The following article, The Impact of a Peer Support Programme for Children who are Experiencing Loss: A New Zealand Perspective by Peter Bray and Joy Tomoana, supports the value of the group process when working with grieving children. The qualitative research provides a glimpse into the group processes, their values and outcomes. This is not an endorsement but acknowledgement of the value of the group process when working with children who are experiencing loss.

Thank you,

William Steele

The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children
The Impact of a Peer Support Programme for Children who are Experiencing Loss:
A New Zealand Perspective

Abstract
Managing the absence or loss of a significant person in a child’s life is distressing, sometimes traumatic and always unavoidable. Short-term, support programmes offer opportunities for children through safe disclosure, guided exploration and meaning making to understand and manage this distress. This research evaluates the work of one peer support programme in New Zealand. Gathering qualitative data from 141 participants in four centres it examines the programme’s aims and affects on its participants, and discusses the grief support needs and experiences of children and young people. The results indicate that this programme is highly valued by its participants and that it supports both parents and their children to manage their losses and integrate these difficult experiences.

KEYWORDS: death, divorce, loss, grief, groups, peer support, separation

INTRODUCTION
The severing of intimate bonds with close adults is commonly endured by many children. Exposed to distressing experiences of parental absence, death, divorce and separation, these unwanted and “necessary losses” (Viorst, 1986) irrevocably disrupt our children’s lives. Such losses significantly challenge an individual’s understanding of the world (Attig, 1996) triggering profound reconstructions of existing personal narratives (Neimeyer, 1998; Stefens & Coyle, 2010). In these circumstances the world has changed and it will never be the same again. It has been estimated that 50% of all marriages in the industrialized world end in divorce (Harris, 2010). In any one year in New Zealand around 25,000 parents separate
(Robertson & Pryor, 2009) and presently almost a third of New Zealand households containing children are managed by separated, divorced or single parents (Statistics New Zealand, n. d.).

Children are significantly affected by parental discord, inconsistent and ineffective parenting, reduced affection and problematic parental well-being that accompany parental absence, death, divorce and separation (Demo & Cox, 2000; Harris, 2010). From a number of key studies on the effects of divorce on children, Grych and Fincham (1992) summarise that children, particularly boys, consistently suffer from high levels of aggression and conduct disorder. They also note the prevalence of depression, anxiety and withdrawal associated with social interaction and academic difficulty. In terms of age specific responses, they found that younger children generally present as moderately depressed, internalise their concerns about the parent’s absence, and perceive divorce as personal rejection (Wallerstein, cited in Grych & Fincham, 1992), whereas older children are more able to express anger and find blame with others.

Children’s bereavement experiences can depend upon the circumstances of the death, the relationship with the deceased (Worden, 2009), and their predisposition to developing a psychiatric disorder (Dowdney, 2000). Most children, Worden and Silverman (1996) suggest, make adequate adjustments to the loss of a parent within a year. However, some children do become socially withdrawn, suffer, significant depressive symptoms, and have academic difficulties for a much longer period (Cerel, Fristad, Veducci, Weller, & Weller, 2006). This apparent disparity is explained by Kalter, Lohnes, Chasin, Cain, Dunning and Rowan’s (2002) meta-review of the adjustment literature that reveals that some children experience high levels of distress and life disruption whilst others may not be significantly different to non-bereaved children. Indeed, Worden’s 1996 ‘Child Bereavement Study’ (cited in Currier,
Holland & Neimeyer, 2007) suggests that up to 80 per cent of bereaved children find positive ways to manage their losses.

While evaluative research into the efficacy and impact of support programmes for children following parental separation is limited, particularly in New Zealand, the evidence clearly indicates that in countries where they are in place they make a positive difference (Wolchik, Sandler, Millsap, Plummer, Greene, & Anderson, et al., 2002; Pedro-Carroll, 2005). However, much of the research relating to the value and efficacy of peer support interventions for bereaved children, according to Currier, Holland & Neimeyer (2007) provide little evidence of positive outcomes for children who participate. Indeed, there appears to be little consensus as to whether interventions like grief support programmes are even necessary, appropriate or beneficial for children, particularly for those who may not be considered at high risk of negative outcomes (Harrington & Harrison, 1999; Kalter, et al., 2002).

