

“I don’t understand why you are upset”: public and parental views on grief education and support for bereaved children in UK schools.

Summary Report

June 2024



Chief Investigators

Prof Annmarie Nelson

Scientific Director, Marie Curie Research Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Prof Simon Noble

Clinical Director, Marie Curie Research Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Project team

Dr Emily Harrop

Bereavement Theme Lead, Marie Curie Research Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Dr Silvia Goss

Research Assistant, Marie Curie Research Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Dr Stephanie Sivell

Research Fellow, Marie Curie Research Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Dr Sam Royston

Director of Policy and Research, Marie Curie, London.

Public Contributor

Bob McCallister

PPI Representative, Marie Curie Research Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Coordinating centre

Marie Curie Research Centre
Division of Population Medicine
Cardiff University School of Medicine
8th Floor, Neuadd Meirionnydd
Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4YS

Tel: 02920687175

Email: mariecuriecentre@cardiff.ac.uk

Website: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/marie-curie-palliative-care-research-centre>

Funded by

Data presented here were collected as part of the 'Public Attitudes to Death and Dying 2024' (PADDUK 2024) survey, funded by Marie Curie. Marie Curie commissioned the research team at the [Marie Curie Research Centre](#) at Cardiff University, School of Medicine, to develop the survey question set and [Opinium](#), a UK-based commercial market research company, to administer the survey to a representative sample of the UK public and carry out the initial data analysis.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all people who took part in the research and our study advisory group for their help with developing the survey.

Further information

For further information, please contact Dr Emily Harrop by email at harrope@cardiff.ac.uk or +44 29206 87184.

How to cite:

Goss S., Harrop E., Sivell S., Royston S., and Noble S. (2024). "I don't understand why you are upset": public and parental views on grief education and support for bereaved children in UK schools. Research report. London (UK): Marie Curie.

Background

The pandemic shone a light on the need for wide-ranging improvements in the support that is available for people experiencing bereavement, including children and young people (1,2). Childhood bereavement increases the risk of adverse health, psychological and social outcomes (3-7). Having the right informal and formal support available is vital for promoting resilience and mitigating these risks (7). Schools, colleges and universities are essential communities for bereaved children and young people, enabling emotional support from peers, teachers and more specialist services if needed (1, 8-14). However, a number of weaknesses with school-based support have been identified, including lack of awareness and understanding of grief and how to support students (1,12,13) as well as poor communication and information sharing, inflexible systems and variable access to specialist support (1). In a recent consultation by the UK Commission on Bereavement (UKCB), just under half of children and young people (49%; n=32/65) felt not at all or only a little supported by their school or college (1). The UKCB recommended the implementation of a bereavement policy, staff training, and a process for supporting a bereaved child or young person and their family in all educational settings (1).

There is also growing recognition of the potential benefits of including grief education in schools. The UKCB called for all education settings to provide age-appropriate opportunities for children and young people to learn about coping with death and bereavement (1). This is echoed in a recent review which reported the benefits of learning about grief, death and loss at school for both bereaved young people and those who are yet to experience a bereavement (15). Normalising and destigmatising grief and bereavement in the younger generations could also contribute to more compassionate societies longer term (15,16), addressing well-documented inadequacies with the informal support perceived by bereaved people within their social networks, and its negative consequences for long term grief outcomes (17-20). Likely reflecting these concerns, recent surveys of children and adults have demonstrated support for grief education among children and adults, whilst also acknowledging some of the challenges and sensitivities in delivering such topics (1,15,21).

This report further explores public and parental attitudes to grief education, and parental perceptions of support received by their bereaved children at school or other education settings.

Methods

Marie Curie recently commissioned a large population-wide survey on public attitudes to death, dying and bereavement in the UK (PADDUK 2024) to follow up on a similar survey in 2021 (22). This new survey included a series of questions capturing the public's views on including learning about grief and bereavement in the school curriculum. A sub-set of questions further explored the prevalence of childhood bereavement among the survey participants who identified as parents/guardians of children up to the age of 25 and how well supported parents/guardians felt their child was in their educational setting at the time of their bereavement.

The research team at the [Marie Curie Research Centre](#) at Cardiff University developed the questions in close collaboration with stakeholders in the field of grief education and childhood bereavement. A commercial market research company ([Opinium](#)) was then commissioned to put the question to a large nationally representative sample of 10500 adults living in the UK (representative for age, gender and UK region), using their panel of registered research participants. Respondents were asked to express their

views using 5-point scales ranging from e.g. 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', alongside closed 'yes/no' -type of questions and a small number of open-ended questions to invite free-text comments.¹

Findings from the descriptive analysis of the data are reported below, with quotes from participants' free text comments for illustration.

