The Children and Young People's Bereavement Centre

Final Report

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Mt Olivet Community Services
Continuing the Mission of the Sisters of Charity

June 2005

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Executive Summary

The bereavement counselling needs of children and young people can be easily overlooked in the provision of palliative care to the adults of a family. The need for specific services for children and young people with a parent who is dying is noted in the *Standards for Providing Quality Palliative Care,* 2005[1]:

> *"..young individuals may be excluded from participating in an active way, and may feel isolated and fearful….Children particularly have specific needs associated with their developmental stage and may require additional or specific responses.. ".*

Identifying information

Program/project title:	The Children and Young People's Bereavement Centre
Time period:	July 2003 – July 2005
Organisation:	Mt Olivet Community Services

Setting

The Children and Young People's Bereavement Centre (CYPBC) provides bereavement counselling and support to children and young people aged 5 to 18 years, and their families, in the wider Brisbane area. The service is centre-based, located in a house within the grounds of Mt Olivet Hospital. Mt Olivet Community Services auspices the project and provides infrastructure support.

Background/Model/Rationale

The project responds to the gap in available bereavement support specific to the needs of children and young people, identified by a community needs analysis of bereavement support services in Brisbane conducted by Mt Olivet Palliative Care Services staff and the University of Queensland in 2001[2].

The Centre is unique in Queensland in specialising in children's bereavement counselling. Its counselling is not specific to a particular cause of death, such as cancer, or specific to the relationship between the deceased person and the bereaved child.

The University of Queensland study also identified unmet needs for training specific to working with children who are grieving, a need for stronger networking between bereavement support services in Brisbane, and a lack of community education about children and bereavement. In response to these findings, the CYPBC also provides information and support to community service providers, in particular schools.

Project Objectives/Aims

The Children and Young People's Bereavement Centre project has three main objectives:

- To provide accessible counselling and support to grieving children, young people and their families
- To raise awareness in the wider community (particularly schools) about the needs of grieving children and young people prior to and after a death in the family
- To develop and maintain a network of social workers and counsellors in the Brisbane area who work in the areas of palliative care and grief work.

[1] Palliative Care Australia, (2005) *Standards for Providing Quality Palliative Care*, PCA, Canberra.
[2] McAuliffe, D. & Shapiro, M. (2001) *Reaching Out – a Study of Community Bereavement Support Services in Brisbane*, School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Queensland, Brisbane.

Methodology/Description

The Centre provides counselling and support for children and young people aged 5 to 18 years who have experienced the death of a close relative, in particular a parent, sibling or grandparent, and for families of these children. To May 2004, 178 children and young people from 79 families have been provided support. Families have accessed the Centre from throughout the wider Brisbane area, and from Ipswich, the Gold Coast and Redcliffe.

The Centre employs a social worker as coordinator/counsellor (70 hours per fortnight) and a part-time administrative officer (48 hours per fortnight). The counsellor has expertise in both working with children and bereavement counselling, and uses a range of creative and expressive therapies to work with children prior to and after the death of a significant family member. Parents are supported to develop their understanding of the child's grief and of how to assist their child. Similarly, teachers and others involved closely with the child are provided with advice.

Awareness raising and educational activities are targeted at schools in the wider Brisbane area, hospital-based palliative care and oncology services, and other organisations working with children and families who are likely to be in a position to support a bereaved child or young person.

Results

The project has been independently evaluated by Encompass Family and Community. The evaluator has concluded that each of the three stated objectives has been met. The evaluation found that:

- the service is accessible, being welcoming and inclusive with straightforward referral processes; however referrals from some Mt Olivet services are lower than expected
- the amount of publicity generated to promote the Centre and simultaneously raise awareness about children's and young people's bereavement issues is exceptional given the resources available
- awareness of the centre is promoted by many speaking engagements, project collaborations and networking opportunities taken up by the coordinator – this has included 21 invitations to speak or to present workshops, in the 18 month period to May 2005, directly involving over 600 participants
- the Centre has been highly successful in raising awareness with other professionals and the community about children's bereavement issues, given resources available
- the Centre's contact with schools, in particular, has been very well-received, and demand for the resource booklet *When a Student is Grieving – A Guide for Teachers* has been constant. It has been distributed to most schools in south-east Queensland
- the coordinator has successfully facilitated a network of palliative care counsellors, which now meets quarterly. A future challenge is to reduce the reliance of members upon the CYPBC coordinator to facilitate group meetings
- the service provided by the Centre to individual children, young people and their families is of a very high quality. Feedback from all eleven stakeholders who assisted with this evaluation was very positive
- the specialist bereavement model developed by the Centre is grounded in good practice for working with children and young people. Feedback from families and from stakeholders indicates that the principles and methods of this framework are being applied in practice.

Discussion/Conclusions

A major achievement of the Centre has been the development of a bereavement model specific to children and young people, which is grounded in good practice for working with children and young people and informed by other models for quality bereavement practice. It applies knowledge of child development, and of children's developmental understanding of death in particular, within an ecological model that responds to the child's bereavement in the context of the individual child's world.

The Centre has added considerably to the previously limited body of knowledge about providing bereavement services specific to the special needs of children and young people. Some of the key learnings are:

- children and young people's bereavement counselling is a specialist area of work. A qualified children's counsellor is required to do this work
- the space for children's and young people's work needs to be child friendly, safe and accessible, with clear policies and guidelines on how the work is done
- one-off groupings are likely to be more viable than age based groups for bereaved children
- staff and volunteers who work this field require regular professional supervision, support and debriefing. Children's grief can be emotionally demanding. The coordinator requires the opportunity for external professional development/supervision
- links to other professionals for children and young people, such as child protection experts and child mental health experts, are important.

Feedback suggests that awareness raising and education among persons who work with children and families needs to be an ongoing activity of the Centre. Desirable areas for expansion to meet demand include:

- providing increased opportunities for information and training of professionals
- promoting increased opportunities to raise awareness within the community
- providing opportunities for other suitably qualified persons to become familiar with the model and program of the Centre.

However greater activity would require more staffing and other resources.

Areas for improvement or review which have been identified by the evaluation include:

- ensuring all health professionals working within Mt Olivet palliative care services are aware of the role of the CYPBC
- a study of referral pathways for families from other Mt Olivet services to the CYPBC, including the practice, context and timing of referrals, with a view to improving these processes
- applying a more systematic means of collecting data about service quality and outcomes, including client satisfaction and the short-term outcomes for children and young people
- providing opportunities for suitable persons to become familiar with the CYPBC model and program, with a view to succession planning.

The viability of the project has been confirmed, although current staffing does not allow for expansion. It is clear that the project has filled a significant gap in available services for children and young people, and has been an important addition to the range of palliative care services provided by Mt Olivet.

Mt Olivet Community Services has made a commitment to fund the operation of the Centre for a further three year term. Discussion about future financial support will also continue with corporate bodies linked to Mt Olivet.