**The Seasons™ programme**

Seasons™ is a national, voluntary and community based peer-support programme that offers the opportunity for children and young people to share their stories of grief and loss and help each other. The participants are usually missing an important person from their daily life due to death, divorce, imprisonment or separation (CENTACARE, 1996).

Originating in Melbourne, this Australian programme has been offered in New Zealand since 1997 as the core component of the Waiapu Anglican Social Services Trust Board’s (WASSTB) outreach service called ‘Growing through Grief’. This study investigates the experiences of children, parents and Companion/facilitators of this not for profit programme within four regions of New Zealand. Currently the WASSTB offer 10 ‘Growing through Grief’ services and deliver Seasons™ to over 500 children annually. Local committees, coordinators and trained volunteer Companions provide Seasons™ in their community, with
support from WASSTB, and a national coordinator. Other regional centres in New Zealand such as Auckland, Waikato and Taranaki are also beginning to offer Seasons™ and currently an additional 350 children attend these programmes annually. It is anticipated that the number of programme providers and participants will increase each year.

The programme runs over a ten week period. Children and young people between the ages of 5 and 16 years attend a 60 minute session once a week after school in church premises or community venues while those in in-school programmes attend during school time. The ‘Growing through Grief’ service provides extensive training for volunteer Companions prior to their facilitation of the peer support process with children in groups of 5 to 6. The curriculum of the Seasons™ programme is based on the concept of the seasons of the year. Consequently, children are encouraged to understand that their grief and loss is a dynamic experience that changes and resolves through time. Although this is not essentially a therapeutic programme it acknowledges the uniqueness of each child and their experience of grief and loss and gives them opportunities to ask questions and express their dreams and hopes for the future. Primarily, the sessions focus upon peer support and working through a journal of words and drawings that encourage responses. The groups share: discussion and storytelling; literature, poetry, drama, art, writing and music; the appreciation of ritual, symbol and celebration; and, activities that involve silence, reflection, relaxation and meditation. Sessions are conducted in a safe and supportive environment and participants, guided by trained adult Companions, may choose to opt in or out of the activities as they wish.

The programme’s content and delivery style match the criteria recommended by Pedro-Carroll (2005) for quality programmes that provide support to, and strengthen the skills of, children from separated families by providing: a safe and supportive environment; interaction
in small groups; an emphasis on children’s strengths; and, training and close supervision for facilitators.

METHODS

Background

Studies of community-based interventions providing support to bereaved parents and children reveal major limitations in the ways that they might effectively be evaluated (Curtis & Newman, 2001; Lieberman, 1993). For example, findings of some quantitative studies have been compromised by methodological weaknesses such as small sample sizes; high levels of attrition by those attending; difficulty in developing appropriate instrumentation (Curtis & Newman, 2001); and difficulties in controlling for the multiple variables in children’s lives (Stokes, Wyer & Crossley, 1997). Further complications are to be found in Currier, Holland and Neimeyer’s (2007) meta-study of bereavement interventions with children. They conclude that studies that had a control group and used quantitative measures of participants’ responses to the intervention had not resulted in either expected or beneficial levels of outcome for the children. In these cases almost all of the research judged the quality of outcomes using psychiatric symptom or behavioural disorder measures, which suggests that the choice of measures has a strong influence on the findings.

