

INDEPENDENT  
THINKING  
ON ...

# LOSS

*Ian Gilbert*

*with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert*

A LITTLE BOOK ABOUT BEREAVEMENT FOR SCHOOLS

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For Grandad.

'When a person we love so much leaves us, it is hard, but we draw strength from the life they lived, from the memories they have left us and from the hope that they held for the lives we have left to live.'



# FOREWORD

Since establishing Independent Thinking in 1994, we have worked hard to share with educators around the world our belief that there is always another way. The Independent Thinking On ... series of books is an extension of that work, giving a space for great educators to use their words and share great practice across a number of critical and relevant areas of education.

*Independent Thinking on Loss* is a welcome but challenging addition to this series, looking not so much at the nature of teaching and learning or the wider education system but, instead, at what a school can do when the worst happens to a child in it. As it will.

Nothing prepares us for the loss of a loved one, regardless of our age. Or theirs. Whether we know that death is imminent, expected and inevitable or whether someone is snatched away from us so suddenly that we never had time to say goodbye, neither is better, neither is right; whatever happens, the loss hits us and it really, really hurts.

As part of our duty of care to the children and young people in our classrooms, the least we can do is to prepare ourselves to deal with a child losing a loved one. This is important not only because we can help to minimise the disruption to their schooling and their future lives, but also because it's the right thing to do.

But what do you do when you are faced with the situation of a child losing someone close to them and you simply don't know what you should say or not say, do or not do?

This book will help you to answer that question.

## INDEPENDENT THINKING ON LOSS

The memory of June 2008 is forever etched on the lives of Ian Gilbert (founder of Independent Thinking) and his three amazing children, William, Olivia and Phoebe. Their hopelessness and anger, courage and bravery after the children lost their mum comes through loud and clear in this hard-hitting book. Many people around them at the time did the right thing. Many did the wrong thing. Worse, many did nothing.

The overwhelming need for schools and communities to at least have an idea of what to do in order to help children who are experiencing loss, and its aftermath, is why this book is so important.

**NINA JACKSON  
CRAIG CEFN PARC**

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<i>Send a condolence card and encourage classmates to do the same. Saying 'I didn't know what to do' and doing nothing is a form of moral cowardice – and why should you be let off the hook? No one else knows what to do either.</i>	
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<i>When the child comes back to school talk to them (but don't patronise them). Ask them how they would like their teachers to act.</i>	
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*Be tolerant of homework and other work commitments – evenings may well be spent grieving and talking, not working. Agree work commitments with the child, though, and be firm but caring as you try to ensure they don't get too far behind (and thereby add a feeling of failure to their grieving).*
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*When another parent dies, make sure you are mindful of other children who have lost parents, or*

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*indeed any loved one, as it will bring many memories back.*

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*Time heals in bereavement as much as it does following an amputation. It is just what you go through to come to terms with things better.*

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*Thank you for taking the time to read this. You can make a terrible situation a bit less stressful for a grieving family.*

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*Let's not tell our sad stories.*

**JERRY MAGUIRE (1996)**



I  
FERGUS



This is a unique and special book.

Schools need practical, everyday guidance on how to support bereaved children in schools. But they also need to hear and feel how children and young people experience this support, to tune into what are so often unheard voices, to truly understand what they need and what they want.

Around 45,000 children and young people in the UK experience the bereavement of a parent or a sibling every year.<sup>1</sup> It is a significant number, and the effects can be devastating. At the very least, that is around one child in every classroom in this country.

We know that teachers want to help, that grief and bereavement feel real to them, and that they can make a difference in how a grieving child or young person journeys through their grief over time. But we also know that teachers don't always know what to do and worry that they don't have the skills to talk to grieving children. Most people (teachers included) worry that they will make it worse, not better.

Like everything in teaching, it is both a huge responsibility and a real opportunity.

