

**POST QUALIFYING CERTIFICATE**

**IN**

**COUNSELLING CHILDREN**

**AND**

**YOUNG PEOPLE**

**BIRMINGHAM**

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**UNIT 3**

**ESSAY 3**

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**Describe one specialist area of work with young people and evaluate  
the use of creative interventions in your working practice**

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**Introduction**

For the purpose of this assignment I will consider the specialist area of childhood bereavement; reflecting that death and therefore, bereavement are part of the human experience and moreover that to grieve is a natural process. In addition, I will explore the factors which can influence the grief process in children and young people; the culture and social context into which they are born, and how family or carers influence the way in which loss is managed by children and young people with a particular focus on how western culture views grief as a process.

Furthermore, I will consider that grief is a natural process through which children and young people can progress naturally with the help and support of those close to them; family, carers or peer group, and reflect that at times counselling is neither necessary nor appropriate.

However, I will also deliberate that there are times when a child or young person falters in their grief process, explore why this might happen, and reflect that at such times counselling can facilitate the grief process. Furthermore, I will reflect on the issues which might influence the counselling process, such as the young person's developmental stage or cognitive ability, because as Daniels and Jenkins advise; "the child's level of understanding needs to be assessed on an individual basis by the therapist". (2000. P19) (3)

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In addition I will pondered that when counselling children and young people, clients are frequently unable to make use of counselling in the same way as an adult client is able to; that to expect a child or young person to engage with an older counsellor and spend fifty minutes talking about how they feel is often unrealistic and that therefore, it is necessary to facilitate the counselling by utilising creative interventions. Thus, I will illustrate the effectiveness of using creative interventions by drawing on examples of clients from my own practice, whilst at the same time deliberate contra-indications to the use of particular interventions.

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In the past there has been controversy as to whether children grieve, however, as Smith proposes “it is not now a question of whether children grieve, as this is now largely accepted” (1999. P9.) Death and therefore, bereavement are a part of life, as Culley and Bond remind; that although “an inescapable part of life, bereavement is a powerful and potentially deeply painful and disturbing experience” (2004. P167.) Nevertheless grieving is a normal and natural process; and children and young people will often go through the grieving process in their own way and in their own time if allowed to, the grieving process lessening as time goes on. **(2,3)**

Some cultures consider there to be a set way of grieving, and as Granot affirms “children respond to loss within the cultural and social context in which they grow up, and in accordance with the expectations of the adults around them” (2005. P143.) However, as McCloud contends “most western models of grief propose that it is necessary for bereaved people to work through their feelings of loss.” (1998. P175.) This concept of a grief process, of stages is refined further by Bowlby who suggests that there are four phases of mourning:

- “1. Phase of numbness that usually lasts from a few hours to a week and may be interrupted by outbursts of extremely intense distress and/or anger.
2. Phase of yearning and searching for the lost figure, lasting some months and often for years.
3. Phase of disorganisation and despair.
4. Phase of greater or less degree of reorganisation.” (1979. P 83) **(2,3)**

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Thus, whilst many children and young people who experience bereavement will complete their grieving process without accessing counselling, there are times when a child becomes stuck in their grieving process and it is necessary for the young person to seek the help of a counsellor in order to facilitate its course. As Turner urges “strong and sympathetic adult assistance to a grief-stricken child has very significant immediate positive results, and may well help prevent serious mental health problems in adulthood. (1988. P11) **(1b,3)**

Loss is experienced throughout our lives; our first loss being that of our mother’s womb and a child’s family culture will impact upon the way that a child manages loss. It is important that loss is acknowledged, as by doing so we allow a child to grieve. However, doing so can be difficult for parents, because it is distressing for a parent to see their child’s emotional pain and consequently, they may wish to protect the child from the realities of death. Furthermore, some parents or carers pass messages to their child that it is not good to show emotion, and if the parent or carer themselves are grieving or depressed; the result maybe that they are emotionally unavailable to support the child.

In addition for children to see their parent or carer grieving can be distressing and experiencing this for the first time arguably is another loss; as they realise that the person is not omnipotent, that the world is not all good and that bad things do happen,

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thus, resulting in a loss of innocence. Furthermore, to see a parent upset and grieving can cause a child to suppress their own grief, as they feel they need to look after the parent, so that in turn the parent is able to look after the child. In addition there maybe a lot of fear on the part of the child and they may be concerned that their remaining parent may die or even that they may die themselves. **(1b,2)**

Preparation for loss can help soften its impact; thus by explaining what death is, and explaining about rituals; such as what will happen at the funeral can facilitate a child's grieving process.

