Census 2006 indicating that 8% of single parent families arise as a result of the death of one parent (Fahey & Russell, 2001; Lunn, Fahey & Hannon, 2009). Between 1986 and 2006, there was a five-fold increase in the number of people who experienced marital breakdown (Lunn et al., 2009). In Census 2011, the highest rate of marital breakdown occurred in Limerick city (Central Statistics Office, 2012b). Findings from the Growing up in Ireland national study of children reported that by age 9, 43% of children had experienced the death of a close family member, 3% the death of a parent, 15% the divorce/separation of parents and 6% the death of a close friend (Williams et al., 2009). Thus, experiences of loss and bereavement are common among the population of children and young people.

Considerable research has documented the effect of parental absence and loss on children growing up and has concluded that children growing up in a single parent family on average tend to do less well than children who grow up in households with two parents continuously present (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). These children tend to do less well in school, and have higher levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties. While some of this difference may be accounted for by lower income levels among single parent families, other characteristics that differentiate single parent from two parent families may help us to understand why children in single parent families do less well on average. Among the reasons that appear to be important are: children's exposure to conflict between parents, higher levels of parental stress and depression, poor parenting, disrupted attachment with the parent who is no longer present and experiences of loss.

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. According to Worden (1996), there are four tasks involved in the grief process for children following parental death: 1. to accept the reality of the loss; 2. to experience the pain or emotional aspects of the loss; 3. to adjust to an environment in which the parental figure is missing; and 4. to relocate the deceased person within one's life to remember the person. 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 of siblings or grandparents through death has received relatively less attention in the literature than loss of parents. Death of a grandparent is often the first loss encountered by children, and the reactions of those around the child are important in helping the child deal with their grief. According to Corey (2010), children younger than 8 or 9 years have limited understanding of death, and typical mourning behaviours for young children may include: complaints of stomach-aches or headaches

with no known cause, engagement in normal play behaviour, punctuated by sporadic episodes of crying, regression to an earlier stage of development, changes in typical patterns of behaviour (e.g. previously quiet children becoming aggressive, previously aggressive children becoming withdrawn). Corey also notes that young children may have difficulty telling their friends, and peers who may not know what to say may withdraw from socialising with the child.

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. In contrast, fantasies of re-union are less likely among children who have been bereaved through death of a parent, especially among children who have developed an understanding of death as permanent and irreversible. 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).

The tendency of children to blame themselves is more common following parental divorce than after parental death – in one study of 121 children age 6 to 12 years, at 6 months after their parents' separation, one-third of children felt that they were to blame; at 18 months after the separation, this had declined to one-fifth of the children (Healy, Stewart & Copeland, 1993). In contrast, Worden (1996) reported less frequent self-blame among children whose parent had died; 5% to 7% of children reported feelings of self-blame at 4 months and 1 year following the death of their parent, respectively. Divorce is also a matter of choice and can leave a child feeling abandoned and angry to a greater extent than when a death occurs, which is usually not the choice of the person who died. In their study of the experiences of 60 children and adolescents in Ireland whose parents had separated, Hogan, Halpenny and Greene (2002) found that almost half of the children felt angry and confused about their parents' separation.

In many situations of divorce, ongoing conflict between parents may continue for some time, and children may feel caught in the middle and feel that they must take sides between parents (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). In one large scale study of families followed over many years (the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage), Hetherington and colleagues found that children in high-conflict families were less well-adjusted and parents engaged in less effective parenting, than in low-conflict families. Looking specifically at the families where parents separated, the researchers found that children in these separated families overall did less well than the children whose parents stayed together, within the first two years after the separation. However, after two years, children whose parents separated and were in low conflict were better off than the children in high-conflict families where parents had stayed together, but it was the children from separated families where inter-parental conflict remained high who fared worse of all (Hetherington, 1999). The researchers concluded that children can adjust well to parental separation as long as the separation is accompanied by reduced levels of conflict between parents.

Parental separation is also a time of conflicted loyalties – children may feel pulled by love and loyalty in the direction of both parents. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) reported that two thirds of separated parents in their research openly competed for their children's allegiances, and even when this did not occur explicitly, children still experienced divided loyalties. Smart, Neale and Wade (2001) also documented experiences of divided loyalties and how children whose parents had separated were sometimes cast in the role as allies with one parent or another, an experience which they concluded was damaging for children involved.

Together, the aforementioned research highlights that loss of a loved one, through death or separation, can be a challenging and sometimes traumatic event experienced by a significant minority of children and young people. 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. While family, teachers and peers may support children through such times, formal support services, such as those offered by the Children's Grief Project may also have an important role to play. Little research to date has considered the role of formal support services in supporting children through bereavement and loss in the Irish context. In their study of Irish children's experiences of parental separation and divorce, Hogan et al. (2002) reported that two-thirds of the children had accessed support from a formal service, including Rainbows, Teen Between, and private counselling services. Among the benefits of the 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. Barriers to support access were also identified, including a perception that parental separation was a private family matter and should be dealt with in the family. The data presented in the following sections represents children's and parents' perspectives on the services and support offered in the Children's Grief Project.

