

BEHIND THE UNIFORM

SCOTTY'S LITTLE SOLDIERS

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF BEREAVED MILITARY CHILDREN

Scotty's Little Soldiers is a national charity which supports children and young people who have experienced the death of a parent who served in the British Armed Forces. Scotty's supports all children and young people (CYP) regardless of the cause of death, or whether the parent was still serving at the time of death. The Scotty Council, a lived experience advisory panel of bereaved CYP who help lead Scotty's, have repeatedly raised concerns to the charity about negative experiences in school for bereaved children that could lead to children disengaging from school, increased absenteeism and ultimately lower educational achievement.

There is a growing academic evidence base around the additional demand for young people in higher education with a history of trauma when taught traumatic content, and the risk it carries for those young people (Carello et.al., 2014) (Miller, 2008). However, the impact of teaching traumatic content to much younger bereaved children within the national curriculum has to date, largely been ignored. In response, and to help inform the current Curriculum Review (2024), Scotty's has undertaken a short research project to better understand the school life of children who have experienced the death of a parent who served in the British Armed Forces. This paper explores the experiences of those bereaved military children in the classroom¹. The purpose of the research was to better understand:

- **Whether there is content in the current national curriculum² that may unintentionally disadvantage bereaved children.**
- **How schools have delivered the curriculum to bereaved military children where the content may be upsetting.**
- **The practical recommendations to ensure equity for this cohort.**

Scotty's works directly with bereaved CYP and their families with the aim of improving long-term outcomes for children who have experienced the death of a parent who served; including educational achievement, employment and mental health and wellbeing. Scotty's provides one-to-one bereavement support for children who are struggling, respite breaks for families to create an opportunity to communicate and rebuild following a death, educational grants to support extra-curricular participation, and provides events and regular outreach to ensure children do not feel alone or forgotten. Although Scotty's aligns its strategy and interventions to academic evidence, it is a user directed organisation. The voice of bereaved children is central and informs all the charity's activities and is the source of the findings and recommendations shared here. This report contains the experiences of bereaved children and parents in their own words and may be difficult or upsetting for some people to read.

About the research

This report draws on qualitative data collected via surveys completed in October 2024 (n=190) by families who have accessed support from Scotty's Little Soldiers, along with in depth interviews with individuals and groups of children and young people (n= 20).

- CYP up to and including KS2 (up to 12yrs old)
- CYP KS3-KS5 (ages 13-18yrs)
- CYP (19-25yrs)
- Parent/Carer

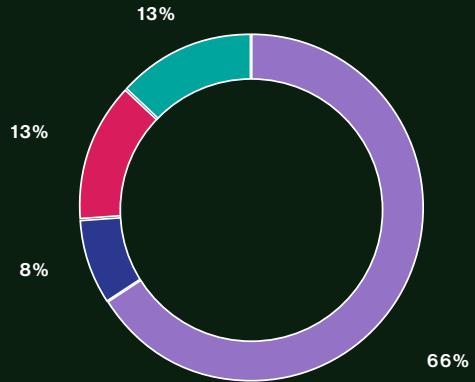


Figure 1: Age/family role distribution of survey sample (n=190)

The survey was made available for bereaved children and parents and carers of bereaved children. Amongst the parents and carers completing the survey, reflecting on the school experiences of their child, 11% had preschool age children (0-4 years), 52% had children in primary school (5-12 years), 56% had children in secondary and KS5 (age 13- 18 years) and 18% had children between the ages of 19 and 25 years old (NB: parents and carers can have multiple children so the previous will add to more than 100%).

22% of CYP across the surveys were reported as having a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND).

All interviews were conducted with CYP ages 12- 25 years.

It is important to note that this report is based on qualitative, self-reported data of school experiences. It cannot comment on any resulting impact on educational achievement. There is no marker in the National Pupil Database (NPD) that would allow bereaved children to be identified and provide national data on whether and how bereavement impacts the educational attainment (final marks/grades) of children, or school attendance (absenteeism, attendance rates, or exclusion rates). Although in theory the children of currently or formerly (Ever6) personnel should be identifiable via receipt of the Service Premium Grant, not all families declare eligibility for a variety of reasons. Bereaved military children are therefore invisible in the NPD.