Subsequently, our research employed a predominantly qualitative methodology that we felt was the least intrusive and appropriately and respectfully captured the participants’ experiences of the programme (Patton, 2003). Data was collected that corresponded to the evaluative purpose of the project and pursued areas of inquiry that were specifically designed and developed from the programme’s stated objectives (Curtis & Newman, 2001):

1.) Is the programme achieving its aims?
Seasons™ aims to provide children with a number of opportunities or conditions in which they can integrate their grief experiences, which include telling their full story in a confidential and supportive environment that nurtures inner peace, self mastery and esteem, and creates hope (CENTACARE, 1996). This central ‘fidelity’ question was explored with all of the stakeholders in this evaluation.

2.) What is the immediate impact of attending this programme on the children and their families?

Whilst the children addressed this question directly in their small focus groups at the end of the programme, the parents and caregivers were asked at both the beginning and the end to identify their: concerns about their children’s wellbeing; reasons for participation; hopes and benefits to their children and themselves; and, whether their expectations and preferred outcomes had been realised by the programme.

3.) Are there variations in impact over the groups of children who attend (by age, gender, ethnic background, nature of loss)?

The research was interested to evaluate how variable factors such as children’s gender, ethnicity, and age, participation in the programme and experience of different kinds of losses might influence the parents’ and the children’s perception of and response to the programme.

4.) Are there unmet grief support needs for children in our communities?

It was considered an important part of the research to identify any limitations in the scope, delivery and effectiveness of the programme when placed alongside the stated needs of the client group in each community.

Participants

A full research proposal was submitted to, and approved by, our institutional research and human subjects committee and the pre- and post-intervention evaluative interview questions were trialled. Four out of ten regional centres where the Seasons™ programme is currently
delivered were randomly designated for study. Permission was obtained from the following participating stakeholder groups:

a.) Parents/Caregivers – Once permission had been obtained, these participants were given a pre-intervention interview in the week before their children began Seasons™ of up to 30 minutes using a set of guiding questions. A second 30 minute post-intervention interview was conducted within a fortnight of their children’s completion of the programme using a second set of questions. The majority of the 53 adults interviewed were the children’s mothers. Most were happy to complete the interview in person although a quarter preferred to be interviewed by telephone.

b.) Children - 73 children participated in this study, 54 (74%) in the 5 to 11 years age range and 19 (26%) aged from 12 to 16 years. In total there were an equal number of male and female participants, 60% were European New Zealanders and 36% Maori New Zealanders. 47% of the children were attending the programme because of their parent’s separation, 31% were experiencing the death of someone close to them, a further 19% had to manage a combination of losses, and 3% had a parent in prison.

c.) Companion/Facilitators – Five group companions chose to participate in this study. These trained adult volunteers are described by the organisation as having a commitment to the programme philosophy and its content, an understanding of the process of grief, and a sensitivity to the needs of children (CENTACARE, 1996).

d.) Professional referrers - Fifteen professionals working in grief support, education, family court, and children’s mental health agreed to participate. They were selected because they have referred families or children to Seasons™ and have had subsequent contact with them.

**Measures**

In evaluating the impact of the Seasons™ programme on its participants a number of measures were employed. These included pre- and post-intervention interviews for the
parents, focus groups with the children, a mixture of interviews and contemporaneously written guided reflections from the adult companions, and interviews with professional referrers. These measures were used because of their context sensitivity and exploratory flexibility (Mason, 2002) and because they provided vivid, immediate data that focussed on the participants’ understanding and meaning of their experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

As the Seasons™ programme is based on the belief that the experience and healing of grief is a process and that each person’s experience of loss and change is different, there are no clearly identified programme outcomes on which to judge or measure children’s progress. Therefore, it was agreed to record and use programme outcomes related to the parents’ original hopes and concerns for the children and themselves as primary measures of the programme’s effectiveness. Pre- and post-intervention questions were designed to assess the programme’s impact on the children and effectiveness in achieving its aims. These were trialled with an independent control group three months before the full study took place.

