

# Disciplined over homework on day of Dad's funeral



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**T**HE idea that "children should be seen and not heard" was prevalent when I was a child. I often wonder today whether the significant issues that children deal with in the transition from childhood to adulthood are not heard, hidden by the noise of discussion about standards, structures and systems.

In July 1958, important things were happening. Colonel Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi army had just overthrown the monarch. The USA had just tested an atmospheric atom bomb on Bikini Island. The first woman life peer entered the House of Lords. The first parking meter was installed in the UK. In the world of education, Local Education Authorities were still reluctant to develop expensive new secondary technical schools despite supporting the tripartite system with less than 4% of the secondary age group in secondary technical schools. The Carr Committee reported that employers were overwhelmingly opposed to vocational instruction provided by schools.

To me, as a little boy of 14 years, and an important customer of the education system, all of these significant events were irrelevant. On Monday morning, July 28, my father was found crushed to death by the car he was repairing in our garage. The car was balanced on some bricks, which slipped. This was only two years after my sister had died from encephalomyelitis, a virus which affected the brain.

As was common practice, I attended school rather than go to the funerals of my father and sister. Both were particularly difficult times for me as a pupil - the end of my first year at secondary school and the start of the fourth year O-Level examination courses.

Without doubt, my school was unable to respond to or cope with my bereavement. Indeed, I remember being disciplined for not doing my homework on the day my father was buried. As I went from class to class I realised that not one teacher had been informed that this was the day of my father's funeral.

A few weeks later, my grandmother bought me a dog, "Laddie". Because I wasn't allowed to keep it at home I would visit my grandparents every weekend to take Laddie for a walk. One weekend I arrived at



Les Walton's searing experience surely couldn't happen now

my grandparents to be told by my grandmother that Laddie had been killed by a bus.

Many years later my grandfather was dying and, just before he died, he said he wanted to confess to me. He then described how he had filled a dustbin with water, put Laddie inside the bin and sat on the lid until he drowned. I could not forgive him - at least until many years later.

When I researched my family tree, I discovered that my grandfather had started working at Medomsley Pit at 12, cleaning the toilets. His own father had died at the age of 47 of a mine-related lung disease. To my grandfather, the death of a dog was no great shakes.

In my youth it seemed death was more openly discussed, certainly among adults, and seemed to be just part of everyday life. When my other grandfather was about to die he asked my cousin Dennis and myself to take him for one last drink of whiskey at the working men's club. This was a Friday night. He then held court as all his old mates popped in for a drink with him. He died on the Sunday morning.

My "uncles" were a mixture of real uncles and friends of the family. When one of my uncles was dying, the rest all visited him on a Saturday night in hospital. I watched as they all told him to hang on until Monday morning so they could "put a bob" on the insurance. "No bloody way am I doing that," he said. "I'll die

tomorrow just to upset you all." Sure enough, he died on the Sunday. Whether or not death was less of a taboo in my childhood and grieving even being seen as a sign of weakness, certainly the impact on children was rarely talked about and considered in schools.

Many years later, I would be prominent in the development of the "pastoral care movement" focusing on child centred education. My motivation for the establishment of Gateshead Pastoral Care Association and, subsequently, the National Association of Pastoral Care, was to address the continuing need for schools to place the child's needs at the centre of everything they do.

Child Bereavement UK provides some very powerful statistics. A parent of children under 18 dies every 22 minutes in the UK - around 23,600 a year. This equates to around 11 children being bereaved of a parent every day. And 1 in 29 school children has been bereaved of a parent or sibling - that's a child in every class.

Without doubt, there is still insufficient focus on child bereavement.

It is always so important to remember that children are dealing with more than studying, and that schools are more than exam factories. The death of a family member including pets is a significant event for children. I do accept it is difficult within schools to identify and address the immediate emotional needs of children. The school curriculum, through personal and social education, should explore issues such as bereavement, but that is not enough - a culture of care is crucial in which everyone looks out for signs of vulnerability and we are there to support one another when that support is needed.

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