Figure 1: Age/family role distribution of survey sample (n=190)

The survey was made available for bereaved children and parents and carers of bereaved children. Amongst the parents and carers completing the survey, reflecting on the school experiences of their child, 11% had preschool age children (0-4 years), 52% had children in primary school (5-12 years), 56% had children in secondary and KS5 (age 13- 18 years) and 18% had children between the ages of 19 and 25 years old (NB: parents and carers can have multiple children so the previous will add to more than 100%).

22% of CYP across the surveys were reported as having a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND).

All interviews were conducted with CYP ages 12- 25 years.

It is important to note that this report is based on qualitative, self-reported data of school experiences. It cannot comment on any resulting impact on educational achievement. There is no marker in the National Pupil Database (NPD) that would allow bereaved children to be identified and provide national data on whether and how bereavement impacts the educational attainment (final marks/grades) of children, or school attendance (absenteeism, attendance rates, or exclusion rates). Although in theory the children of currently or formerly (Ever6) personnel should be identifiable via receipt of the Service Premium Grant, not all families declare eligibility for a variety of reasons. Bereaved military children are therefore invisible in the NPD.

The headline findings

Being upset is a natural part of grief. And it is also natural that pain can be triggered at any point following a bereavement (see pain button theory). However, for optimal learning to take place it is important that children have

the cognitive capacity to learn and to demonstrate their knowledge – and if a child is very upset the risk is that they will no longer be in a state to learn (take in new information) or to express their subject content knowledge in the classroom or exam (demonstrate their knowledge). Of particular concern is questions within high stakes exams (such as GCSEs or A levels) which may determine options for continuing study or employment. If a child is 'triggered' during a high stakes exam and that impacts their grade, that can affect whether or where they attend further study or higher education and ultimately their employment options.

The research demonstrates that bereaved military schoolchildren routinely confront content in the classrooms that can be disturbing to them.

- **Over three quarters (77%) of bereaved CYP had experienced at least one lesson where they covered content that directly related to the cause of death of their parent, or otherwise explicitly reminded them of their bereavement.**
- **Over half of the CYP (52%) had multiple experiences of potentially traumatic content in lessons related to their bereavement.**
- **One in six children had experienced 'a lot' of lessons which were upsetting to participate in as they directly related to or reminded them of their bereavement.**
- **The study found that just over one in eight students who had sat GCSE or A level examinations had been asked – in the exam – to answer a question that directly related to or reminded them of the death of their parent.**

The role of the school and the teachers is a crucial aspect of this discussion. Although there is a requirement to deliver the national curriculum for all state funded schools, how schools deliver the curriculum and how children are supported through the topics within the curriculum is up to the individual school or teacher. The study found that less than a third of families (31%) felt the school handled the upsetting curriculum content in a supportive or sensitive manner. Where the schools were effective the data indicates that alleviated many of the difficulties for the child suggesting that all sensitive topics do not need to be removed from the curriculum for all children, but instead teachers need to be supported and trained to effectively work with bereaved children in the classroom. Moreover, it is important to note that the recommendation from families (CYP and parents and carers who participated in this research) for policy makers and school leaders was relatively simple;

- **Children (and/or their parents depending on the age of the child) should be warned ahead of the lesson to give them time to prepare. This was suggested by 70% of parents and carers and CYP.**

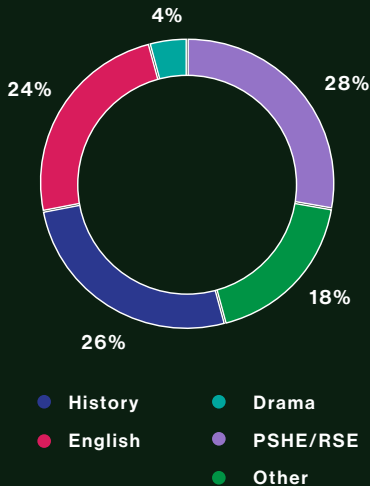
- **Where possible children should be offered topic alternatives or a 'safe space' to work from. This was suggested by 37% of parents and carers and CYP.**
- **A well trained, supportive teacher with good knowledge of bereavement and techniques to support emotional wellbeing could enable the school to deliver challenging curriculum content. This was suggested by 38% of parents and carers and CYP.**