Children's Grief Project – Profile of Parents and Children who use the Service

Between the establishment of the Project in September 2010 and the end of 2015, a total of 686 children and their families have attended the service. Almost two-thirds of the children (444; 65%) attended due to the separation of their parents, with the remaining children attending due to bereavement. A total of 5064 hours of support have been provided to children, with the number of hours increasing each year. Almost 700 hours of support (673) in total have been provided to adults. Comparing the first period of operation September 2010- December 2011 (covering 16 months) to the most recent calendar year of 2015, almost three times as many hours of support were offered to children in 2015 and almost twice as many hours of support were offered to parents/guardians.

Table 1 provides details about the children and their parents who have attended the service.

Table 1: Demographic Information about Attendees at the Children's Grief Project

	September 2010- December 2011	January 2012- December 2012	January 2013- December 2013	January 2014- December 2014	January 2015- December 2015
Number of children	154	135	107	150	140
Gender of child (% and number of boys)	48% (74)	55% (74)	47% (50)	51% (77)	45% (63)
Mean age of children in years (standard deviation)	10.62 (3.69)	10.13 (3.55)	10.50 (3.49)	9.99 (3.44)	10.26 (3.67)
Reasons for Attending					
Bereavement	36%	31%	36%	37%	32%
Separation	60%	69%	64%	63%	68%
Other (including sibling illness)	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Source of Referral					
Parents	70%	96%	93%	95%	87%
School	14%	4%	2%	1%	4%
Other, including GP, HSE	16%	0%	5%	4%	9%
Hours to children	510	890	902	1280	1482
Hours to adults	102	50	121	206	194
Geographical Area of Referral					
Limerick	82%	80%	80%	76%	83%
Tipperary	5%	9%	13%	13%	11%
Clare	12%	11%	7%	8%	6%
Other	1%	0%	0%	3%	1%

The children who attended the service ranged in age from 3 to 18 years, with an average of 10.30 years (standard deviation 3.58). Three quarters of the children who attended the service were aged 13 or younger, and half of the children were aged 10 or younger. Roughly equal numbers of boys and girls attended the service. In the majority of cases, children were referred to the service by their parent and came from the Limerick area.

Evaluations were completed and available for analysis from the period September 2011 to December 2015 – out of a total of 570 families, 189 children and 209 parents/guardians completed evaluation forms. This represents response rates of 33% for children and approximately 37% for parents/guardians (in a small number of cases two parents per family may have completed an evaluation form).

Table 2: Number of evaluation forms completed by children and parents per year

	Sept 2011-December 2012	January 2013-December 2013	January 2014-December 2014	January 2015-December 2015*
Total number of children	173	107	150	140
Number of evaluations by children	80	35	30	44
Number of evaluations by parents	93	32	39	45

* Note: Not all families included in the total for 2015 would have been invited to complete an evaluation form, as they may not be finished attending the service.

In the sections that follow, children's and parents' responses to the questions are presented. Sample quotations are provided to illustrate the nature of responses.

Children's Perspectives on the Children's Grief Project

Evaluation forms were available for a total of 189 children and young people, although not all children responded to every question.

Perceptions on what children found helpful

A total of 187 children responded to this question. The key response noted by children (n = 95; 51%) was that their attendance at the service provided them with an opportunity to talk their feelings. Being able to talk made children feel better:

> *"That I could discuss whatever I wanted to talk about"*.

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

> *"That I was able to talk about what happened a bit easier and that once I talked about it I felt better"*.

> *"I found that talking to someone instead of holding it in was helpful"*.

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

> *"Talking and getting a lot out. Being around positive people. When you talk about things you're not being judged. What you talk about is confidential and is talked about to no one"*.

> *"The way you didn't fire questions at me, you let me talk and then added bits of information which made me understand why I was upset. The feelings sheet helped me to realise there was nothing wrong with how I was feeling. I have been doing the deep breathing to help me stay [calm]"*.

> *"I found it helpful that I could just talk to someone who was more mature and experienced who I could just trust and who was there just to listen and give advice when needed"*.

Children also noted that feeling understood and being asked about their feelings were helpful for them: *"Knowing someone was asking how you are and helping you a lot and being so nice"*; *"I found the talking really helpful because someone understands"*. For example, one child reflected a realisation that *"It's ok to cry"*. Through talking children achieved a better understanding of what had happened; for example, two children reported a realisation that their parents' separation/fathers' departure was not their fault: *"I know that it wasn't my fault my parents broke up"*. Another child stated: *"When I found most helpful was understanding more about bipolar"*. Through talking, children could achieve a deeper understanding of their situation and accept what had happened: *"Talking to someone, it was easier to accept what was happening"*; *"I feel I got over my mum and dad splitting up"*.

