

Ragdoll Foundation Impact Questionnaire

Project Title

Pre-school programme

Aim of your project

The project was specifically for children under five who have experienced the death of a parent or sibling. Pre-school children see themselves at the centre of the world and can think that their thoughts, actions and emotions have caused a death. The project aim was to prevent the onset of serious emotional and behavioural problems and help children develop coping strategies for the future.

What were the key outcome/s of the project ?

- Children have an increased understanding of death, dying and bereavement
- Children have increased self esteem and decreased sense of isolation
- Children have developed coping strategies for the future
- Improved communication within families
- Children & parents met other families in a similar situation, allowing them to share experiences.
- Parents were given tools to help ensure their children grow into confident young adults, thus improving the child's psychological and emotional well being.
- Parents have an increased awareness of the impact bereavement has on them and their immediate family, helping them to better support their family

How has your project made a difference to:

Children

Pre-school aged children sometimes miss out on receiving bereavement support because of their age and level of understanding. This project has enabled those bereaved young children, who might have missed out, to access bereavement services they need to help them grow into robust young adults.

The programme has helped the children to learn how to deal with the death of a parent or sibling. This was achieved by teaching the children what death means, what happens after you die, different ways of dying, different feelings and way to remember the person who has died. In giving pre-school children this knowledge it is hoped that they will grow into confident, resilient young adults who understand that the death was not their fault.

Families

The pre-school programme has provided surviving parents & carers with the advice needed to confidently support their children following a family bereavement.

Parents who attended the preschool programme were very anxious at the start of the programme, as they did not know where to begin with explaining death to their children. Research has found that there are limited bereavement services for children under 5, even though the parents

The programme gave families the opportunity to meet other families in a similar situation allowing them to share their experiences. The sharing of experiences is very important as bereaved families can often feel isolated from the rest of society, especially in the case of death through suicide, murder or manslaughter. Meeting other bereaved families helps people to realise that they are not alone.

Teaching families to talk openly about death and suggesting ways to remember the deceased family member improves family relationships, thus promoting the well being of the family unit.

The organisation

Being able to run the pre school group for a number of years has made a tremendous difference to Winstons Wish and the service we can provide to families who have very young children when someone dies. It has enabled us to understand how very young children experience an important death and the effect this has on the parent(s).

It is common in society to think that very young children are not affected by the death of someone and should not be included in rituals that are part of saying goodbye and expressing grief. Running the group has helped us understand how the developmental stage of children and their cognitive abilities influences their experience and also their reaction to a death. So we have been able to develop ways of talking to pre school children about death and the feelings associated with it and share these with parents.

What we have learnt from the group has given us increased confidence to talk with callers to our helpline about the needs of very young children after a death. This has been well received by callers. Very few organizations have the expertise to work with very young children who have been bereaved and our work has caused us to be invited to speak at conferences of other bereavement organizations to share what we have learnt. We have also been able to include it on other training modules. So the effect of a small group has had a lot of cascade effects, to the benefit of a much greater number of bereaved children.

Wider community or society

The learning gained from the programme can be shared with other professionals through training & consultancy, allowing for further dissemination of the benefits of the programme throughout the wider community.

Increasing evidence shows that bereavement can have long-term effects on the mental health and anti social behaviour of young people. By understanding death & learning how to deal with their grief at an early age, children are less likely to

develop poor mental health and exhibit antisocial behaviour, which benefits society as a whole.

What was the number of children / adults involved in the project as participants ?

2005 – 6 children, 5 parents
2006 – 7 children, 7 parents
2007 – 4 children, 5 parents
2008 – 5 children, 5 parents

What were the views of the participants. What they liked about the project, what they didn't like, what they think could have been better.

As described by the parents, families felt more confident in understanding their children and their own reactions to their children. Parents also felt the group had allowed them to express their own emotions in a safe environment. They also felt the group allowed their children to talk about the death and manage their own feelings.

Parents thought they worried less about how their children would turn out in the long run and felt better and more relaxed at dealing with their children. They felt their children seemed more stable and mature in their emotions following the group.

The most important session for most parents was the one that discussed funerals and what happens after someone dies.

What was difficult about the group: parents said it was emotionally difficult to attend the group but that the outcomes were worth it. Some said attending the group had unsettled their children, but that the long term results were that this passed and their children were in a better position to cope with life without the person who died.

What could have been better: thinking about the role and impact of the wider family.

What were the views of partners and agencies connected to the project. What they liked about the project, what they didn't like, what they think could have been better.

There were no partners or agencies connected to the project

What were the benefits to individuals, the groups involved?

The children learnt a vocabulary around the issues of death and dying which helped them to verbalise what had happened and how they felt. This made it easier for parents to relate to them and support them in appropriate ways.

They had the opportunity to get information about and know the story around what had happened to the person who died. This helps the children feel more confident to talk to others about what has happened as they grow up.

The children learn something about the feelings they and others experience, helping them to be less frightening.

Children learn what it means when we say something is dead and the differences from being alive, this aids their understanding and makes it easier for parents to talk about these difficult things. In a similar way children learn about funerals, burial and cremation. Parents find it very difficult to talk about these, and knowing this has already happened makes it easier for them to continue these conversations.

Children and parents attended separate groups at the same time. The parent's learned about what the children were doing and how young children grieve and this gave them confidence to deal with difficult questions, manage challenging behaviour and be more relaxed in their parenting.

What areas of good practice would you like to share – what has worked well.

Running a group for parents alongside that for children is really important in order to consolidate the work done with the children. In this way parents are given the tools to continue the work with their children long after the end of the group.

The group has caused us to constantly look for ways to work with children using their own means of expression i.e. play. This is vital in work with very young children who cannot yet express themselves in words or pictures. This means always having to reconsider children's developmental stages and cognitive abilities. Groups for very young children could flounder if these are not always held in mind. The fact that the subject is death means that it is an area that most people are unsure and unwilling to venture into with young children. Our experience shows that it is possible and important to discover ways to talk about this with children under 5 and enables us to share this with others who may be caring for a bereaved child.

What were the constraints (if any) – areas where the project has faced obstacles and barriers. How did you overcome them.

No real constraints

Any other thoughts you wish to share

In funding this project, The Ragdoll Foundation, has helped to make a difference in the lives of children that otherwise might be left to cope alone with confusing feelings of loss, with potential detrimental effects on their future well-being.

Thank you for your time

Thank you for your support!