

social care

Police officers are being trained to treat bereaved children after the sudden death of a loved one, says **Jane Hughes**

Pain of a child

Adults tend to find themselves at a loss when talking to children about the death of someone close. Police officers, who may have to break the news of a sudden death, are no different to the rest of us. But they are now getting expert help — from an independent child bereavement project which first came to the aid of police in the aftermath of the Paddington rail crash.

"Like adults, children who have lost someone they love want to talk about what has happened and find ways to express their grief," says Frances Kraus, co-ordinator of the Candle Project, a counselling service for bereaved children that is providing specialist training to officers in the Metropolitan Police. "Instead, they often feel forced to bottle things up because adults find the subject too difficult to broach, or may be so overwhelmed by their own emotions that they are un-

able to offer much comfort."

The aim of the police training, says Kraus, is to increase awareness of what children of different ages understand about death and what their reactions and needs could be following a sudden and traumatic loss. Officers are also taught how they can advise parents worried about what to say to their children, referring them to specialist support where necessary.

For professionals working in front-line services, every disaster highlights the limited and patchy nature of expert help for bereaved children. Frequently, there is no immediate, co-ordinated response to the needs of such children. Instead, statutory and voluntary child bereavement projects, which are often community based, may be brought in on an ad hoc basis as various agencies work together to do the best they can.

After the Paddington crash in 1999, one of the most difficult tasks faced by family liaison officers (FLOs) in the

Met was how to support the parents or carers of children who had been bereaved. A counselling team brought in by the rail companies was unable to offer expertise in working with children and the police turned to the Candle Project, based at St Christopher's hospice in south London.

"People were asking for immediate, practical advice about what to tell their children and how they might react, as well as what to watch out for as time went on," says Kraus. The Candle Project had just produced a booklet for children grieving over the sudden loss of someone close to them and Thames Trains ordered 150 copies to give out to the families. Because the project's catchment area covered only south-east London, Kraus helped refer individual families on to specialist agencies nearer their own homes and provided telephone advice to police and parents.

After Paddington, Kraus was asked by the Met to provide **▶ page 159**



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▶ page 160 further training in child bereavement, as part of a six-day course in family liaison skills. The course had been set up following the Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence, when the force had pledged to improve its response to bereaved families by training 500 family liaison officers (FLOs) in two years. The training now runs every three weeks and looks likely to continue at least into next year.

Detective Constable Ron Cuthbertson, of the detective training school in Hendon, north London, says: "Getting the family liaison work right means that everybody gains — the family, the community and the police. People want to protect children from the truth, yet as soon as a police officer steps into a home they will know there is something going on. Kraus is one of the most experienced workers in the field and her input is crucial in providing officers with the grounding necessary to give the right information and advice."

The course trains FLOs to work with families bereaved by murder, manslaughter, suicide, unexplained death or a road crash. Their role is to support the family from the initial point of contact, through to a possible inquest, court trial or public inquiry.

Kraus, together with psychologist William Yule, who runs a traumatic stress clinic for children at the Maudsley hospital in south London, teaches a one-day session on bereavement — half of which focuses on children. The training for the police is offered also to other professionals, including teachers, social workers, school nurses and health visitors.

A social worker herself, Kraus's expertise is drawn from St Christopher's, which has been working with bereaved families for more than 30 years. She does not teach counselling techniques, although the Candle Project does provide a counselling service for children, as well as specialist training for counsellors and a self-help group for parents. Rather, her aim is to provide a practical and theoretical knowledge base about child grief.

"The most recent research shows that children have a good understanding of death by eight to 10 years old," says Kraus. "However, they may react in very different ways to a sudden bereavement — anything from anger, distress, shock or even appearing to be unaffected.

"If their grief is suppressed, then it

may come out in other ways, such as behavioural problems or physical symptoms. We talk about post-traumatic stress disorder — how common it is, what the symptoms are and how it can go on for much longer than people imagine."

Officers watch a video of children who have been bereaved, talking about how they felt excluded from the grieving of adults because their feelings were not acknowledged. This is followed by a discussion on children's needs, including at what age they can attend a funeral and how they need to be given an informed choice about whether to go. Officers role play different situations and practise giving information in simple language and manageable chunks. They are taught to check what children have understood by asking them to repeat it back.

Following the training, Kraus regularly gets calls from FLOs asking for advice on how to handle a particular situation or refer a family to another service. According to one officer, who worked with relatives of victims of the Paddington crash and the Soho bombing, the information she provides is a vital resource.

"We are not counsellors, but what we say to bereaved families is extremely important and we have got to get it right the first time, says Detective Constable Mark Graham, of the racial and violent crimes taskforce. "As a father myself, I think the training reinforced my sense that it was better not to try and hide anything because children need to be included and they are going to find out anyway.

"It was helpful to have information on how much they would understand — and need to know — at different ages and to learn more about the stages of the grieving process. Knowing that people react to a sudden death in many different ways helped make sense of certain situations I have experienced, for instance how sometimes anger can be directed at you as the bearer of bad news."

Ultimately, says Graham, parents or relatives will make up their own minds about what to tell their children. But, with the right training, the police can at least help them make an informed decision.

The Candle Project is on 0208-778 9252. The Childhood Bereavement Project, on 0115-911 8070 or at: cbp@ncb.org.uk, has information on other projects around the country