Findings

Survey participants

The 10500 survey participants were recruited from Opinium's research panel so as to reflect the UK population with regards to age, gender and UK region: 51% of survey respondents were women (n=5406) and 48% (n=5063) were men. 28% were aged between 18-34 years (n=2900), 33% were between 35 and 54 years of age (n=3485) and 39% were 55 and older (n=4415). Most respondents (82%; n=8561) lived in England as the largest and most populated UK nation, 10% in Scotland (n=1076), 5% in Wales (n=489) and just under 4% in Northern Ireland (n=374). The UK wide results reported below were very similar across all four nations; breakdowns of these results for individual nations can be accessed here: [\[UK nations report\]](#).

Across all respondents, about one in ten self-identified as being from an ethnic minority background (12%; n=1312).

44% (n=4590) identified as parents or guardians of a child/children up to the age of 25 years: 28% had children under the age of four (n=1285), 42% (n=1945) and 40% (n=1822), respectively, had children of primary and secondary school age, and a further 27% (n=1251) had older children aged between 18 and 25 years.

The bereavement and support experiences of children and young people

Just over half of parents/guardians (53%; n=2432) indicated that their child/children had experienced the death of a person close to them. Most commonly, children had lost a grandparent (61%; n=1489), other family members (23%; n=571) or a friend (16%, n=400). Eight percent had experienced the loss of a parent (n=195), another eight percent the loss of a sibling (n=183). About one in six children (16%; n=388) had experienced more than one bereavement.

Nearly half (44%; n=1076) of the bereaved children were of primary school age (i.e. 4-11 years) when they experienced a close bereavement while about a third (31%; n=765) experienced a death at secondary school age.²

Parents of bereaved children were asked how well they felt their child was supported in their educational institution (e.g. nursery/school/college or university) at the time of their bereavement (see Fig. 1).

¹ For the purpose of this report, responses of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were grouped into 'agree' and responses of 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' were grouped into 'disagree'.

² Parents respondents with more than one child were asked to respond to questions with their oldest child's experiences in mind.

- Over half rated teaching staff as supportive (53%).
- About a fifth (21%) felt that teachers were neither supportive nor unsupportive.
- One in ten felt that teachers were unsupportive at the time of their child's bereavement.
- Interestingly, parents perceived their child's peers as somewhat more supportive than their teachers (58% vs. 53%). Only 7% indicated that peers had been unsupportive.

"Not much support other than they could leave the class if needed. Nothing around death or bereavement was offered and it should have been."

PADDUK parent respondent

"The support my daughter received from her school was good. We received timely updates from the school and they were flexible when we asked."