Inside in the classroom

This section will explore some of the common themes identified through the survey and interviews with bereaved families. This includes the subjects and topics where bereaved military children are more likely to encounter difficulties, the role of teacher skill/knowledge in supporting bereaved children in the classroom, high stakes exams, and other risk areas including for children with SEND, children bereaved by suicide, and the transition from primary to secondary school.

Figure 2: Subjects with potentially difficult content for bereaved military children

The subject most likely to have unsettling content was PSHE/RSE, where 28% of families had reported having difficult lessons. PSHE/RSE in primary school includes topics on family relationships, family roles and 'the importance of spending time together and sharing each other's lives' along with topics which may have contributed to a cause of death such as drug or alcohol addiction (DfE, 2020). In secondary school, topics progress and become more explicit such as exploring cancer through the dangers of smoking. Under PSHE/



RSE schools often explore a variety of religious education topics and philosophy for children (P4C) including ethics. The statutory guidance (curriculum) for PSHE/RSE is currently under review and includes a new requirement to explicitly teach bereavement in both the primary and secondary phases.



[There was a] recent essay in RMPS (RE) about organ donation looking at the pros and cons of the ethical debate. My husband died following planned organ transplant surgery. My daughter did the essay but struggled with the content.

-Parent/Carer

PSHE/RSE was closely followed by History (26%) and English (24%) as being most likely to have content that related to a child's bereavement. With bereaved military children topics related to modern wars in History can be particularly difficult if a parent was killed in action during that war, or where tours of duty are associated by the family as contributing to PTSD, addiction or struggles with mental health. Within the English curriculum there is a KS4 GCSE poetry topic variously referred to as 'War and Conflict' or 'Power and Conflict'. This topic is repeatedly raised by families being supported by the charity as a particular cause for concern. Emotive language and imagery of war, death, suicide and suffering is used as tool to help generate creative writing.



[My child] was asked to study and perform' war poetry as part of an English syllabus during the weeks leading up to Remembrance Sunday. All of the poems were very descriptive about soldiers falling in the battlefield, injuries and 'dropping down dead' in front of each other. It was utterly debilitating to her and she stood in front of the whole class with tears streaming down her face[...]. She immediately wanted to 'drop' the subject and it left her with lasting anxiety entering his classroom.

-Parent/Carer

In interviews with CYP they frequently spoke of the War and Conflict module. The visual stimulus shared on sites such as BBC Bitesize were flagged as disturbing for bereaved children, and in particular videos. One child whose father was killed in an explosion in conflict, spoke of being asked to watch videos of bombing from the same war their father had been killed in;



**Every time it blew up:
[I thought] that's my Dad**

Child/Young Person

Other subjects that were raised by families included Science (and in particular Biology and Physics) and Art, along with a number of 'supplementary' subjects/topics outside of the national curriculum including 'Father's Day', days involving parental participation such as 'Sports Day' and 'Bring Your Child To Work Day', and general classes such as EYFS/ Reception for young children and Life Skills in Special Needs schools. Sensitive topics were also encountered outside of the classroom, for example in school assemblies on road safety or to mark Remembrance.



For [me] it was particularly GCSE English (Poetry - War & Conflict) especially regarding the Afghanistan conflict which my dad had completed a tour in. It wasn't handled the best by the teacher as for them it was just taught like any other lesson. But for me it was much more than any other typical English lesson. Furthermore, when it comes to the War & Conflict topic, I found it was more the videos teachers would present to accompany the poem that made it more upsetting for me than the actual poem itself.