Thirty-three children (18%) specifically mentioned the workbook being helpful or referred to activities, such as colouring, drawing, clay work and playing as helpful. One child noted that it was helpful to have met other children in a similar situation. Eight children noted improved relationships in their families or improvements in their own behaviour. For example, one child was less anxious

about spending time with his/her father, two children reported less conflict at home, and another child now refused to act as a go-between for her parents: *"Much more confident. That I am able to tell my mum and dad I don't want to talk about any of them when I am with them"*. The remaining children made general statements about the project, mentioning for example that they felt better or happier, or that they found the project helpful.

Perceptions on what children found unhelpful

This question was specifically asked in the evaluations from 2013 onwards and so was asked of 109 children. Of these, only 8 children suggested something that they found unhelpful, with the remaining children either stating that there was nothing that was unhelpful, or not responding to the question. Two children indicated that it was unhelpful to have certain memories or realisations evoked: *"it sometimes reminded me of what happened"*; *"I found talking too much about my grandparents unhelpful because then I realised I wasn't going to have any more memories with them"*. Three children did not like specific activities such as role play with toys, or meditating, and one child noted that coming to the project meant that other activities were interrupted. Two children mentioned things that they did not like that did not pertain to the service. It should be noted that in response to other questions, all 8 children did identify things that they liked about the project and benefits of attending the service.

Perceptions on what children liked most about coming to the service

Children frequently referred to being able to talk to somebody and feeling listened to – this was mentioned by 61 of the children: *"It was easy to talk openly"*.

> *"The opportunity to share and unload worries or problems. Being able to talk to someone completely neutral and understanding"*.

> *""It was a safe place to talk. No one knew your business. The person was so nice and helpful and I really enjoyed it a lot"*.

> *"The thing that I most liked about coming here is talking about how I feel after the separation"*.

> *"How easy it was talking to the counsellor. The very good advice given by the counsellor. Also, how comfortable I felt talking about my grief to the counsellor"*.

> *"That I can actually talk to somebody about all my feelings"*.

> *"It is very helpful and helps me understand stuff. I was able to talk about my thoughts"*.

A minority of children talked about the safety they felt in opening up, trust they had developed with the project worker, and how they were assured of confidentiality: *"Being able to talk to them and being able to trust them"*. Children also reflected that they felt listened to and understood:

> *"I found coming was good because [project worker] was helpful and understood"*.

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> *"[Project worker] helped me with my problems and she made my life easier".*

> *"The way I could be open and honest with you without worrying about upsetting you. I felt like I could sit back, take time, and talk without being forced to say anything. All of your advice is treasured and I use it every day. I feel more happy now".*

A similar number of children (63) referred to the opportunity to do activities such as playing, art work or completing the workbook. Children referred to having fun, and a small number of children mentioned getting time off school: *"I liked playing with the sandbox and the toys"; "We played, we did fun stuff, painting, clay and stories"; "I liked the soft ball and the sand for making me feel a lot better". "I always had lots of fun and I got lots of time off school. Love coming to the Children's Grief Project; "I liked the workbook as it was a fun way to release feelings".*

A small number of children identified benefits they perceived from attending the service, such as feeling less sad, and feeling that they were getting help with their problems : *"She made my life easier"; "Instead of crying I'm building up happiness"; "It made me feel better. I was upset when I came first".* A minority mentioned the homely atmosphere and the project worker with whom they specifically worked: *"I liked the fact that the people and atmosphere was so warm and inviting"; "I liked the fact that the building and rooms felt calm and very peaceful and they felt very homely"; "The lady I worked with was warm and friendly".*

Perceptions on the difference that the sessions made in their life

Of the 177 children who responded to this question, 165 (93%) indicated that the sessions had made positive difference in their lives. Two children indicated that they were not sure or that the sessions *"kind of"* made a difference, while 10 children indicated that it made no difference: *"no, not really, my parents are still fighting".*

The key differences that were identified by the children included reduced negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear and sadness; and increased positive emotions, such as happiness and reassurance. For example, 14 children noted specifically that attending the project meant that they did not feel as upset or sad:

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

> *"It helped me when I was sad, down, alone and it has made me happier".*

> *"Yes I was very sad but now I am only a tiny bit sad".*

> *"I don't cry anymore. It helped me to stop stammering".*

> *"Going to the sessions removed some of the sadness from my life and made me feel better".*

> *"I don't feel as down in myself anymore and my mood has improved".*

A further 39 children reported that they felt happier or better as a result of attending the service: *"I feel more happy and relieved"; "They made me feel a lot more positive towards life and made me feel happier in my life".*

Children also described feeling less stressed and less angry: *"My temper went down and I don't react so quickly"*; *"I don't hit or kick"*. Psychosomatic symptoms also decreased for a small number of children: *"I stopped getting problems in my tummy"*: Children noted that they understood more about their situation, and felt reassured that somebody was there for them and understood their issues:

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

> *"The way I wouldn't talk about all the sad things at night and I could get better sleep and if I wanted to talk to someone, I knew [project worker] was there for me".*

> *"It made me think more about my feelings and knowing someone understood about losing someone".*

> *"I used to blame myself for family issues and beat myself up about it. But now I just accept it and leave it at that".*

> *"Yes as they showed me how to cope with grief and how to improve the relationship with my father."*

> *"Yes it made a big difference. I feel more at ease with [Family member's] death, now and even though some days I feel sad and miss him I understand that is normal. Now I am able to continue with my life and not be letting my sadness control how I feel, while still acknowledging it".*

A number of children mentioned increased contact with their fathers and his family: *"I got back in contact with my dad"*; *"Yes because it helped me to become closer to my daddy"*.

