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Childhood Bereavement Irish context

The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) works with its members to promote the voice of bereaved children and young people. ICBN is hosted by Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) and jointly funded by the Irish Child & Family Agency (Tusla) and IHF.

We know that in Ireland there is no statutory children's bereavement policy and very few dedicated children's bereavement services.

Approx 80 people die every day, they are parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles and siblings – bereaved children can often be invisible. Most children can manage and learn to live with their grief with the appropriate support from their family and key adults in their lives.

However, this is based on the premise that the adults surrounding the child have accurate and up-to-date information on the impact of childhood bereavement. Sometimes families may not be able to provide this support and they will need to turn to support outside the family.

ICBN Survey objectives and response rate

The core aim of the survey was to gather information about the range of services & supports that are available for bereaved children and their families in Ireland.

The key objective was to capture a full picture of what is out there to support bereaved children and families to gain a broader reflection of the supports available, where they are, whose involved and what capacity issues emerge.

The survey was circulated widely with the assistance of the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC). It was open to all services who support bereaved children and families.

There were 103 respondents with the majority from the NGO/Community and Voluntary sector and a smaller number of Statutory services, private providers, and schools. 22% provide a national service, 35% based in Leinster, 29% based in Munster, 20% based in Connacht and 5% operating in Ulster.

What is a grief informed service?

Grief informed services have a clear understanding that grief is expressed and felt in many different ways. They support people based on the understanding that there is no linear path or five stages of grief, that it ebbs and flows. Also understanding that there is no time limit to grief, it takes the time it takes and stays with us and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

Where are the needs of bereaved children & young people being met?

Childhood bereavement supports in Ireland are mainly integrated into existing services for children and families with a small number of stand-alone childhood bereavement services.

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| 33% community-based services (family resource centres, youth and community centres) |
| 21% Schools (early years services, primary & secondary schools, and school completion projects) |
| 11% Health Care settings (hospitals, hospices, cancer care support services) |
| 11% Issue-based orgs (one parent family groups, domestic violence projects, homeless services etc.) |
| 10% Statutory services (Tusla social work service, HSE projects, CAMHs) |
| 9% Private services (individual bereavement therapists) |
| 7% Stand-alone children's bereavement services |

Most respondents supporting bereaved children in Ireland are **not dedicated bereavement** services and offer grief informed support within the context of a range of supports to children and families.

Most of the respondents work in a multi-generational way offering support to a range of age groups with **bereavement being only one of the issues** that they address in their response to needs presented. The majority work with children aged 6-12 with only half catering for teenagers.

Additionally, many indicated that they work with people from a range of minority and vulnerable groups (members of the Traveller Roma Community, adults experiencing addiction, homelessness, refugees and people with Intellectual Disabilities)

WHAT TYPE OF BEREAVEMENT SUPPORTS ARE OFFERED?

We suggestion the following list of bereavement specific supports

- Bereavements information leaflets
- Bereavement Support groups
- Bereavement Counselling
- General Counselling
- Art Therapy
- Play Therapy
- Rainbow Groups

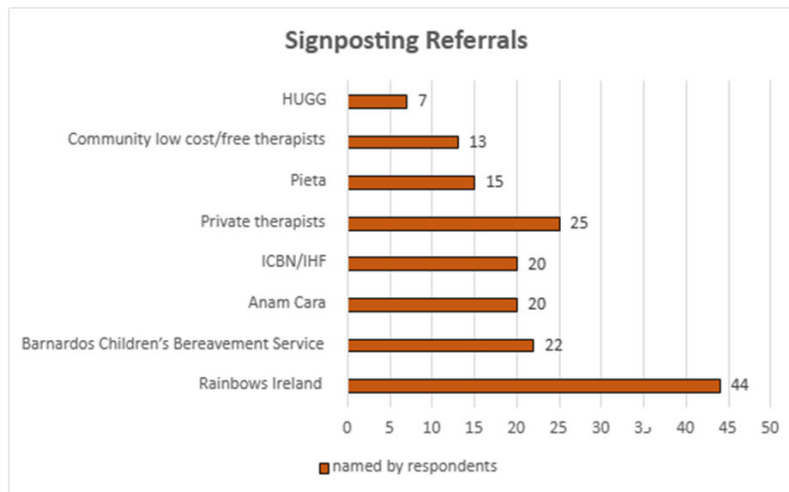
From the list of bereavement supports for children and adults presented in the survey, **33% of the respondents offered a combination of 4 or more of these supports** directly within their local service.

