

Support needed for children losing parent at early age

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A study exploring the impact of early parental death has revealed the long-term damage and suffering that can be experienced by individuals in adult life if appropriate levels of support are not provided at the time of bereavement. The new research, published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, describes the low self-esteem, loneliness, isolation and inability to express feelings of some individuals who lost a parent in childhood, with the effects felt for as long as 71 years after the bereavement.

The researchers found common themes that affect the experience of parental loss, including disruptions and continuity, the role of social networks and affiliations, and communication. Professor Mari Lloyd Williams, from the University of Liverpool, speaking on behalf of the research team of Dr Jackie Ellis and Professor Chris Dowrick, said: "Moving home and separation from family and friends makes adjustment to parental death significantly more difficult and increases stress in bereaved children. Long periods of disruption or living arrangements that do not meet the needs of the bereaved child means they are more likely to experience [emotional difficulties](#) and feelings of insecurity and loneliness in adult life."

Professor Lloyd Williams continues: "It is essential that bereavement [support](#) consists of far more than counselling that is frequently available and offered to bereaved children. Where possible they should remain in their existing social networks, live in the same area, go to the same school and maintain the same friendships." She adds that those working

with bereaved families also need to ensure that support which increases stability, continuity and cohesion is introduced at every level of the family system. This should include essential practical support with [household tasks](#) such as housework, cooking, shopping and taking the children to school. "Our research suggests that if the social network addresses the necessary 'mothering or fathering' then a child does not appear to be affected in adult life."

"The findings from this study demonstrate the distress experienced as children and adults when they are not given clear and honest information at appropriate time points relevant to their understanding and experience", says Professor Lloyd Williams.

The researchers suggest a model to identify and support individuals who may be more vulnerable to less favourable outcomes in adult life and point to the best practice guidelines set by The Childhood Bereavement Network which provide a framework for support of parents of bereaved children.

More information: The long-term impact of early parental death: lessons from a narrative study, by Jackie Ellis, Chris Dowrick and Mari Lloyd-Williams, will be published online on Friday 8th February 2013 by the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*.

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