

Study reveals more than half of Scottish children experience bereavement by eight

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More than half of Scottish children have experienced bereavement of a close family member by the age of eight according to a new study.

Research by the University of Strathclyde also found the risk of [children](#) from deprived households experiencing the death of a parent was five times more likely.

'The prevalence of childhood bereavement in Scotland and its relationship with disadvantage' study, which was jointly produced by researchers Nina Vaswani from the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice and Dr. Sally Paul from the School of Social Work and Social Policy, used data from the Scottish Government funded [Growing Up in Scotland](#) (GUS) research.

GUS is tracking the lives around 14,000 children and their families. The Strathclyde study, published in the Palliative Care and Social Practice Journal, used eight separate data 'sweeps' from the same group of 2,815 children, who were usually visited annually, from ten months old to the start of primary six.

It found that by the age of 7.8 years, 50.8 percent of the children had experienced bereavement. By the age of 10, that figure had risen to 62 percent, with the death of one or more grandparents the most common bereavement.

Dr. Paul said: "The findings show that children are not protected from death by virtue of their age. If you have a classroom of eight-year-olds then at least half that class will have experienced bereavement of a close family member.

"We talk about bereavement as a majority experience but there hasn't been a large prevalence study done in Scotland before and we wanted to have hard figures for that. Our findings suggest that the figure in younger children is much higher than previous estimates and that children with a lower household socioeconomic status are significantly more likely to experience the death of a parent or sibling.

"We believe the figures are actually an underestimate of the true extent of childhood bereavement in Scotland as we only looked at data which reported on the death of close relatives. We don't know how many children experienced the death of other important people, such as other family members, close friends, neighbours, teachers and so on. We also made the decision not to include people who dropped out the GUS study."

Greater risk

A child born into a family in the lowest income band at Sweep 1 of less than £8,410 per annum, had a five times greater risk of being bereaved of a parent by Sweep 8 than a child born into a family in the highest annual income band—more than £33,571. The risk of being bereaved of a sibling was also almost four times higher in the lowest income families as it was in the highest income families.

Dr. Paul said: "Our research has shown that there is a link between children from the most deprived households and the risk of a parent dying. The risk is five times greater than for a child from an area of less deprivation."

Most bereaved children won't need professional services like counselling, but there is a body of research which argues bereavement can make children vulnerable to anxiety and depression, as well as self-harm and suicide. It has also been linked to underachievement at school, offending and unemployment.

Dr. Paul added: "Age appropriate education on death and grief in early years and primary education, and supporting the capacity of families, peers and community networks could all help engage with children on these issues."

"This potentially requires significant culture change in society about the willingness and ability to have open and honest conversations with children."

Nina Vaswani said: "A lack of social support—including from schools—has been documented by some previous research as potentially contributing to feelings of isolation, loneliness and social exclusion with some children reporting bullying and difficulties with friendships.

"But children are really resilient and with just a bit of support from somebody in their social environment they can and do cope with most things. The rates of bereavement are so high in childhood that it would be impossible, and unnecessary, to support all those people by specialist services.

"Grief, in whatever form it presents, is a very understandable reaction to what is a common childhood experience, and should not necessarily be viewed as problematic. It's about making sure that the people in the child's environment, whether it's family or friends or teachers, are confident, able and willing to talk about difficult subjects like death and that those conversations are happening with children from an early age.

"It's also about making sure that no children fall through the cracks and those who need additional support are identified."

Case study Mariya felt like her brother 'vanished' after he died in hospital

Mariya Javed was just a few weeks short of her eighth birthday when she tragically lost her brother Ahmar in 2017.

Unknown to anyone 13-year-old Ahmar had the rare condition

Ateriovenous Malformation (AVM), a tangle of abnormal blood vessels connecting arteries and veins in the brain. It caused him to suddenly develop a bleed on the brain while at karate class and he was rushed to hospital.

After Ahmar suffered a second, more serious bleed days later, his parents Sameena and Javed had to take the agonising decision to turn off his life support machine in the Royal Hospital for Children in Glasgow.

Mariya hadn't seen her brother in hospital and her mum said it was as if her elder brother simply vanished from her life.

Disappeared overnight

Sameena, from Elderslie, Renfrewshire, said: "Even though there was a five-year age gap they went everywhere together and did everything together. When Ahmar was ill she didn't see him in hospital because we actually thought he'd get better and come home.

"So for Mariya it was like he disappeared overnight, one minute he was there and the next he wasn't.

"I did explain to her that she could ask me anything and she did ask questions. She came to the funeral and afterwards we tried to keep as much to a routine as possible. She actually coped better than I thought she might."

The day after the funeral Sameena thought it was important for Mariya to return to school.

Sameena added: "Nothing was normal of course, but I wanted to try and keep some normality for her. Being able to see her friends and teachers was important. Her friends knew what had happened of course and

didn't go out of their way to ask but were there if Mariya wanted to talk about it.

"The more normal they were I think the more it helped her, chatting and playing games like they usually did. School was a good distraction for her."

Bereavement education

Sameena has been campaigning for bereavement education to be made compulsory in the school curriculum in Scotland and added: "Having actually been through it with my own family, children do need to know about this and we need to talk about it.

"So may children suffer bereavement and I think there should be something in every school to help them understand it and process it all. "

Sameena says that three years on, Ahmar is still very much part of the conversation at home, especially as the family has a new addition with the birth of her two-year-old son Mohammad Ayaan, who never got to meet his brother.

She said: "I've always made a point of talking about Ahmar. Initially, Mariya didn't talk much about him, but as she's getting older she's talking more. It's important that she knows that she had this brother, he existed and was part of our lives. In a way, we feel that he's always around.

"Ahmar was a straight-A student and wanted to be a doctor and it's difficult to see his friends and think of all the things he should be doing. I know if he'd lived he would have done great things."

After Ahmar died, Sameena launched a charity called Another Star in

the Sky and has raised £14,000 in her son's name to research AVM and other similar conditions.

Provided by University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

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