I don't know of anything else that manages to combine the practical knowledge that teachers need with personal wisdom, drawn from the profound and real experiences of sorrow and loss. What Ian, William, Olivia and Phoebe have done is to give voice to the reality of grief in a family, and to the experience of being bereaved children and young people negotiating the everyday reality of life in school.

Their response is optimism, and this book is imbued with the hope that, in sharing what they know and have

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1 See <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/child-bereavement-plans-schools/>.

## **INDEPENDENT THINKING ON LOSS**

experienced, more schools will be able to help more children and young people through their loss.

If anything can help to change the acoustics in schools for grieving children and young people, this book can.

**FERGUS CROW, CEO, WINSTON'S WISH**

||  
IAN



In 2008 my wife died. It was terrible. It was unexpected. In its own awful way, it was a relief. Mental illness brings with it to family life an inner chaos that radiates turmoil. Tragically, it also eats away at childhoods. At the time of the accident, our three children had already been through a great deal. Phoebe was nine when her mother died. Olivia was thirteen. The last time William saw his mother was on his eighteenth birthday, five days before she died.

Several months after their mother's death, BBC's *Newsround* aired a brave and, at the time, controversial programme in which four children talked about their own experiences of losing a loved one.<sup>1</sup> This prompted us to sit down and think about how we could use the network of Independent Thinking schools to get across to teachers what they could do to help children who have lost a parent or a close loved one based simply on our own experiences. To begin with, we did this by way of a fifteen-point PDF handout on one side of A4. Our points were so welcomed by teachers that we decided to elaborate upon them for schools everywhere. What grew out of that work was *The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools*,<sup>2</sup> and this book, *Independent Thinking on Loss*, is the latest iteration of that original and highly regarded work.

In this way we can not only ensure that a whole new generation of teachers will get the messages we believe are so important, but we can also update the reader on how things are still unfolding, even now, a decade and more later.

As for the circumstances of how my children lost their mother, I am pleased to say that over the last ten years

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1 Gone: Newsround Special Programme on Coping with Death, *Newsround*, BBC One (4 August 2011). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/14394831>.

2 I. Gilbert, W. Gilbert, O. Gilbert and P. Gilbert, *The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2010).

mental illness has all but lost the taboo it had back then. Denial kills, after all. I am no royalist, but the manner in which princes William and Harry have spoken about losing their mother and raised awareness of a range of emotional health issues has helped significantly. If the royals are talking about it, then it will be in *The Telegraph*, which means those most embarrassed by such an illness may have to admit that it exists.

In our experience.

But our experience was what *The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools* was all about. Simply the four of us describing in all honesty the personal experiences we had and what, perhaps, primary schools, secondary schools and sixth form colleges could (a) do more of, (b) do differently and (c) never do again to help all those other children and young people who will experience loss too.

And they will experience it.

According to a report by the Childhood Bereavement Network, 41,000 children in the UK lost a parent in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Or, to put it another way, that is one parental death every twenty-two minutes, statistically speaking. If you haven't experienced such tragedy in your school yet, you will. It's just a question of time. With that in mind, what are you going to do to be ready for it? Or will your response be like the following, as one teacher at a bereavement conference that the girls and I were addressing a few years ago described it?

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A child lost a parent. We didn't know what to do, so we did nothing. Then things moved on. Then it

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3 See <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/research/key-statistics.aspx>.

happened it again. And we still didn't know what to do, so we did nothing again.

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Of course, schools are busy places and teachers are busy people. There are limits to what they can achieve with so much to teach, so many to teach it to and so little time to fit it all in. Not to mention their own natural and cultural squeamishness and clumsiness in talking about death. As a society, it is one taboo too far, so we tend to avoid it. Although maybe there are changes ahead. According to a recent special issue of *New Scientist* magazine bearing the headline 'The Way We Die Now',<sup>4</sup> there is at least one 'death café' in London where you can enjoy tea and cake while exploring questions such as, 'If you planted an apple tree in the ground where your mum had been composted, would you then eat the apples?'<sup>5</sup>

And, of course, teachers are human too. They have their own sad stories and like attending weddings and watching *Love Actually*, we are all susceptible to the triggers that bring vivid memories and strong emotions rushing back in a way we can never control.

