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Living with the death of a parent can be especially difficult for children—Winston's Wish is the bereavement charity that steps in when they need it most.

Every 22 minutes a child's parent dies. One in 29 children are bereaved of a parent [3], brother or sister. 78 per cent of 11 to 16-year-olds experience at least one of their close relatives or friends dying.

"There's no right or wrong way to grieve [4]. And there's no set formula to 'get over' it. In fact, grief [5] isn't something you can simply get over. Instead, we can learn to live with our grief and build a life around our loss," say the bereavement charity Winston's Wish [6].

They exist to give hope to grieving children. Here's how.

Mission and vision

Winston's Wish was founded by Julie Stokes in 1992.

With a Master's degree in clinical psychology, and a belief that it is best to involve children before and after a parent's death, and to support parents, Julie travelled to America and Canada on a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship to better understand bereavement services there.

Inspired by what she saw, she returned to the UK and set up Winston's Wish, naming it after her fellowship.

Today Fergus Crow is at the helm. He says, "From my own lived experience of my father dying when I was still a teenager, I know how vital it is for children and young people to know that there is support out there especially designed for them—and for that support to be easy to find.

"I feel honoured to play my part in a charity which seeks to support grieving children and their families when they are bereft of someone close to them.

“The pain of bereavement can be immeasurably difficult to cope with and it is vital that young people do not feel like they are left on their own when their worlds are turned upside down by grief.

“Each year Winston’s Wish supports thousands of young people as well as the parents, teachers, and other professionals helping them through their bereavement. In many ways, I wish charities like ours didn’t need to exist, but we are a long way from that being a reality.”

Getting help

Any young person up to the age of 25 who has experienced the death of someone important to them can reach out directly to Winston’s Wish through their on-demand services.

They can email, chat online [7], text or call the helpline, or begin with a book that explores emotions, provides escape, and reminds that you are not alone. *As Big As It Gets* talks about serious illness. *Beyond The Rough Rock* supports a child bereaved by suicide. One-to-one counselling is also available by referral.

President of Winston’s Wish, the Duchess of Richmond and Gordon, was four years old when her father died suddenly of a heart attack.

“I think”, she said, “that once you have experienced the death of someone close to you, it’s as though you have crossed a river and you can’t go back. It doesn’t matter if it happens to you when you are four or forty. Suddenly you find yourself in new territory, and however well-meaning the people left on the other side, they don’t really know where you are."

It’s important to talk about grief with others who have "crossed the river", since, in the words of Shakespeare [8], "the grief that does not speak knits up the o'er wrought heart, and bids it break."

To this end, Growing With Grief talks [9] help 16-25 year olds understand their grief together; the podcast series, Grief in Common [10], is designed to offer comfort and practical support to bereaved young people and sees members of the Winston’s Wish Youth Team discuss their personal experiences of grief.

Support at school

“Death neither obeys the school timetable nor appears on it; it enters the classroom without knocking," says Winston's Wish.

Recognising that sudden death, expected death and suicide will impact school communities, Winston’s Wish helps schools to structure culturally-sensitive bereavement policies, and provide guidelines around informing staff, parents and pupils about a death in the school.

Free online bereavement training courses are also available for primary and secondary school teachers and staff.

“Thunks™ are 'beguilingly simple-looking questions' that make your brain go ouch,” and can be used in classrooms to open up discussion around death, grief and bereavement. They include:

- Do you love a family member less after they have died?
- Is it better to die suddenly than being given a month to live?
- Do all your family members have to be alive to be part of your family?

Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, the first National Clinical Director for Children in Government and former Children’s Commissioner for England, has called for schools to be ready to discuss death [11].

"Schools are desperately important—death will affect every school. Death is part of life," he says.

Silent no more

Children are often "hidden mourners", says Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green. His father died suddenly, during a routine operation, when Al was just ten years old.

After the death an aunt said to him, in the hospital, "Al, your daddy has just died and you must be the man of the family now and look after your mum and your sister."

"That was the day my childhood ended," says Al. It was not until much later in life, in his fifties, when watching a programme featuring Winston's Wish that the grief finally spilled over.

Al felt "kicked in the solar plexus" and wept uncontrollably because he had never been allowed to say goodbye.

There is a recognised "burden of unresolved grief" in adults who were bereaved as children, and who received no support.

Some carry it into their eighties and nineties. Believing that it is never too late to confront grief, Winston's Wish have created an exclusive Facebook community, Adults Bereaved as Children [12], to bring "forgotten mourners" together.

Poet and educator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that "there is no grief like the grief that does not speak," whilst Charles Dickens [13] wrote that "we need never be afraid of our tears."

Winston's Wish are waiting for your words and for your tears; for whatever you're feeling or not feeling. They can help you own and start your grief support journey.

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