For children, the most common supports offered are counselling (both general and grief informed), Play Therapy, Rainbows Groups and Art Therapy. For adults, the most common supports offered are counselling (both general and grief informed), bereavement information/leaflets for their own grief and how to support children, bereavement groups.

Some additional supports offered were intensive family support, home visits after traumatic death, creative arts, music and drama therapy as well as online support groups.

SIGNPOSTING AND REFERRAL TO OTHER SUPPORTS

82% of the survey respondents refer service users to bereavement support outside their organisation. When asked to indicate where they signpost children and young people for additional bereavement support, they named a small number of organisations most frequently.



It should be noted that not all services named work directly with bereaved children and young people.

Over half noted the **need for up-to-date information on bereavement specific organisations to support effective referral pathways** and signposting for service users.

Training levels and competency

Appropriate supports for bereaved children and families are linked to their level of training and competency in the area. It was welcome to see that the vast majority of respondents indicated they would benefit from additional training in both grief theory and best practice in supporting bereaved children.

58% indicated that they understand grief process based on evidence-based theories.

70% indicated they have some understanding of the impact of grief on children and young people.

20% stated that they have no training in the area.

While these percentages appear high, it should be noted that almost **half equated bereavement training to the professional qualifications of core staff¹** and **one third** based their level of training on short term or **once off CPD workshops**.

It is **not accurate to assume** that core professionals have received bereavement training as a core component of their academic studies and that once off CPD workshops adequately equip adults working with children with appropriate competencies in the area of bereavement.

Obstacles identified to expanding grief informed supports.

Lack of specific staffing and finance dedicated to bereavement.

Limited access to suitable training opportunities which are flexible and affordable.

Time – competing pressures upon already over stretched services.

Reliable information & greater awareness of bereavement needs

Lack of clear policy to build dedicated bereavement supports

¹ Psychotherapists, play therapist, social workers, psychologists, and family support professionals.

Implication for the future of childhood bereavement supports.

3 key steps to empower a child-centred appropriate response to the needs of bereaved children to promote positive mental health and develop services nationally in order to minimise difficulties for bereaved children into the future.

Expand supports!

Childhood bereavement supports in Ireland are mainly integrated into existing services for children and families with very limited stand-alone childhood bereavement organisations.

- ✓ Build on what we have, A model of support for bereaved children should be developed to build the capacity of existing family support service by investment in these area-based family services, helping them to become grief-informed.
- ✓ Funding support to the small number of national organisations propping up the childhood bereavement sector should be increased.

Enhance knowledge & training!

There is a need to support and enhance the knowledge capacity of existing services who are currently responding to the needs of bereaved children in addition to their core operational objectives.

- ✓ Investment is required to develop a plan to support and enhance the capacity of existing services through the provision of quality training interventions which are accessible and affordable.
- ✓ Bereavement should be explicitly part of the core curriculum for professionals working with children and young people.
- ✓ An explicit framework of skills and competencies should underpin all training and education; this should be based the ICBN Bereavement Care Pyramid²

Share information for signposting!

It is essential to understand service competencies in supporting bereaved children and have referral pathways based on accurate knowledge about the appropriate bereavement supports needed.

- ✓ Investment is required for knowledge sharing at local and national level to enable appropriate signposting and to promote consistency about bereavement pathways and access to evidence-based resource material.
- ✓ Maintaining up to date, accurate knowledge about the appropriate bereavement supports for signposting requires dedicated resources to ensure it is developed based on a clear and transparent framework and is maintained as dynamic resources with constant updates.

For a copy of the full survey finding reports go to

<https://www.childhoodbereavement.ie/childhood-bereavement-services-national-survey-2023/>

² [Childhood Bereavement Care Pyramid - Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#)