Child/Young Person



Whilst it wasn't a lesson, at school, I attended a remembrance assembly. Usually, the assemblies would focus on the likes of WW2 etc, but on this occasion, it was all about Afghanistan and showing the coffins coming into Wootton Bassett and I was not forewarned of any of this. I felt really let down by my school, especially as it was the Head Teacher carrying out this assembly. Both he and my form tutor were aware of my situation and never mentioned it to me or gave me the option to miss the assembly. I was then sat crying during the assembly due to being so upset and overwhelmed, but as you will imagine in school, it was embarrassing for me as people could see I was clearly upset."

Child/Young Person

Teacher knowledge

The data strongly indicated the role of teachers and how the choices made by teachers and other educational professionals can impact the experience of bereaved children. Whilst just under a third of families felt the school or teaching staff handled challenging content in a sensitive manner, where teachers followed best practice for supporting bereaved children in the classroom the impact on the child was significant.

The greatest impact seemed to be when children and/or parents and carers were warned in advance about the content providing and opportunity for the family to prepare the child.

Offering the child a choice about participation or providing a safe space (private) to work if necessary was also a common theme.

“

They used a book that involved parental suicide. I was contacted and [my son] was spoken to. He was advised what part of the book it was in and the lesson that it was to be discussed in. They gave him the option to miss those classes. He chose not to but was allowed to leave if it got too much. They also removed the questions in the upcoming test that mentioned the suicide. They have done this a few times when discussing death or traumatic situations. [My son's] school has been exemplary with their care for [his] situation.”

-Parent/Carer

“

“There was a session at my son's school in religious studies that spoke about death and angels. I was notified by one of the teachers before the session and agreed it was ok for my child to take part as we discussed it at home. The school also used language that coincided with conversations me and my child have had at home so there was consistency with what we had spoken about at home.”

-Parent/Carer

“

Remember what has happened to the child. Alter the content delivery so it is less upsetting. Give the student an opt out before hand, i.e. to not attend the class but provide them with written notes and links. I'm speaking as a secondary school teacher who had to do such things e.g. connected with radiation and cancer deaths etc”

-Parent/Carer

When a child does get upset in class, a sympathetic response from school staff can offset the negative experience.



When talking about losing a family member in PSHE, I felt out of sorts and heavy hearted, I didn't want to participate in the lesson and was called out to answer a question and when I looked at my teacher with tears in my eyes (I was overwhelmed and panicking because I had completely missed the question) I asked to leave the room and went to find a trusted teacher who fully understood me as a struggling student and made my teacher aware that I felt uncomfortable after making sure I was okay and letting me take time to calm down."

-Child/young person



How to meet the needs of a bereaved child in the classroom is not part of Initial Teacher Training and does not feature in either the ITT Core Content Framework nor the Early Career Framework. Schools are not required to have a Bereavement Policy to plan how a bereaved child will be supported. Child Bereavement UK estimates 46,300 dependent children experience the death of a parent each year – that is 127 newly bereaved children each day. On average there will be one bereaved child in every classroom. Amongst the military cohort, approximately 2,100 CYP experience the death of a parent who served in the British Armed Forces every year. The absence of teacher training may contribute to the majority of children having negative experiences in school that could have been avoided.

I think it's more about how the school support the young person perhaps after that lesson or throughout the rest of the day. It could be how that young person is supported for the rest of the week, perhaps it's just really knocked them off their balance and stability, and actually it knocks the whole week out for them in a way they probably don't even recognise."

-Parent/Carer



Right after my husband passed away, two weeks roughly, the book 'Father' was chosen as the class book. This book was about a military father who died and the relationship between the son on earth and father in heaven. Unbelievably awful decision. There were only 12 children in this class so it was not hard to stop."

-Parent/Carer

“

When speaking to the SENCO I mentioned the effect losing his Dad had on him and his answer was “oh he’ll soon grow out of that”

-Parent/Carer

“

I tend to try to hide my emotions so that attention isn’t brought to the fact I’m upset. I have never been given the option to know that there are subjects/topics that could upset me in advance or the chance to miss out on some of the things that could trigger emotions, so I have learnt to hide my feelings during school. I don’t think many of my teachers are aware that my dad has died even though the school were informed.”