PADDUK parent respondent

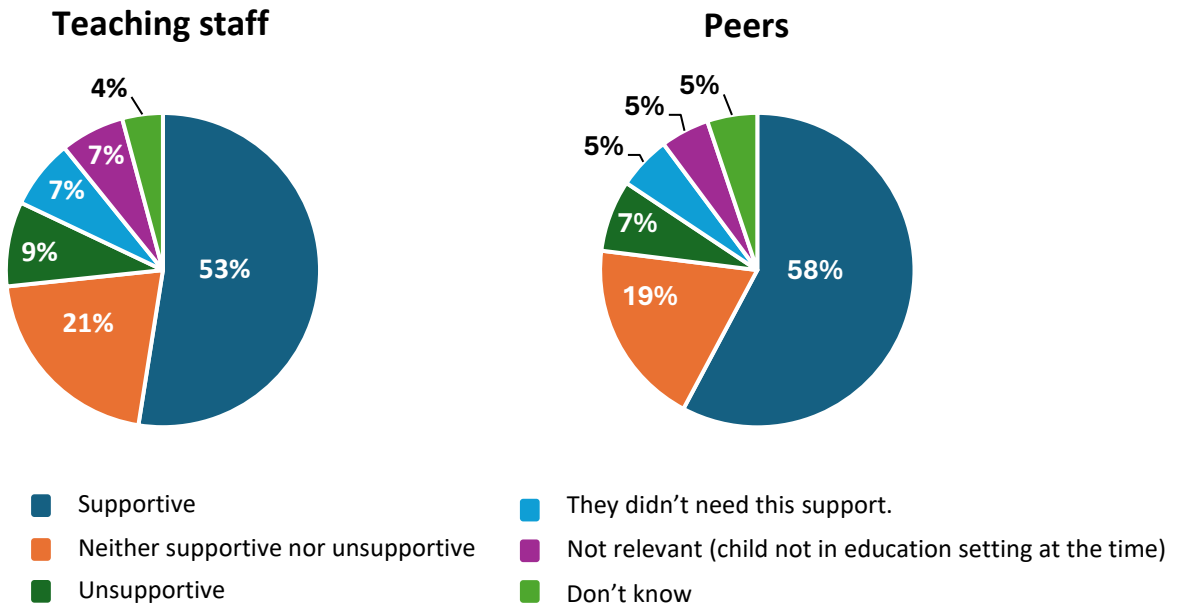


Fig. 1: Parents' perceived supportiveness of teaching staff and peers at the time of their child's bereavement (parent respondents with bereaved children: n=2432)

Attitudes to grief education in schools

Survey participants were asked to what extent they agreed that learning about grief and bereavement should be included in the school curriculum. Although many agreed, attitudes varied depending on children's age with the highest level of agreement for older age-groups. Respondents who were parents of children aged under 25 were more likely to be supportive, in particular those whose child had experienced a bereavement (Figure 2):

- For younger primary school children (i.e. 4-7 years of age), a quarter of all respondents favoured including grief education in the curriculum, whilst half of respondents disagreed. Amongst parents, 37% agreed, whilst 40% disagreed.
- For older primary school children (i.e. 8-11 years), 45% of respondents were in favour of inclusion, whilst 29% disagreed. Amongst parents, over half (54%) agreed and 22% disagreed.
- For secondary school-aged children (12-16 years), 67% of respondents (72% of parents) agreed and 12% of respondents (10% of parents) disagreed.

"I don't think it is appropriate to teach very young children about bereavement, I feel it could make them overly anxious about their parents dying..."

PADDUK respondent from the general public

"A lot of children experience bereavement and I think if it is openly talked about at school it will help them to cope. It will also, hopefully, encourage them to ask for help and report a lack of support at home."

PADDUK respondent from the general public

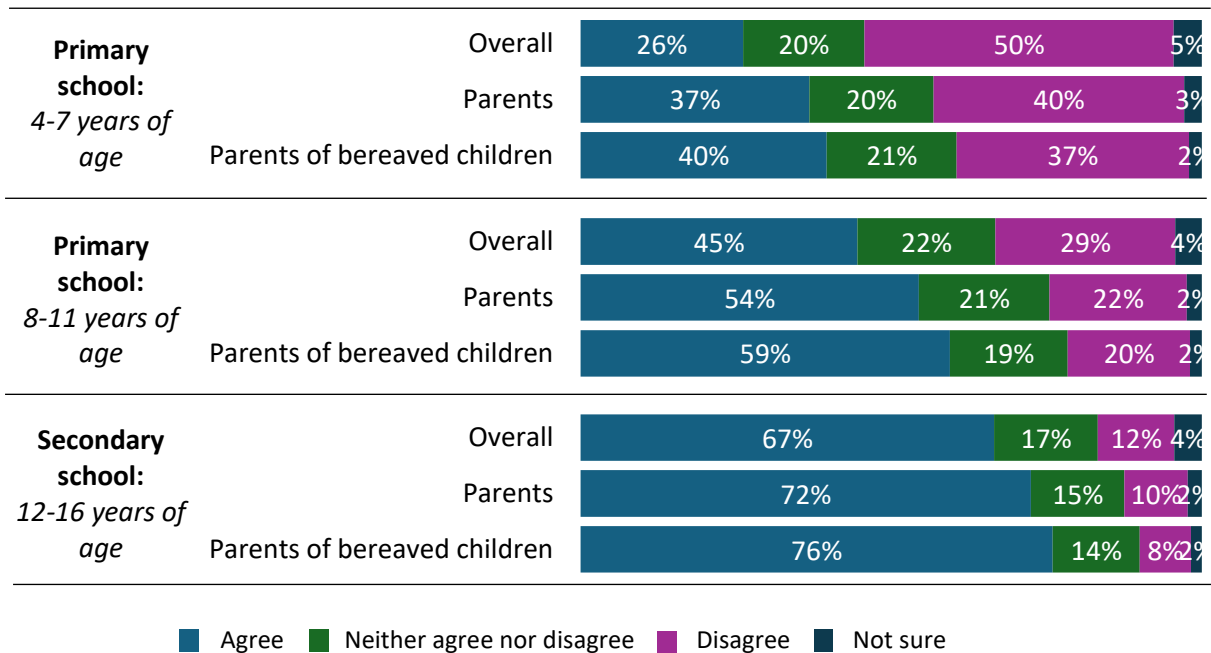


Fig. 2: Respondents' attitude towards including learning about bereavement and grief in the school curriculum for different age groups in primary and secondary schools (overall sample: n=10500; parent participants: n=4590; parents of bereaved children: n=2432).