Nor should we try to. 'Better out than in' has been a family motto of ours for quite a while now.

All of which means that the question of whether schools feel it is their place to address issues of bereavement and loss head-on depends on their understanding not only of their role but also of the link between childhood bereavement, well-being and academic achievement.

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4 *New Scientist*, Issue 3257 (23 November 2019). Available at: <https://www.newscientist.com/issue/3257>.

5 For more such questions to help open up conversations around death and loss, check out the Thunks on Death resource on the Winston's Wish website at: <https://www.winstonswish.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Winstons-Wish-thunks.pdf>.

Let's address the last point straight away. Put simply, emotionally balanced children do better in their exams. Duh! Research from Southampton University for Public Health England in 2014 described the effect on academic attainment that schools can enjoy when emotional health and well-being is high on their list of priorities:

- 1 *Pupils with better health and wellbeing are likely to achieve better academically.*
- 2 *Effective social and emotional competencies are associated with greater health and wellbeing, and better achievement.*
- 3 *The culture, ethos and environment of a school influences the health and wellbeing of pupils and their readiness to learn.*
- 4 *A positive association exists between academic attainment and physical activity levels of pupils.*<sup>6</sup>

Despite Teflon-coated schools ministers dismissing as 'ghastly' initiatives such as social and emotional aspects of learning<sup>7</sup> – even though actual experts, such as Independent Thinking's resident paediatric neurologist Dr Andrew Curran, can see the value in it: Andrew told me that he personally viewed it as the most important innovation to hit primary education for forty years – we can see a clear link between happy and healthy children and academically successful schools.

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6 F. Brooks, *The Link Between Pupil Health and Wellbeing and Attainment: Briefing for Head Teachers, Governors and Staff in Education Settings* (London: Public Health England, 2014), p. 4. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/370686/HT\\_briefing\\_layoutvFINALvii.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370686/HT_briefing_layoutvFINALvii.pdf).

7 Daily Mirror, Kids To Be Taught Respect (30 April 2007). Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/kids-to-be-taught-respect-470934>.

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Independent Thinking. An education company.

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WRITTEN FROM THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A PARENT AND HIS THREE CHILDREN, THIS UNIQUE BOOK DETAILS THE WAYS IN WHICH SCHOOLS CAN HELP THEIR PUPILS COME TO TERMS WITH THE DEATH OF A PARENT.

A child loses a parent every twenty-two minutes in the UK. Childhood bereavement brings with it a whole series of challenges for the children involved – challenges they will deal with all their lives. The research shows teachers want to help, but don't know what to do. This book is a start.

Written by Independent Thinking founder Ian Gilbert together with his three children, *Independent Thinking on Loss* is a personal account of the way educational institutions tried and succeeded, tried and failed and sometimes didn't try at all to help William, Olivia and Phoebe come to terms with the death of their mother.

SUITABLE FOR ANYONE WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING.

This book will help you be the adult that a grieving child needs. It will give you confidence and ideas – and some important pointers on what not to do, too.

DR POOKY KNIGHTSMITH, CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH EXPERT

Provides powerful lessons to help us try to get things right when a child or young person is bereaved.

HEATHER DANSON, HELPLINE MANAGER, WINSTON'S WISH

Since establishing *Independent Thinking* over twenty-five years ago, *Ian Gilbert* has made a name for himself across the world as a highly original and award-winning writer, editor, speaker, practitioner and thinker, and is someone who the *IB World* magazine has referred to as one of the world's leading educational visionaries. His children – *William, Olivia and Phoebe* – are now in their twenties and are happy and successful. But they miss their mum.

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