Children also reported that the sessions helped them to learn strategies for managing their feelings and situations:

> *"Before the sessions, I wouldn't say a word about my Grandad, now I do and I wouldn't go to the grave and now I do".*

> *"I am better able to sleep and tell my dad to stop when I didn't want to hear something".*

Perceptions on what children would change about the service

When asked what they would change about the service, 78 children explicitly stated that they would not change anything about the service: *"I wouldn't change anything as if anything was to change, I don't believe I would be walking out of here with a smile on my face, wanting to come back again"*; *"Nothing, I think that it is a great project and it does great work"*.

A very small minority of children noted specific things that they would change about the project (n = 9). One child noted that they would change having to wait for an appointment; while two children mentioned that they did not like having early morning appointments. One child noted that they would change the workbook, while another child noted that they did not like the books in the waiting room: *"I would like to change the grief books in the waiting room to magazines because it*

makes me annoyed seeing separation everywhere I go". Two teenagers noted that they would make the space more appealing to teenagers, while two children noted changes they would make to the toys and games. Unrelated to changes in the service, two children noted that they would change how open they were in the early sessions: *"I would open up more at the start"; "I would change not being so reluctant in the start"*. The remaining children did not respond to the question.

Parents'/Guardians' Perspectives on the Children's Grief Project

Data were available on a total of 209 parent evaluations. Parents were initially asked to indicate how satisfied they were overall with the service: 171 parents (82%) recorded that they were 'very satisfied', 11 parents (5%) were 'satisfied' and 25 parents (12%) did not respond to this question.

Perceptions on what was most helpful about the service

Twenty-seven parents did not respond to this question, while 182 parents provided a response. A minority of respondents simply referred to their overall satisfaction with the service, indicating that they found it helpful: *"I found the service overall very helpful"* and *"Everything was helpful and I am delighted with the help she gave my daughter"*; *"Support available at a difficult time of separation when most needed"*; *"The staff is helpful and friendly"; "It was very beneficial"*.

The majority of respondents (87; 48% who responded to this question) identified how the service provided *"a place to talk"* for their child; so that *"the children could talk to someone outside the family about the separation"*.

> *"[Project worker's] 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"*.

> *"The service has enabled [child] to express his feelings of loss in an open and supportive way with someone independent who understands where he is coming from"*.

> *"[My] daughter seemed to appreciate having a warm welcoming neutral place to discuss her feelings"*.

> *"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"*.

> *"My child had a place to talk [about] what was on his mind and had a very kind and understanding counsellor who worked through his needs"*.

> *"[Child] 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. I saw a big difference in him and he always looked forward to coming. He needed someone to talk to and knew it was confidential"*.

> *"It gave [Child] the space to talk about his dad without fear of upsetting anyone – it gave a voice to his feelings that he couldn't name and let him see he is not alone and it was normal"*.

> *"It was comforting to know and see [child] going in for a chat with someone he could trust in case he couldn't speak to me. I would hope he was able to get things off his chest"*.

As noted in the quotation above, parents frequently referred to the sense of trust that children had developed in the staff, which meant that children felt safe talking about their experiences and feelings: *"My son felt very safe here"*.

> *"It was a place [child] could come to and speak openly about things going on that he wouldn't talk to anyone else about and especially knowing that he could trust [project worker] one hundred percent".*

> *"My daughter learned to open up with her feelings. She trusted [project worker] to tell her things she couldn't say to me".*

> *"[Child] was given a safe place to talk about her feelings without being worried about upsetting mummy or daddy".*

Among the benefits of having a place to talk were that children seemed happier: *"my son seemed much happier in himself"; "she has come out of herself"; "he is not as affected by the breakup, he is a happy, confident child"*:

> *"[Child] has transformed to a much better child in each and every way only for [project worker]".*

> *"The service made my son feel so much happier and able to deal with his feelings".*

Parents also reflected that children were better able to make sense of and accept their situation: *"[Child] now knows that it's not his fault that his mother is not around"; "Getting [child] to understand and accept our separation, [child] is losing the fear and hurt with our situation".*

> *"It enhanced awareness of grief and separation for my two boys. They seemed to be at ease or acceptance with the separation between me and their mother".*

> *"[Child] is now more aware of his feeling, knows that the marriage broke up because of his dad's drinking and it is not his fault and he is much more confident and happy with life. He knows he is not responsible".*