-Parent/Carer

“

My son had a negative experience and found out through a bully at school that his dad died by suicide, the school didn’t handle it very well and insisted that my son hug and forgive the child that spread the news amongst his class and year group.

-Parent/Carer

In interviews, children reported being given demerit points for being upset when the cause of their parent’s death was directly discussed in the classroom, and insensitive comments such as “I’ll call your dad”. Children noted these encounters sometimes led to them ‘dropping’ a subject they previously enjoyed or avoiding a particular teacher. However, throughout the interviews, the children maintained sympathy for teachers and stressed that the cause was a lack of training and awareness rather than any malice or ill intent.

High stakes exams

Amongst bereaved military children who had sat GCSE or A levels, just over one in eight had been asked to answer a question that directly related to the death of their parent.

“

My sister had a very bad experience with her Science GCSE. Lots of questions on cancer. She cried a lot when she came home. When she finished her GCSE she went to English revision and they were revising [the topic] grief and loss. My sister walked out of the classroom. Our dad passed away 5 months before all this.

-Child/young person

In interviews the children and young people spoke about questions in exams asking them to imagine or describe what it would feel like to have their mother die of cancer (when they had experienced the death of their parent from cancer) and questions on suicide when that was the cause of death of their parent. They also spoke about the physiological impact of the questions during the exams including crying, shaking and an inability to concentrate or think clearly;

“

My handwriting was terrible because I was shaking so much

-Child/young person

“

I looked down. There were tear marks on my exam paper

-Child/young person

“

In physics we had to learn the effects that different bombs had on people, when I asked to leave I wasn't allowed because I might have a question about it in the GCSE. My dad was killed by a bomb in Afghanistan”.

-Child/young person

Survey data and interviews indicated that when content is known to potentially form part of a high stakes examination, the students and/or the teacher can feel pressure to continue the lesson, regardless of the distress it causes. In interviews the children reported 'feeling trapped' because they felt if they left the classroom when upset they might miss content and not be able to receive top marks.

“

[They watched] a video of the Afghan conflict while a poem about conflict was being read. The video has sound of bombs and guns and shouting. It showed scenes of soldiers in the conflict and the military vehicles. 10 min video. This video also had a soldier speaking about his time in Afghan. It showed pictures of the soldiers before, during and after Afghan. My child felt like she could of been watching the explosion of when her dad was killed in Afghan! She was trying to sit through it as she felt like it's GCSE prep so didn't want it to impact her grades. She left during the soldier talking about his experiences because she couldn't take it any longer”

-Parent/Carer

As previously noted, bereaved military children are not identifiable in the National Pupil Database and so it is not possible to comment on the impact of such questions on final grades. However, in interviews children and young people spoke of receiving grades that were lower than predicted in examinations with upsetting questions, appeals under special circumstances policies (which were upheld although JCQ rules limit any adjustment to 5% and requires deaths to be very recent), and lower-than-predicted grades resulting in students unable to attend their preferred further education institutions.

“

He] didn't like this lesson and was very affected by it for weeks later. He struggles to say what is wrong but we knew something had happened as his behaviour changed. A few days later, he finally opened up and was deeply upset.”

-Parent/Carer

Bereaved military children with SEND

As noted above, 22% of CYP in this dataset had SEND. Children with SEND were more likely to have had a negative experience regarding their bereavement in school compared to their peers, with 17% of children with SEND not having experienced upsetting lessons compared to 24% of children who do not identify as having SEND. Children with SEND were also more likely to have multiple instances of upsetting lesson content (55% compared to 48%). Parents of children with more significant SEND commented that bereaved children with SEND may also lack the vocabulary to articulate the cause of their distress following a lesson and parents reported changes in behaviour which later were linked back to upsetting lessons.

“

had discussed Flexi plan with school which was partnership educating. Unfortunately, relationships at school were too broken to trial. It was difficult to manage my child's emotional dysregulation around school, as the behaviour policy was applied. Rather than a holistic approach. I feel we were lucky, as I had a good relationship with Senior leadership team. We still ended up in a place of broken education and choices between permanent exclusion from school, behavioural unit etc. This is where my child met the most damaged personalities and spiralled out of control.”

