



Strategic Alcohol and Drug Death Group

The Impact on Children and Families

April 2025

Bereavement services for children and young people

In early 2021 a mapping exercise was carried out to inform the Strategic Drug Related Death Group what service provision is currently available for adults, children and young people impacted by a loved one's drug related death. This is an updated report on those pathways.

Children and young people impacted by a drug related death

In 2020-22, at least 38 children were known to have lost a parent due to a drug related death. Please note, this does not necessarily mean each child lived with the parent or had contact with the parent at time of death. It might sometimes be under recorded so the real figure could be slightly more.

We also do not have the figures for how many children or young people are impacted by a parental/family non-fatal overdose.

- **Education**

Contact was made with a deputy head in a secondary school in the East of D&G, to discuss what support they would provide or signpost for young people impacted by a substance related death in the family. Staff identified that most young people impacted by parental death due to substance use did have multiple issues and there are usually several partner agencies involved in supporting the young person. It may be that everyone thinks someone else is dealing with the child's bereavement. The cuts to school budgets have put a strain on many areas of school provision. Schools have access to 'Seasons for Growth' through the youth counselling service but there are limitations to this. They also have 1:1 support from youth counsellors, they are only in 2 days a week as they support more than one school and generally are at capacity. The school has a nurture base which gives a warm and supportive environment for young people and one of the ASL teachers is nurture trained and can provide some support to targeted groups. Not all secondary schools have a nurture hub so this may be different for some young people. They had been contacted by Quarriers although there is

a cost to this that schools may not be able to afford. This school had four pupils in one school year alone who had been impacted by a drug related death. (This year group are in S6 now and all those young people have now left school). They have others too, but thought it was a significant number in one year group in one of the smaller high schools. The staff found the Signs of Safety training has helped staff to better support young people impacted by parental substance use.

- **Youth Work**

D&G Youth Work provide low-level mental health support in all secondary schools in the region for an age range of 12 -18 years. The service offers a voluntary service for young people to help them identify, acknowledge and work through difficulties they may be facing which are having an impact on their emotional wellbeing. This project is aimed at young people who find challenges of adolescence too much to manage and although not specific re bereavement this would be one of the areas they would support young people with. Through this project young people can access one to one support sessions, these usually last for 6 – 8 weeks meeting once weekly for 45 mins per session. They also offer targeted and issue-based programmes which are usually delivered with between six to ten young people, the content of the session will be flexible to the needs of each group.

Tel: 01387 251322

E-Mail: YES@dumgal.gov.uk

[Youth Enquiry Service | Dumfries & Galloway – Help is here.](#)

- **Young Carers**

The service can only provide support to YP who are active carers and cannot accept a new referral after a parent has died (unless they had another ongoing caring role), they can provide support to a young carer already in the service who has lost a parent. They support young carers through bereavement by using tools which are available to the service, all staff have attended training around bereavement to equip them with skills to support the young carers, family, and themselves. They use resources from Winstons Wish e.g. Memory boxes, Muddles and Puddles and other literature. The Service Manager said there is limited support in D&G to support children & young people with bereavement. There is a D&G Child Bereavement Network Group which they attend, this is chaired by Dr Sarah Pickstock, Consultant Palliative Medicine, however, there hasn't been a meeting for some time.

[Young Carers - Dumfries & Galloway Carers Centre \(dgalcarers.co.uk\)](#)

- **School Nurses**

School nurses deal with young peoples' mental health and wellbeing, a referral is made to the service and then triaged for a nurse to complete a wellbeing assessment. They support children and young people with bereavement but don't have any specific knowledge on

substance related deaths. There is no specific time frame each person is assessed on an individual basis.

[School Nurses – Dumfries & Galloway Health & Social Care \(dghscp.co.uk\)](http://dghscp.co.uk)

- **ISSU18**

CAMHS/ISSU18 do not accept referrals re bereavement due to a parental drug related death without a significant mental health problem being present. CAMHS clinicians are not bereavement trained but can provide a mental health assessment and intervention where appropriate. CAMHS/ISSU18 accept referrals from stakeholders such as health and social services. It is worth noting CAMHS are about to begin a service wide review so this information may change.