> *"It helped my son come to terms with the situation and deal with it. It helped him to express the emotions he was bottling up inside and to be less aggressive towards me, and to be able to talk about how he was feeling".*

In addition, parents reflected how children were empowered to deal with ongoing issues:

> *"The help [project worker] gave [child] by letting her express her feelings openly and enabling her to address her Dad honestly. This service has been very helpful in introducing her Dad back into her life".*

> *"[Child] enjoyed the one to one time with [project worker]. She explained that she could talk to someone who was very nice and that it helped her to understand her mother's behaviour more. I feel she was empowered to know that her mother's sadness was not her responsibility to improve as I heard her explain this to her sisters"*

Thirty-five parents also referred to the non-judgement attitude, the empathy, understanding of grief, warmth and kindness that emanated from the staff in the service:

> *"What I found most helpful about the service was the level of understanding of grief from all the staff that I had the pleasure of speaking with. Each one, I felt could empathise with what I was feeling and I believe it was the same for my child".*

> *"The staff were very understanding and helpful. They talked to my son and myself through what was happening and at all times, the advice given was very helpful and they listened to what my son had to say".*

> *"The service [is] very organised. [Project worker] was a very warm person and welcoming. My daughter found her kind, gentle and loving. She felt she could really talk to her and express her feelings. We were really made welcome with everyone we met".*

> *"[Project worker's] care and guiding of [child] through the steps of her grief. Thank you for holding her so gently".*

Parents described how particular project workers were *"brilliant"* or how their child *"loved"* coming to see them.

Twelve parents referred to support *they* received as a result of their children attending the service;

> *"It gave both my daughter and I time to think, time to work on our relationship and time to talk together about our feelings rather than the usual school, homework, housework etc."*

> *"Being here allows both myself and [daughter] time to talk and think".*

> *"For me [the most helpful thing was] being able to explain our situation better to my son and learning to talk to him on a child's level".*

> *"The reassurance of hearing that the girls were doing ok and that what we were doing was the correct approach".*

By helping children to talk about their feelings, parents achieved a better understanding of their child's situation and better able to cope with their family situation:

> *"I found [child] opened up more to me and I feel I understand his pain more after sessions. Learning to be truthful with my son has brought my family closer I feel".*

> *"A real understanding of what our family has been through and is having to go through after bereavement. Attending the service provided a time set aside and focus on ourselves and acknowledge what we are feeling and that it is normal. It doesn't take away the issue but definitely armed us all with tools to cope and be there for each other".*

> *"I have received reassurance about [child] which makes more space for me to cope better. I feel reinforced by the feedback that we are handing the bereavement for all of our family well".*

Six parents also highlighted the promptness with which the service was provided: *"easy access to the service, staff very friendly and also I think my daughter has come on lot from this experience"*; *"It was very easy and quick to get the initial appointment"*. One parent highlighted how this contrasted with

the waiting lists within the HSE. Three parents also noted that it was helpful that the service was free of charge: *"The most helpful part was that it was based on donation"*.

Perceptions on what was least helpful about the service

Sixty nine parents/guardians did not respond specifically to this question, while 104 parents indicated that there was nothing about the service that they did not find helpful:

> *"Nothing at all, this has to be one of the best services around for young grieving children"*.

> *"I can't fault the service at all. [Project worker] was brilliant, very kind and caring and understanding of our emotions and feeling to both myself and my son"*.

The most substantive issue, but mentioned by only 8 parents (4%) indicated that communication between staff and parents could be improved in order to support parents in interacting with their children afterwards:

> *"I feel communication between the parent and [project worker] could be improved in terms of feedback from sessions....Feedback would be instrumental in my understanding of the great work done in sessions"*.

> *"[I] would prefer now and again to speak to the counsellor to review how the child is doing"*.

> *"Some feedback would be nice for me – but this isn't about me! My boy felt comfortable and happy coming here, that was the main thing"*.

> *"Not knowing the full extent of what [child] was bringing up in the meetings in order for me to work with [child] to help her more on her understanding of the changes in her little life"*.

> *"As a parent, I would have liked some feedback as to how I might best help my daughter with devising new strategies to cope and to get the opportunity to discuss with [project worker] if what I am doing is now helping"*.

Two parents indicated that not enough sessions were available – their involvement with the project ended too soon: *"I feel the three sessions is just not enough. It's only today on our third session that I feel [child] is more confident to talk about the break-up of me and his father, and now it's ended"*.

Six parents mentioned the challenge in organising appointments as volunteers only work on certain days: *"It would have been a lot easier for me if the appointments could have been on any day of the week, but that is only something very minor"*. Two parents referred to the location of the service: *"Location isn't on our doorstep but not a million miles away – that is the only thing I could possibly find fault with"*. Two parents referred to the waiting room – one mentioned the difficulty in having to share the room with an ex-spouse. Finally, the remaining parents referred to issues that did not pertain to the service at all.