-Parent/Carer

It is not possible to comment whether the increased instances of upsetting content amongst children with SEND was due to differential treatment by educators, or differential sensitivity of the children. Regardless, the disparity suggests further research should be done to better understand the experiences of bereaved children with SEND in the classroom and how schools can better support them.

Other emerging themes; absenteeism, school phase, and language in the classroom.

Both survey data and interviews indicated that these kind of negative school experiences can have an impact on absenteeism with both CYP and parents and carers noting that either they (if a CYP) or their child had increased absenteeism following an experience in school that was badly handled, even when there was no history of absenteeism previously. Some parents and carers spoke of removing their children entirely from school following repeat events.

Another trend in the qualitative responses in the survey and interviews was primary vs secondary comparisons, with a number of parents and CYP noting that primary schools were more likely to have the capacity to support bereaved children, whereas secondary schools struggled to support bereaved children. The smaller nature of primary schools, with a constant class teacher, seemed to lend itself to more awareness and sensitivity. However, the data is less conclusive. Whilst it is true that CYP identifying as secondary school age and above were more likely to have multiple negative experiences (55%) than primary school aged children (47%), secondary school children were also more likely to have not had any negative experiences (29%) compared to CYP identifying as primary school age (20%).

Finally, there was an emerging theme regarding appropriate language use in the classroom and playground. Parents with younger children (EYFS/KS1) found that teachers may use

language that can be confusing to a bereaved child, for example following lessons on Jesus 'rising from the dead' children wondered if their parent might also return, the term 'step parent' was also contentious particularly for families who had chosen to use 'mum' or 'dad' to describe a new partner. This is pertinent to how nuanced teachers need to be when following the PSHE/RSE primary curriculum. A number of families with younger children (primary school age) who had experienced the death of a parent from suicide reported being asked by the school to prevent their child talking about their parent's death to their peers.

Sometimes this was driven by complaints from other parents, sometimes there had been no complaints from parents/peers but the teacher was uncomfortable with a child noting their parent had died by suicide. In all cases, the parents were concerned about the impact of being silenced for their child. The statutory guidance for PSHE/RSE currently in consultation includes requirements to teach children about suicide and suggests age restrictions. This research again points to the nuance – and training – that teachers will need to handle such potentially complex material if there are bereaved children in the class, and particularly those bereaved by suicide.

Recommendations

Potentially upsetting content in the curriculum should be clearly identified in documentation produced by the Department for Education with a corresponding note that teachers should follow recommended best practice (see below) to support any children in their classroom who may find the content upsetting.

- The Department for Education should publish guidance on best practice for meeting the needs of bereaved children in the classroom. This should include the recommendation that where there is content in the curriculum that could relate to a bereavement, children (and/or their parents depending on the age of the child) should be warned ahead of the lesson to give them time to prepare.
- The Department for Education should publish guidance on best practice for meeting the needs of bereaved children in the classroom. This should include the recommendation that where possible children should be offered topic alternatives or a 'safe space' to work from.
- The Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework and Early Career Framework should include a requirement for trainee teachers and early career teachers to complete training on supporting bereaved children in the classroom. Training should include a basic understanding of bereavement theory, alongside practical approaches for the classroom. This would provide teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to support vulnerable children, and enable access to a broad curriculum.
- There should be a statutory requirement for schools to have a bereavement policy so that schools and staff are prepared to support bereaved children returning to education following a death.
- The Department for Education should consider the appropriateness of traumatising material being used as a stimulus for creative writing in the English GCSE syllabus. This should not only be considered in regards to bereaved children, but also in light of the rising numbers of young people with mental health needs following the pandemic.
- Ofqual, the Exam Boards and JCQ should, in consultation with the child bereavement sector, agree an appropriate way to ensure equity in exams for bereaved children where potentially traumatic questions are included in exams; this could be the requirement to alternative questions, or warnings ahead of an exam of particular topics.