

Supporting families and schools...

**“The expertise of PTHC is invaluable”.**

As well as helping children at school, we also offer post-bereavement group sessions, which are designed to teach children coping strategies. Our experienced team of volunteers offer support through these sessions and our ratio of two children to every volunteer ensures that every child's needs are met.

Our Little Rays group is designed for children of primary school age, offering them the opportunity to share and experience their loss in a safe and supported environment. Through play, arts and crafts, they are able to explore their thoughts and feelings about their loved one and process their grief. They are guided on a journey which talks openly and honestly about death, normalising the emotions and behaviours of grief which they may have experienced.

Our Storm group is aimed at children of secondary school and sixth form age. Adolescence brings its own set of challenges and, when coupled with grief, can lead to a multitude of complexities. Through our informal group activities, teens are able to meet and socialise with others who have similar experiences, building important peer networks. Knowing that they are not alone is a great support at a difficult time, as Liam says: **“it's nice to know you've got other people who are going through the same thing, and comforting knowing you're not the only one.”**

*“It's not just the kids that go through hard times,” he continues. “The mums and dads can talk about their experiences, after all they've lost a husband or wife, so it's not just us who are having a hard time. It's great for everyone. Sometimes my mum wouldn't get upset over Dad, she'd get upset at me getting upset over it, and seeing that I'm having a great time with other kids that understand is comforting for her as well.”*

We are privileged to care for people like Liam, his mum Jo and their family, at probably the most difficult time in their lives, but we can only do this with the generosity of our local community.

We have to raise over £20,000 every day in order to provide care, free of charge, to our patients and their relatives.

For further information about how to support Phyllis Tuckwell Hospice Care, contact our Fundraising team on:

**01252 729446**  
**support@pth.org.uk**

Phyllis Tuckwell Hospice Care

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Phyllis Tuckwell Memorial Hospice Ltd.  
Registered Number 1063033. Registered Charity Number 264501.

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### **Liam's Story**

Childhood bereavement support for schools.

**Phyllis Tuckwell**<sup>®</sup>  
Hospice Care

...because every day is precious

July 2017

# Liam's Story



**It is estimated that, by the age of 16, 1 in 20 children will have experienced the death of one or both parents. Many teachers and head teachers will at some point have a bereaved child in their care and may need some guidance on how to support that child.**

*"It's something you're never prepared for," says Megan Robinson, head teacher at Elvetham Heath Primary school in Fleet. "Supporting children through separation and divorce is one thing, but when a parent is terminally ill, and then dies, that's a whole new ballgame."*

When a parent is diagnosed with a terminal illness, children need to know what is happening and be supported in age-appropriate ways. Unsupported grief in childhood can have significant short and long term negative consequences, including a deep and lasting effect on a child's emotional wellbeing, which can result in anger, depression, sleeping difficulties, mental health issues, relationship problems and offending incidents.

Studies have shown a clear correlation between school exclusions and delinquency arising from bereavement. 16% of bereaved children have concentration problems one year on from the death of their loved one, compared with 6% in non-bereaved children, and 21% have serious problems two years on. In addition to this, the incidence of childhood bereavement in youth offenders can be up to ten times higher (41%) than the national average (4%), illustrating why bereavement work with children and young people is therefore vital not only for the benefit of the individual child but for society as a whole.

Familiarity, structure and routine are essential to a child's wellbeing, and a terminal illness can disrupt these, turning life on its head and leaving the child feeling insecure and

uncertain. When a parent dies, life changes for the rest of the family, and they need support through this turbulent time. The surviving parent may need to work longer hours to support the family, leaving less time to spend with their child or children. The family's income may decrease, and they may need to move house, perhaps to a different area and consequently a different school. Our counsellors understand these changes and the impact they can have. Through family counselling, one-to-one sessions and group work, we can put in place the appropriate support, based on each child and family's needs.

For some children, school can be a refuge when a parent is dying or has died, offering normality, where everything remains the same and they can forget – albeit temporarily – life outside of school. Often we see these children excel academically, as their schoolwork provides a distraction from home life.

Other children find school challenging, feeling that everyone there knows their business and that they can't escape. They can feel singled out or different; teachers ask too many questions, meaning well but only reminding them of their loss. Their concentration and focus can be easily disrupted, leading them to struggle with their work and finding themselves punished for not concentrating.

Schools need educating in recognising the behaviours of grief and ways in which they can support these children. **"Having the support of Phyllis Tuckwell is such a huge relief to everybody,"** says Megan, *"because it affects the whole school community. It's getting that balance right between what do we say to the child, what do we not say to the child, what do we say to the parents – how do we get that all-round care for the child. The expertise of Phyllis Tuckwell is invaluable; I can't imagine not having it."*

Understanding the individuality, belief system and culture of each family is paramount to understanding the child, and so we work with the whole family. We also work in and alongside schools, supporting them in their expectations of the child and providing them with strategies to help the child cope emotionally within the school environment.

*"It's not a one-size-fits-all,"* agrees Megan. *"The children Phyllis Tuckwell has been working with at Elvetham Heath are a range of ages, personalities and families, and the psychological difference between them is vast. **Knowing that the counsellors are equipped to deal with that, and to help and support them and us regardless of these issues, is so important. It's not just them coming in, spending time with the child and then leaving again - it's a continuous conversation.** Being able to pick up the phone and ask the most ridiculous question without feeling like it's a ridiculous question has been invaluable, and their feedback really helps us open up the doors of conversation - that's where the support's brilliant. The children benefit so much, and that means everything."*

*"He didn't understand why he sometimes did what he did,"* said one mum of her bereaved son, Liam. *"He would run out of the classroom, do things which were quite out of character for him, and somebody from the outside who didn't know of his bereavement might perceive that as naughty behaviour - but I always remember his counsellor saying to him 'you're not bad, you're sad', and she was probably the only person at the time who really understood that."*

*"It was like me against the world,"* explains Liam. *"I didn't really talk to anyone about anything. My answer to everything was anger or frustration. I used to push people away. When I didn't have counselling, I never really said anything out loud or told anyone - I just held it in, and that didn't help at all. But then when I did get angry, I let it out and not in a good way. **Having counselling helped it to come out meaningfully and in the right way,** doing good things and not hurting others or being angry."*

*"He was like an exploding firework at school,"* agrees his mum, *"but the work his counsellor did with him, and giving the school advice on what strategies and coping mechanisms they could try – sometimes it was really straightforward things, but it did massively help. He's also had one-to-one sessions, which helped him. Now the years are starting to pass, he's growing into a young man, and he's much more able to deal with things because he got help in the early stages, talking to people who really knew how to deal with those situations. Having that release was good for him."*