Perceptions on the organisation of the service

Out of 209 parents, 184 parents (88%) responded to this question; with 25 parents not responding. The overwhelming response was that the service was very well organised, noted by 181 parents:

> *"It was very well organised from the initial meeting explaining the service to the pre-planned appointments, to the hour long appointments for [child], to the offer of as many appointments as necessary to help her. The service was second to none".*

Parents also commented on how they were made to feel welcome, how they did not feel judged, that it was private, and accommodating and flexible to suit parents and children.

> *"Very well organised – personable, kind, relaxing and welcoming. The waiting list was reasonable and I was given time to talk about my darling boy before we ever met [Project worker] or came to the service. Admin staff are always warm and inviting also".*

> *"Extremely, you were always greeted with a gentle and calm voice when you phone, there is no overlapping in appointments and usually there was no one else around which made every appointment more personal".*

> *"Yes. The service endeavoured to meet times appropriate for attendance of all of us. We always knew times for next appointment and were facilitated if change [was] requested".*

> *"Fantastically organised! Such an amazing atmosphere with amazing staff".*

> *"Yes, while it seems casual and informal it was obvious there was a definite methodology employed".*

> *"Yes very well organised, good initial information through the brochure, excellent one on one session with parents and appointment time planned well in advance. Good feedback too."*

Two parents suggested that more regular appointments might be possible if there were more volunteers available: *"Maybe if more volunteers were available it may be possible to see children more regularly"*. Another parent indicated that it would be useful to agree upon a certain number of sessions for the child, which could be followed by a review and more sessions if necessary.

Perceptions on friendliness, helpfulness, and accessibility of the service

Thirty parents did not respond to this question, and out of the 179 who did, all parents indicated that they found the service helpful, friendly and accessible. Parents referred specifically to the warmth and kindness of the staff and the welcome they received:

> *"I think you are made feel very welcome and it is a friendly place".*

> *"There is always a smile waiting for you when you walk through the door, and always waiting to help in any way possible".*

> *"Yes staff were very friendly, you were made welcome once you arrived and on departure…building very accessible and easy to locate."*

"Yes I could not complain about anything. I always met friendly, caring people on our visits. Very welcoming and the service is quite easy to contact and travel to".

One parent described the service as: *"[Her child's] little haven....she and I have always felt welcomed and cared for each time we have come here. The atmosphere is special, the attitude is always helpful and kind"*.

Another parent noted: *"My daughter who was 3 when she attended loved it and still describes it as 'that lovely place'"*. The warmth and helpfulness perceived by parents permeated throughout the service, from the physical surrounds to the manner of all staff: for example, one parent noted *"an air or calm and peace prevails about the building and surrounds"* while another parent remarked: *"it is very helpful from secretary to counsellors"*.

Perceptions on whether support received helped parent and child understand and come to terms with their situation

Thirty-four of the parents did not respond to this question. Of the 175 parents who did respond to this question, only one parent indicated that there had been no change in for them. One parent also noted that it was difficult to assess the impact of the service: *"[Child] does not discuss at any great length his feelings and concerns and if he got any relief from such"*.

However, the remaining parents (n = 173) indicated that the support which they received had helped them and their child understand and come to terms with their situation and experiences of loss. In relation to the child's understanding and acceptance of their situation, key elements appeared to be: having a space to express emotions, dealing with self-blame, normalising the child's emotions, helping the child to realise that their experience is not unique, and helping the child to distance him/herself from adult difficulties and problems.

Attending the service gave children the opportunity to express their feelings in a safe environment:

"They also were able to get angry, cry, feel sad and then talk about what the experience was like for them".

"I feel [child] has opened up and spoken to [project worker] about how he feels which means he is not keeping it all bottled up".

"Has really helped my son come out of himself and talk more openly".

"Definitely, it allowed my son to express his emotions in a safe environment with an experienced therapist. It allowed him to be himself and he left each session a little lighter".

Through this, children's feelings appeared to be less intense or they were less burdened by the feelings:

"She does not seem so emotional and angry about her mother's behaviour".

"[Child] is much better equipped to deal with our life now. [She] is not holding a huge pain anymore".

> *"She seems to have had a weight lifted from her"*.

For other children however, this process was still ongoing:

> *"I do believe [project worker's] work has helped [child] express and understand his situation better. However he still holds a lot of anger"*.

> *"[Child] is not very expressive and cannot communicate his problems very well. He does understand what's happening to some extent in our house but he is still innocent. I think he knows that his mummy and daddy are no longer happy with each other, but it is still confusing for him whilst we are all still living in the one house. I feel that it is a gradual process with [child] and everyday he seems to grow up a little and understand things better"*.

> *"I believe that my son will probably have to deal with his issues again when he is older but I do believe he has definitely confronted some challenges as he is much happier"*.