**Procedures**

a.) Parents/Caregivers – The first interview was designed to establish the children’s observable pre-intervention functioning. As well as supplying information regarding the children’s age, ethnicity and the nature of the loss the child had experienced, parent/caregivers were asked three open questions that explored what: what child’s behaviour, mood or attitude was causing concern; what they expected their children might gain as a result of attending Seasons™; and, what they might gain for themselves by their child attending.

The second post-intervention interview began with reviewing the parent/caregivers’ responses to the first interview. The questions were then designed to see what, if any, perceived changes had occurred over the course of the programme. Parent/caregivers were asked to select the most appropriate response to three simple questions, respond to two closed
questions requiring only a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer and, finally, to two open questions. These questions explored: whether the behaviours of concern had stayed the same, or increased or decreased; whether the child and parent had gained what they had hoped; whether the venue and time were satisfactory; what, if anything, the child had shared about their experience of attending Seasons™; and, anything else the parent would like to say about their experience with the programme concerning any impact it may have had on their child/ren.
b.) Children - The focus groups were conducted with the children in their familiar Seasons™ group. The researcher visited the Seasons™ venue at least once part way through the 10-session programme to introduce themselves to the children and let them know that they would be returning to their final session to ask them questions. The children were asked a series of open questions: what they liked and didn’t like about coming to the programme; if anything had changed for them since they started the programme; whether or not they would recommend Seasons™ to a friend; whether they had asked questions that were important to them and whether the answers received had been helpful. The children’s responses were written down by each interviewer as they spoke with them during the focus groups. This was manageable as most groups comprised five or fewer children.
c.) Companion/Facilitators - They completed a journal after each of the sessions in which they reflected upon: their role in facilitating the children’s journey; when the session fulfilled the conditions necessary to achieve the programme’s stated aims; barriers that might limit a child’s participation; the children’s abilities to manage their losses; and, challenges or breakthrough that occurred in the session. These observations were made generally about the group and individual children were not referred to by name. The companions were interviewed for up to 60 minutes at the completion of the programme where their reflections were discussed but not collected.
d.) Professional referrers – In semi-structured interviews of up to 30 minutes they were asked to comment upon: the effectiveness of the Seasons™ programme in providing support for children who have experienced loss; the suitability of current programmes to diverse groups of children; and, whether or not there are unmet grief support needs for children in their communities.

Data Analysis

The information collected from the parent/caregiver’s initial interviews regarding children’s age, ethnicity and nature of loss were collected and tabulated. Answers to each of the three open questions were collected separately and arranged, identified and coded according to their emergent themes. Qualitative data from the second post-intervention interview requiring the tabulation of five simple participant categorised questions and the two open question responses were again organised and coded according to themes. The children’s focus groups, and the individual companion and professional referrer interviews were all conducted in a similar manner. The participants took part in an informal discussion which was guided by the predetermined questions. The companions were already aware of the questions as they framed their journal responses, whereas the children and the professionals were not. All of the respondent’s answers were simply recorded contemporaneously in writing as either direct quotes or impressions by the researcher/interviewer and subsequently coded and listed.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Programme impact – parents and caregivers

Children come into the Seasons™ programme because their parents/caregiver’s and other adults have concerns about their current behaviours or mood and their abilities to manage stressful life events occasioned by loss. Ranging from mild to severe, the behaviours and moods that most concerned our sample’s parents were: angry and aggressive behaviours of
27 children (37%); sad or withdrawn behaviours that affected 15 children (21%); and moods and behaviours described as anxious, fearful and lacking in confidence, exhibited by 10 of the children (14%).

(Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent/caregiver concerns about children’s behaviour or mood</th>
<th>Parents n = 73</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angry/aggressive</td>
<td>27 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad/withdrawn</td>
<td>15 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious/fearful/lacking confidence</td>
<td>10 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding/manipulative</td>
<td>7 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific reactions to parents’ separation</td>
<td>7 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No concerns</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mother of an 11 year old boy explained, “He is down, depressed. He said ‘I wish I could go to bed and never wake up’”. Other children exhibited behaviours that were not typical prior to their losses such as refusing to attend school, bullying others, bed-wetting and swearing. One mother reported that her 14 year old “is not who she used to be 6 months ago”. She describes her as “moody, frumpy, rebellious, weepy, goes into herself and will not communicate. It is almost like she has a personality change”.
(Table 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Parents/caregivers hopes and gains for their children</th>
<th>Parents n = 73</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk/ Express feelings</td>
<td>47 (64%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain skills and confidence</td>
<td>26 (35%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share with others /reduce isolation</td>
<td>25 (34%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting remaining parent /Cease a behaviour</td>
<td>22 (30%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>21 (28%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regain qualities</td>
<td>13 (18%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have fun</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typically, parents/caregivers had hopes that attendance at the programme would help their child in a positive way. One parent commented “Once she gets to know everyone in the group, I’m hoping she will open up and talk because she will see that others have the same problems”.

(Table 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Parents/caregivers hopes and gains for themselves</th>
<th>Parents n = 37</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share the burden/ know they have taken action</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will lead to talking with their child</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less worry/peace at home</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better relationships at home</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less stress/ fighting at home</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their initial interview parents were asked to identify something that they were hoping to gain for themselves. 37 of the 54 parents responded and almost half of this group (17) stated that they wanted to know they had done the best they could for their children by providing support that might help them, and/or that they wanted others to help share the burden of supporting their children. The mother of a 7 year old boy said “This is the only thing I can’t fix for him. I don’t seem to be able to reach him about this”. Many parents expressed very
strong relief at knowing that there was somewhere to send their children that might provide help for all the family.

Given the absence of any measurable outcomes provided by the programme itself, positive change in parent-identified negative behaviours or mood and the realisation of parents’ hopes for their children were taken as the main measurement of impact. Based upon these responses, the post-intervention interview with parents and the focus groups with the children showed that participating in Seasons™ was a very positive experience for almost all of the children and families involved in this study.

(Table 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent observed change in children’s behaviour or mood</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>Stayed the same</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 57</td>
<td>36 (63%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>14 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent observed change in children’s behaviour or mood by age group</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>Stayed the same</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger n = 43</td>
<td>26 (60%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>12 (28%)</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older n = 14</td>
<td>10 (71%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
<td>2 (14%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over half of the parents (63%) observed that their children’s negative behaviours and/or moods had decreased over the 10 weeks, 25% had stayed the same, and 9% had increased. One recently-separated mother talking about her daughter explained that “the programme has helped her to locate her grief and deal with the feelings in a better way”, and that “she gained from being with her peers and receiving their support”.

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In total, 89% of the children gained what their parent had hoped they would from attending Seasons™, either “to a great extent” (42%) or, “to some extent” (47%), and 38 of the 39 parents who made a final comment were extremely positive about the programme’s impact on themselves and their children. The mother of a 6 year old said, “The programme was so worthwhile. It’s a valuable asset for parents who need help to manage their children’s feelings”. A number of parent/caregivers (40%) who had concerns about their children’s moods or behaviours believed the programme had helped the children and themselves to some extent. A mother who had three children attend said, “The children would come home on a Tuesday night like a big weight had been lifted off them – they were fun, happy, carefree children on these nights. It didn’t take the problems away, but (the programme provided) great coping skills to learn for life”.