The perceived benefits of learning about grief and bereavement at school

The majority of respondents appreciated the range of potential benefits that learning about grief and bereavement as part of the school curriculum could have, particularly in secondary schools (see Fig. 3).

- Most agreed that grief education could improve the support for bereaved children by fostering more understanding and compassionate school environments (55% primary vs 73% secondary) and providing an opportunity for bereaved children to reach out for support and talk about their feelings (61% vs 76%).
- There was also majority agreement that learning about grief and bereavement at school could help children cope with future bereavements (55% vs. 74%), enable them to better understand and support their bereaved friends (53% vs. 74%) and generally contribute to greater understanding for grieving people (53% vs. 74%).

“My daughter lost her grandmother when she was quite young and it wasn’t until she turned about 5 she started asking more questions but then didn’t really ask anymore. She is now 8 and has so many questions and sometimes gets upset missing her grandmother. Some of her peers have said to her I don’t understand why you are upset, it’s silly being upset which makes her even more upset. I think if this teaching was done in schools, then this maybe would not have happened.”

PADDUK parent respondent

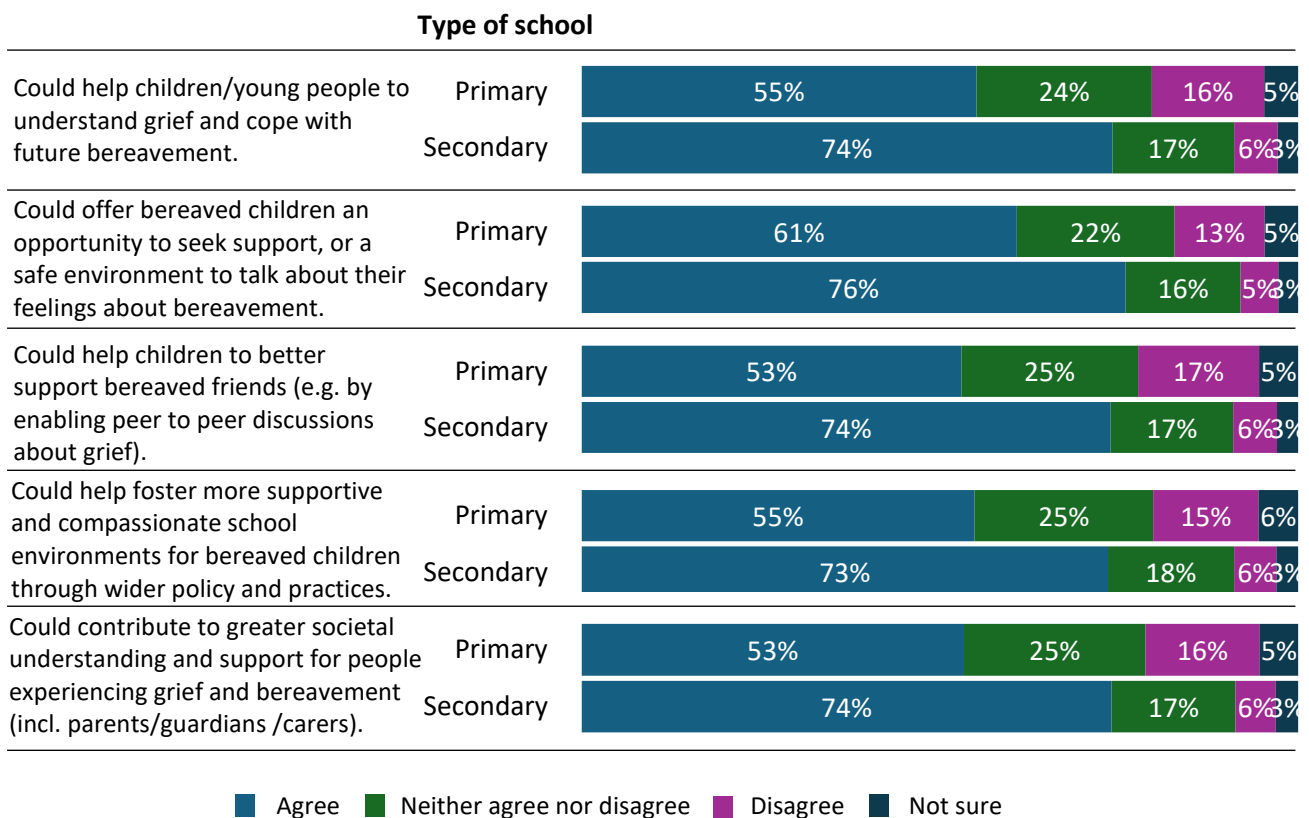


Fig. 3: Respondents’ attitudes towards potential benefits of including learning about grief and bereavement as part of the school curriculum in primary vs. secondary schools (n=10500).

Concerns about learning about grief and bereavement at school

However, just over 40% of respondents felt that conversations about grief and bereavement were not needed in primary schools and should instead be left to children's families (32% for secondary schools). About a quarter of respondents (25% for primary schools, 26% for secondary schools) considered grief education unnecessary as they felt children are naturally able to cope with bereavement.

More than half of respondents (58%; n=6122) were concerned that engaging with this sensitive topic could be upsetting and distressing for primary school children (45% for secondary schools).

For both types of schools, the vast majority of respondents (79% and 82%, respectively) agreed that appropriate training for teachers and other staff is key to ensure that the topic of grief and bereavement is engaged with sensitively and that staff have the necessary skills to have supportive conversations with bereaved children.

Conclusions