[ISSU 18 – Dumfries & Galloway Health & Social Care \(dghscp.co.uk\)](http://dghscp.co.uk)

- **Child Bereavement UK**

They provide one to one support via phone or video link and their only contact centre in Scotland is in Glasgow. If someone requires face to face support, they will travel to Glasgow for monthly support.

[Projects in Scotland | Child Bereavement UK](#)

- **D&G Child Bereavement Network**

This is chaired by Dr Sarah Pitstock, Consultant Palliative Medicine, with representatives from Health, Education, Third Sector and School Nursing.

- **Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland**

They have a helpline any young person can access. If the bereavement is less than six months, they have access to an early support session and post six months they can access face to face counselling or via phone or virtual. They have a children and young people specialist support service. There is a waiting list for these services (except the helpline) and face to face is a longer time on the waiting list than virtual or phone.

[Children, young people and grief - Cruse Bereavement Support](#)

- **Social Services**

D&G adopted a strength and risk sensible based approach which is very much embedded in practice and utilises supporting tools such as Signs of Safety to understand risks and safety with emphasis on relationships and strengths to increase resilience. Additionally, a trauma informed approach to supporting children and families will ensure that children affected by bereavement receive the right support to help them heal. Not all children who suffer a bereavement because of a drug related death will be referred to Children and Families Social Work. Some children will have a good network of support which means they do not require social work intervention. Where there is existing Social Services involvement, the child's plan will detail what is required specifically to meet the individual child's needs. Some children might require social work support as there is no-one to look after them following their parent's death. The child's network of support will always be explored thoroughly before placing the child in foster care.

[Support for children and families - Dumfries and Galloway Council \(dumgal.gov.uk\)](http://dumgal.gov.uk)

- **Aberlour**

They would continue to support the family and the young person/people while trying to access external services, though this can be limited depending on age, neurodiversity etc. The Aberlour team are trained in Seasons for Growth which supports young people with loss including bereavement, however the time must be right for this intervention and many people need to work through various stages of grief before they are ready for this type of support. They also use a range of tools including Muddles and Puddles & Sunshine, Out of the Blue and Never 2 young to grieve.

familyoutreachdumfries@aberlour.org.uk

[Aberlour Children's Charity - Stop children suffering](http://www.aberlour.org.uk)

Additional information

There is limited research available on the impact on children and young people who experience losing a parent to substance use, however there is some research on adults impacted by a substance related death and several studies on the experience of children living with parental substance use:

The Burden of Bereavement Study (2018) found that "Bereavement by sudden parental death was associated with an increased incidence of depression, primarily during the first two years, along with post-traumatic stress disorder and functional impairment. Early identification and intervention may lessen the long-term impact".

Bergman, Axberg and Hanson found "Young people who lose a parent, (to a sudden death) especially through suicide, are vulnerable to depression and alcohol or substance abuse

during the second year after the loss.....The most propitious time to prevent or attenuate depressive episodes in bereaved youth may be shortly after the parent's death. Interventions that target complicated grief and blaming of others may also improve outcomes in symptomatic youth with parental bereavement”.

The USC Rossier Mat online programme explains how “loss after an overdose can be different to other types of parental loss. It can often come after a prolonged experience of Type II trauma. They've lost somebody that they love, but they've also sometimes lost the source of stability in their life, Or, they might have lost the source of instability or the source of chaos”.

Jessica Roy (2020) Children living with parental substance use: a cross sectional profile of children and families referred to children’s social care noted that “The study's findings highlight that children and families affected by PSM often have a range of significant support needs”.

Silva, Eroy & Noto, Ana & Souza-Formigoni, Maria Lucia. (2007). Death by Drug Overdose: Impact on Families. Journal of psychoactive drugs - The report stresses “how disturbing it is to lose a family member by overdose, and points to the need for psychological support for those families”.

Barbara Zaman, ADP Community Engagement Officer