Parents also reflected that by expressing their feelings, children were better able to *"come to terms with the situation"*. They were enabled to make sense of their role in the situation and specifically to address any feelings of self-blame:

> *"It helped my son understand that what had/has happened was not his fault"*

> *"This openness seemed to allow the boys to move on from any blame or hurt they put on themselves as a result from me and mum separating"*.

> *"[Child] will never get over what happened, but hopefully support like this will help [him] to realise it was nothing he did wrong and he was not being singled out and punished for any previous actions that he may have done or not done. And also to face and realise the anger he is feeling is normal and to come to terms with it as much as possible"*.

> *"I think my child realises now there are things that happen that are out of her control and not her fault"*.

> *"I believe [child] was able to see that her parents being separated did not have anything to do with her. She did not need to feel responsible or ashamed"*.

Through expression of their emotions in a safe place, parents reflected that their children's difficult emotional experiences were validated. This enabled children to become comfortable in expressing what they were feeling and it helped them to understand that it was normal to feel the way they did:

> *"It has helped him to understand that his emotions are normal and not to hide them away"*.

> *"Made him aware that these feelings are normal and ok and to talk about them anytime he feels like it"*.

> *"I hope in time that they both will understand that it is ok to be upset and cry"*.

> *"[Child] was able to work through her emotions and feelings. So much better with a non-family member who made her realise that all that she is feeling is a normal process"*.

Alongside this, parents believed that children no longer viewed their own situation as unique and now understood that others experienced similar situations:

"She realises now she is not different to anyone".

"[She] has a better understand of why parents separate and that she is not alone in this situation".

"I feel my son has realised that myself and his father will separate and that this is not as bad as he initially thought. I think he realises that many other children are in the same situation".

A number of parents specifically reflected upon their child's increased ability to cope with ongoing difficult situations:

"She gained strength and confidence and as a result had better coping mechanisms to deal with her problems".

"She speaks openly with her sisters about their mother's anxious behaviour appearing to be able to look at it from a distance rather than [being] totally immersed in it. She appears more mature with regards to everything relating to the separation".

"Every day brings its own new issues but we are better able to cope with these now. [Child] gets very angry, cross and upset about our family situation, but she talks it through with me, she vents it now and this helps her to cope better".

In relation to parents' own understanding and acceptance of their situation, a number of parents also reflected that they had achieved a better understanding of their child's emotions:

"It has helped me to understand more how difficult it must have been especially in the initial weeks after [relative] died for [child] to express what she was feeling".

"It helped me to understand where my son was at and what he was feeling about all that has happened".

"I think we have both learned from the experience, my daughter is the eldest children in the family and she acted like a go between for her dad and I. I can now see that was not fair on her as well and now I feel she can ask me questions about the break-up, but before she was afraid to ask me in case it hurt her feelings".

"It helped me understand that my son kept a lot of things and questions in his head and that I need to talk and listen to him more, and that some of his behaviour is not about separation, it's about him being eight and an intelligent boy who has a strong mind".

Parents felt better equipped and more willing to talk to their children: *"I as a parent learned the importance of answering my child's questions about our separation honestly"; "I can explain better about death".*

"I felt more comfortable talking to my child about death instead of trying to avoid it. I learned to use my child as a guide when to talk about his [grandparent's] death. I learned

that children understand and can accept a lot more than we give them credit for. We often talk about our feelings and have become very open with each other" .

Parents also realised how their own grief was affecting their child: *"it helped both of us to see how we both were dealing [with] and handling the grief"; "I myself have decided to ring and make an appointment to speak to someone also".*

> *"I've learnt a lot about how everything affected me without realising it had done so. My feelings were getting muddled with [child's] feelings. I got great advice from [project worker] in addressing this and let [child] manage the relationship with her dad without my interference".*

Perceived differences in child's behaviour

Eight-five percent of parents (177 out of 209) responded to this question. With the exception of about ten parents, all parents identified an array of positive emotional and behavioural responses in their children. These responses were coded into one of five categories: (1) being calmer or more relaxed/less angry; (2) being more content and happier ;(3) being more confident and able to open up or talk more; (4) displaying less problematic behaviour and; (5) being more engaged in school, at home and in activities. Table 3 illustrates the frequency of each category of response and sample quotations. It should be noted that the majority of parents noted several improvements/changes in their children, and so the frequencies exceed the total number of parents.