The results from this large, national survey demonstrate overall public and parental support for including grief education in the school curriculum for older primary-aged and secondary-school students, with mixed views on its appropriateness for the youngest primary-school children. Relatedly, and in line with previous research (1,12,13), results also demonstrate inadequacies in how well supported bereaved children and young people feel at school and amongst their peers, with a substantial minority of parents reporting that their child was not well supported by teachers or peers in their education settings. The importance of these settings was further confirmed in our finding that just over a half of children described had experienced a close bereavement, most commonly when they were at primary school, with only 7% of their parents feeling that support from teachers was not needed. This underlines the need for bereavement policies, staff training, and a process for supporting a bereaved child or young person and their family in educational settings (1).

As argued elsewhere (1,14,15), most participants recognised the potential benefits of grief education for enabling bereaved children and young people to better cope with current or future bereavements and for improving the support available to them from peers and schools. The potential for grief education to equip all students to better support people experiencing bereavement, in turn contributing to more compassionate, grief-literate communities was also well recognised. Although concerns over the potential for grief education to cause distress to children and young people were commonly reported, so too was the need for appropriate training to mitigate these risks and ensure that the topic is engaged with sensitively and that staff have the necessary skills to have supportive conversations with bereaved children.

Implications

These findings are timely and well-placed to inform the expected consultation due on the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum in England, the implementation of grief and bereavement training in schools in Northern Ireland and the new child bereavement support pathway that is being developed in Wales (2).

The views of parent-participants in particular lend support to the recommendations of the UKCB (1), the Scottish Childhood Bereavement Project (21) and Dawson et al (15) that discussions of grief, death and loss should be included in (at least older) primary and secondary school curriculums.

This could be achieved through integration into relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) in England; the health and wellbeing curriculum areas in Wales and Scotland; and personal development education in Northern Ireland (15). Cross-curricula approaches and wider school initiatives could also be used to help learners explore different personal, religious, and cultural responses to bereavement (15).

Effective training for teachers and other school staff on how to conduct conversations about grief, death and loss, and integrate these topics into their teaching will be critical to the successful implementation of such initiatives. The wealth of resources and expertise which already exists in the UK should also be made easily accessible to schools to support this programme of work (15).