As Dyregrov urges "different ceremonies and rituals help us to get a grip on what has happened, to understand that it really has happened, and to confront the loss. Children have the same need as adults to get a grip on the event, and ritual acts or ceremonies are important in their grief work. Practically, this means that the child must be included in the adult ceremonies". (1988.

P71) **(3)**

When not told the truth children will often fantasise, filling in missing information for themselves. However, often when adults do explain there is a temptation to use euphemism, but it is important to be careful as it can be confusing for young children, for example to say that the deceased as gone to sleep, may cause the child to worry about what will happen if they go to sleep; that they may not wake up again. Explanations should always be age appropriate.

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Children need to be allowed to grieve; to let go, to make sense of what has happened, to relocate the dead person in their lives and to accept the reality of the loss. However, this can be difficult for small children, as a child needs to have the cognitive ability to understand the concept of time and inevitability in order to accept the reality of the loss. Nevertheless, grieving is a natural process and often children and young people can do what they need to do with support of their family and their peer group and thus, not need to see a counsellor.

When accepting a referral, the counsellor should always consider that counselling can do damage if started when children and young people do not need it. Children are good at burying what they are unable deal with at that moment and sometimes that it is for the best.

Mark was six years old when he was referred for counselling after his mother, Rosie died from a drug overdose. Mark's grandmother was concerned that he did not appear to be grieving for his mother, although there were times when he appeared quite and withdrawn. To facilitate the initial assessment I made use of stuffed toys; when counselling children and young people it is necessary to consider why the client would want to speak to a middle aged woman, that there may be a language barrier and furthermore, Mark's grandmother, the person who told him what to do is, was a similar age to me. However often children will talk to a stuffed toy, when they will not talk to an adult. Although, the use of any creative intervention has to be age

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appropriate, thus using stuffed toys or puppets may not be an appropriate intervention when counselling an older child or young person.

Through the process of the assessment it transpired that for much of Mark's life his mother had been absent, and he had been cared for consistently by his grandmother. Thus his primary attachment was to his grandmother and although he missed his mother's visits at this point in his life her death was not a source of great worry to him. Thus, counselling was not necessary or appropriate at this time. **(1a, 4a,b)**

However, there are times when children require counselling to facilitate their grief process. Children can take on the guilt of a death, believing that somehow the death was their fault or they may be inappropriately angry. Whilst some children will throw themselves into their school work, others will struggle at school. Ellie was nine years old when her mother died from breast cancer; she was referred to counselling because she was constantly complaining of tummy ache and consequently taking a lot of time off school.

Prior to the referral to counselling Ellie had been seen by her general practitioner and no physical cause could be found for her stomach pains. However, bereaved children often suffer from physical ailments when they are grieving. As Turner reminds, frequently "children cannot use words and may therefore show their distress by changes in their behaviour, or by becoming poorly". (2005. P15) Thus, considering

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that young children are often not articulate enough to spend an hour talking about their feelings; that they may not have the language to describe their feelings or their feelings may be too overwhelming, in order to facilitate the counselling process with Ellie, the use of a creative intervention was fundamental. **(3)**

When working creatively with Ellie I drew around her body and asked her to colour bits of the image we had created, the focus being to explore where she was holding her emotions, where did it hurt, what did Ellie think that hurt inside looked like. Initially before I drew around her, I asked Ellie to draw around me, in order that she understood what it was we were planning to do and also to build trust within the counselling relationship. **(1a, 4a,b)**

When using this particular creative intervention it is important to respect the child's personal body space. For example the counsellor should draw around the closed legs of the child or to ask the child themselves to draw around the upper thigh area. This creative intervention would not be suitable for a child who has been sexually abused.

It is important that as counsellors we understand the contraindications of any creative interventions we might use with young people. For example to ask a child to describe a miracle day or to engage in a creative visualisation would not be suitable interventions when working with bereaved children, as the focus of bereavement work needs to be about dealing with the child's grief, accepting the loss and moving on.