Table 3: Parents' perceptions of differences in their child's behaviour

Difference in Child	Frequency	Sample Quotations
Calmer/less angry/more relaxed or at ease	54	"She appears less angry".
		"She is calm and easier".
		"[Child] is much calmer (he still has his moments) but in general he is not as angry with the world. He understands the situation a lot better now".
		"[Child] is much more relaxed around pick up times and in general, she is very relieved at the outcome she has achieved through her voice being heard".
		"When [child] came first she was very angry at the world but with each session she got calmer. Now I have my daughter back".
Happier/more content in himself/herself	65	"All in all [child] seems happier and more content in himself".
		"She has become gradually happier in herself and no longer reports that she does not feel like herself".
		"She is happier, more relaxed and more confident in herself".
		"I notice my son smiling every time he comes out of a session with [project worker] and he seems more calm and grounded".
		"She seems happier in herself, her nightmares have stopped and her separation anxiety has improved greatly".
Not afraid to communicate feelings or needs/opens up more/more confident or assertive	78	"He speaks more freely".
		"He is much better able to talk about things than before. He has learned a lot about opening up to people".
		"She seems to be voicing exactly what she wants".
		"When a situation escalates she is very clear in what she needs or wants".
		"Definitely has found her 'voice' and is more self-assured."
		"My daughter is not afraid to ask me things about the break-up. She is a lot more confident in herself now".
Less problematic behaviour	20	"Her attention seeking behaviour has reduced very significantly".
		"She doesn't moan or throw tantrums as much".
		"[Child] has stopped hitting and pinching me."
		"Less aggressive outbursts, way more relaxed about going from house to house and overall improved behaviour".
		"On the whole, [child] is more mature and thinking of consequences much more. More willing to co-operate, less tantrums at home".
		"He hasn't gotten in as much trouble at school".
		"He is not as angry as he would have been 13 months ago and we have had no tantrums for the past 5 months".
		"My child's behaviour has much improved, she is not afraid to speak out about her feelings now. She goes to the bathroom on her own again and she now eats her own meals without me having to spoon feed her."

Difference in Child	Frequency	Sample Quotations
More engaged at home, in school and in activities	**19**	"[Child's] behaviour has completely turned around, she is full of life again, it is so nice to see her laugh and smile and joke and be with her friends and be a 'normal' kid again".
		"She is not clingy now and happily goes to school, ballet and with her dad".
		"His school work has improved and all his teachers have commented on the change in him".
		"She doesn't dread going to school and is back playing sport".
		"Yes he is gone back to the happy-go-lucky kid that he was. He smiles more and he is gone back into his sports with willingness that had gone before this. He is now going back to playing in the green with his friends and he speaks to me more".
		"She now attends parties and play dates without me having to stay. She is happier going into school too".
		"I have definitely noticed a difference. He is more himself, enthusiastic about school and sport again".
		"[Child's] school work has improved ten-fold".

Notwithstanding these positive responses from the majority of parents, a small number of parents observed continued difficulties with their children: *"No I don't find any difference in my child's behaviour"*; *"I am still concerned with how [child] reacts to situations that irritate her"*; *"It is still up and down sometimes"*.

Concluding Comments

This report has provided an evaluation of the Children's Grief Project based on data provided by children and parents who attended the service between September 2011 and December 2015. Figures outlined in the Annual Reports of the Children's Grief Project clearly indicate that a demand exists in the area for the Project and this demand is not diminishing. A total of 686 children and their families have attended the service since its establishment in 2010; with an average of approximately 130 children attending the service every year. While the numbers of children being referred every year have remained relatively stable, the number of hours being provided each year to both children and parents is increasing - approximately three times as many hours were offered to children in 2015 in comparison with 2011, and approximately twice the number of hours were offered to parents in 2015 in comparison with 2011. These data highlight the important service that the Children's Grief Project is offering and further that the demand for this service is likely to increase.

Evaluation forms were completed by approximately 33% of children and 37% of parents. An analysis of the evaluation forms completed by the parents and children indicate an overwhelmingly positive experience for those who attend the service. The key to the success of the project, as outlined by both children and parents, was the opportunity afforded to the children to talk about their experiences and feel respected and listened to, in the context of a trusting, warm, non-judgemental and safe relationship with the counsellor/project worker. Opportunities to play, do art and have fun were also significant, especially for the younger children. These activities appeared to provide a useful mechanism by which younger children could deal with difficult emotions and learn to express themselves. Both children and parents noted an array of positive outcomes that occurred following attendance at the Children's Grief Project. Most notably these outcomes included a reduction in sadness, anxiety and anger, and increased positive emotions such as happiness and calmness. Both parents and children noted how they had achieved an insight into the effect of loss on their emotions and their relationships, and had been equipped with strategies to help them deal with their loss. Through this insight, children tended to blame themselves less, feel less guilty, and had come to accept their situations. In addition to the benefits for children, parents also noted how they had received some guidance and reassurance about they could support their children. It was in only a handful of cases that parents and children identified issues with the service that could be improved, and a minority of parents felt that the service had not resulted in improvements for their children. It may be the case that these children have more complex needs or that these children could not avail of the number of sessions needed to address their needs.

The final comment, I would like to leave to one of the young people, whose overall reflection on the Children's Grief Project resonates with the perspectives of many of those who have benefitted from attending the project.

"Helen was extremely kind and warm and made me feel comfortable so I could speak openly during the sessions. She was extremely understanding and respectful of everything I said and so helpful and encouraging in helping me to deal with any issues or problems. Thank you so much for everything. Even though at the beginning I didn't want to come, I found myself counting down until the next session. I feel like a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders and I can talk about [deceased cousin] more openly now. Thank you."

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