References

1. UK Commission on Bereavement. Bereavement is everybody's business. 2022. Available at: <https://bereavementcommission.org.uk/ukcb-findings/>
2. Harrop E. A spotlight on children and young people – and remembering Colin Murray Parkes. *Bereavement: journal of grief and responses to death*. 2024. Vol.3. <https://www.bereavementjournal.org/index.php/bcj/article/view/1140/1144>
3. Lytje M, Dyregrov A. The price of loss—a literature review of the psychosocial and health consequences of childhood bereavement. *Bereavement Care*. 2019 Jan 2;38(1):13-22.
4. Li J, Vestergaard M, Cnattingius S, Gissler M, Bech BH, Obel C, Olsen J. Mortality after parental death in childhood: a nationwide cohort study from three Nordic countries. *PLoS medicine*. 2014 Jul 22;11(7):e1001679.
5. Rolls L, Payne SA. Children and young people's experience of UK childhood bereavement services. *Mortality*. 2007 Aug 1;12(3):281-303.
6. Kaplow JB, Saunders J, Angold A, Costello EJ. Psychiatric symptoms in bereaved versus nonbereaved youth and young adults: a longitudinal epidemiological study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2010 Nov 1;49(11):1145-54.
7. Dowdney, L.: Childhood Bereavement Following Parental Death. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*. 2000 41(7),819-830. doi:10.1111/1469-7610.00670.
8. Stokes J. Resilience and bereaved children: Helping a child to develop a resilient mind-set following the death of a parent. *Bereavement Care*. 2009 Apr 1;28(1):9-17
9. Childhood Bereavement Network. *Grief Matters for Children*. 2017. <https://nationalbereavementalliance.org.uk/grief-matters-for-children/>
10. Irish Childhood Bereavement Network. *Childhood Bereavement Care Pyramid*. 2014. <https://www.childhoodbereavement.ie/professionals/childhood-bereavement-care-pyramid/>
11. Dyregrov, K, Kristensen, P, Johnsen, I, et al. The psychosocial follow-up after the terror of July 22nd 2011 as experienced by the bereaved. *Scand Psychol* 2015; 2, <https://psykologisk.no/sp/2015/02/e1/>
12. Dyregrov, A, Dyregrov, K & Lytje M. Loss in the family – A reflection on how schools can support their students, *Bereavement Care* 2020 39:3, 95-101, DOI: 10.1080/02682621.2020.18287
13. Lytje, M, Dyregrov A. Beyond prolonged grief: Exploring the unique nature of complicated grief in bereaved children. *Bereavement: journal of grief and responses to death*. 2024. Vol.3. DOI <https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2024.1127>
14. Harrop E, Goss S, Longo M, Seddon K, Torrens-Burton A, Sutton E, Farnell DJ, Penny A, Nelson A, Byrne A, Selman LE. Parental perspectives on the grief and support needs of children and young people bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic: qualitative findings from a national survey. *BMC Palliative Care*. 2022 Oct 10;21(1):177.
15. Dawson L, Hare R, Selman L, Boseley T, Penny A. The one thing guaranteed in life and yet they won't teach you about it': The case for mandatory grief education in UK schools. *Bereavement*. 2023 Apr 12;2.

16. Breen LJ, Kawashima D, Joy K, Cadell S, Roth D, Chow A, Macdonald ME. Grief literacy: A call to action for compassionate communities. *Death studies*. 2022 Feb 7;46(2):425-33.
17. Smith KV, Wild J, Ehlers A. The masking of mourning: Social disconnection after bereavement and its role in psychological distress. *Clinical Psychological Science*. 2020 May;8(3):464-76.
18. Cacciatore J, Thieleman K, Fretts R, Jackson LB. What is good grief support? Exploring the actors and actions in social support after traumatic grief. *PLoS One*. 2021 May 27;16(5):e0252324
19. Harrop E, Goss S, Farnell D, Longo M, Byrne A, Barawi K, Torrens-Burton A, Nelson A, Seddon K, Machin L, Sutton E. Support needs and barriers to accessing support: Baseline results of a mixed-methods national survey of people bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Palliative medicine*. 2021 Dec;35(10):1985-97.
20. Harrop E, Mirra RM, Goss S, Longo M, Byrne A, Farnell DJ, Seddon K, Penny A, Machin L, Sivell S, Selman LE. Prolonged grief during and beyond the pandemic: Factors associated with levels of grief in a four time-point longitudinal survey of people bereaved in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Public Health*. 2023;11.
21. National Childhood Bereavement Project (Scotland). Growing up grieving. 2022. Available at: https://issuu.com/includem2000/docs/ncbp_includem_22_v422.
22. Nelson A, Byrne A, Carson-Stevens A, Longo M, Sivell S, Islam I, Price D, Graham-Wisener L, Dempster M, Newman A. (2021). Public attitudes to death and dying in the UK. Research report. London (UK): Marie Curie. Available at: <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/globalassets/media/documents/policy/public-attitudes-to-death-and-dying-report-final.pdf>. (Accessed: 14 February 2024)