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As counsellors working with children and young people we need to work systemically involving parents, often explaining to a carer that there may be unusual behaviour from a grieving child and that children need to take as much time as they need to grieve. Thus it was important to involve Ellie's father in periodic reviews as counselling progressed, because as Davies reminds, often "parents need support from therapists". (1996. P148) **((1a, 3, 4a,b))**

Adults often expect young people to respond to bereavement as they are themselves. Kris was an adopted young person, who was aged 17 when his adoptive father died suddenly in a car crash. There were concerns from his adoptive mother that although at times he seemed to be missing his dad, at other times he appeared unaffected, wanting to go out with his friends as he did before his dad had died. At this point in her own grief process Kris's mother she did not want to go out or even want to go to work. However for a young person their feelings of grief can ebb and flow; being more intense at times than at others, consequently their behaviour can be seen as inappropriate by the adults who are grieving around them.

Kris enjoyed drawing, and as Geldard and Geldard affirm, "many adolescents use artistic methods to express themselves and convey meaning about their lives to others". (2004. P145 Therefore, through his artwork Kris was able to explore his feelings around his father's death including that there had been conflict at times between him and his dad; that he felt that his dad did not understand him, through

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counselling he was able to understand conflict is often part of the relationship between an adolescent and their parents and, thus accept that his father had loved him nonetheless. **(1a, 3, 4a,b)**

The counsellor should always be aware that a child's artwork is very personal and should ask the child or young person what they want to do with their artwork at the end of a counselling session. The counsellor should take care not to touch artwork unless the child or young person wants them to and also should be wary of interpreting artwork, for example what appears to be a cat to the counsellor, may actually mean something completely different to the child. In addition when suggesting creative interventions such as drawing, the counsellor should take into consideration that a child may have been told that they are no good at art or drawing and also that children used to having their artwork assessed and graded in school.

Although resilient, children have fewer resources than adults and yet are frequently expected to get back to normal quickly following bereavement. However, whilst some children need to talk about things over and over again, others do not, as Holland reminds us, that for each young client we need "awareness that there are individual factors within bereavement" (2001. P9) **(3)**

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**Conclusion**

To experience the death of a loved one and thus to grieve is a part of life and is, therefore normal; a natural process. How a young person manages loss and subsequently the grief process will be affected by many things including their past experience, their culture, religion, and family as well as their peer group, as Geldard and Geldard verify, “as children grow they incorporate and integrate those values beliefs and attitudes from the world around them they find appealing and useful.” (2002. P73) Furthermore, whilst some cultures offer a definite approach to how grieving should be managed, others are less rigid. Western models of grief process however, view grief as a succession of stages which need to be completed in order that there is a healthy resolution, as Kennerley confirms “grieving is more than a feeling of sadness. Indeed it’s not just one feeling, but a whole succession of emotions which might overlap and can take a while to work through”. (2000. P191)

Thus, whatever their background some bereaved young people are able to complete their grief process with the support of those around them in their own time and for such young people counselling is not appropriate or necessary. However, this is not true for all young people and often it is difficult for parents or carers to be available to support a young person at a time of bereavement; they may be grieving themselves or uncomfortable with the emotion of their own grief process and this may impact on a young person’s ability to grieve.

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Therefore, there are times when young people do get stuck in their grief process and as a consequence counselling is needed. When working with young clients it is important to use age appropriate language, to consider the developmental stage and cognitive ability of the young person. Furthermore it is necessary to give consideration to anything which might cause difficulties in the counselling, for example the age of the counsellor being similar to that of the young person's carers and moreover, to consider the use of creative interventions to facilitate the counselling process, because as Stokes affirms; "bereaved children who are struggling often have great difficulty expressing their feelings directly. Shock, rage and terror often arise from how the person died, and block the flow of feelings. Plays, puppets, clay, drawings, sand trays and dolls' houses are valuable tools," (2004. P146) and without such interventions a child or young person may share very little with the counsellor.

Thus, types of creative interventions are many and varied; when considering their use it is important that they are age appropriate and that any contraindications are taken into account. Furthermore it is important to ensure the child or young person is comfortable with taking part in the suggested intervention and understands what is expected of them before starting. Finally, as Wordon reminds us, "bereavement is a very complex issue and people experience their grief in many and varied ways" (1991. P4), thus when counselling bereaved children and young people it is important for the counsellor to remember that each client is an individual, and thus their bereavement and consequently their grief process is also individual to them. **(3, b,c)**

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