(Table 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement of parent’s hopes and gains for their children</th>
<th>To a great extent</th>
<th>To some extent</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 57</td>
<td>24 (42%)</td>
<td>27 (47%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement of parent’s hopes and gains according to the nature of their children’s losses</th>
<th>To a great extent</th>
<th>To some extent</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separation n = 29</td>
<td>14 (49%)</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death n = 17</td>
<td>4 (23%)</td>
<td>9 (53%)</td>
<td>3 (18%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple loss n = 9</td>
<td>5 (56%)</td>
<td>4 (44%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment n = 2</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These findings are consistent with those of other qualitative research studies which have concluded that children enjoy attending such programmes because they help reduce feelings of isolation and feeling ‘the odd one out’ in their peer group, they provide a language to talk about loss (Gilroy & Johnson, 2004) and, they enable children to identify, understand and normalise negative feelings (Stokes, et al., 1997). The majority of parents wanted their child to be more open about feeling and to manage them. For the most part, parents believed that this had been achieved and expressed relief that their children were willing or able to talk about their losses more in the Seasons™ sessions or for the first time at home. The mother of a 6 year old suggested that it gave her daughter “a way to express herself and the confidence to do it”. For children of families where communication regarding death, separation or the sudden departure of a parent was not openly discussed, the opportunity to share their feelings, thoughts and worries with a caring and attentive adult and a group of peers contributed positively to changes in mood and behaviour. These results are confirmed by the literature that suggests that programmes designed specifically to support children who are experiencing grief and loss and engage with their fears do have a very positive impact on their well-being (McCarthy, 2007; Rolls & Payne, 2007).

(Table 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement of parent’s hopes and gains for themselves</th>
<th>n = 43</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To a great extent</td>
<td>To some extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 (46%)</td>
<td>17 (40%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the parents identified one or more things that Seasons™ could offer them as parents. Their hopes, which were substantially addressed by the programme, generally fell into two broad areas: the sharing of their burden of care; and, their wish to see the needs of their
children being met as widely as possible. Parents spoke of their relief at the end of the 10 weeks that their children seemed happier, problems at school had diminished, and fighting at home had reduced. One mother of three children who had all attended recognised the value of the programme for herself as “a lifeline for my children”. She was impressed that “They can work out things there where there is trust and they are not judged”, which in itself hugely benefitted the children and their parents.

Finally, many parents felt that they had gained from their child’s participation in the programme and were also very grateful for the support they had received in their parenting role during a time of stressful change. Rolls and Payne (2007) suggest that programmes like Seasons™ can shoulder some of the parent’s responsibility for meeting their grieving child’s support needs at a time when parents are unable to do so.

**Programme impact - the children**

The impact of the Seasons™ programme was recorded across all sub-groups, which including age, gender and the nature of the loss. The interviewers met with 48 children aged 5-11 years in 12 focus groups. The older children in these groups responded to all six questions and the younger children commented briefly or not at all.

*(Table 7)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent observed change in children’s behaviour or mood by age group</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>Stayed the same</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger (5-12 years) n = 43</td>
<td>26 (60%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Responding to the first two questions about the content of the programme, 32 children said that they liked art and craft activities and games, whilst 20 children enjoyed aspects that focussed on making social connections like meeting people, friendship, hearing stories and learning from each other. Talking about sharing feelings, a 6 year old boy said “It makes me happy ‘cos I get shy”. One group comprising 1 girl and 3 boys expressed appreciation of their group’s confidentiality agreement, “You can speak to people and you know they won’t speak to anyone else about it... If you tell them, they will keep it a secret – if it’s something you don’t want others to know”. 14 children enjoyed the cooking and food and 12 children enjoyed all aspects of the programme, “Everything, it was all good. We love all the activities”. 5 children particularly enjoyed the stories and one younger boy said he liked going home. The third question, asking them to describe their feelings of loss now, although proving too sophisticated for some of the younger children, nevertheless provided some thoughtful answers. A 10 year old boy said “Yes, I feel better inside and much happier”. Some children seem to have experienced quite a change in the ways that they managed their feelings, “Before I thought I should keep all my feelings to myself, now I know it’s ok to let them out”. Of the 40 children who responded to the question about recommending the programme to others, 32 said they would and 8 said they would not. A group of 7 year old girls thoughtfully remarked that the children they recommended it to could “think we were being mean to them talking about their loss when they hadn’t asked us to, it might hurt their feelings to talk when they weren’t ready to”. The last two questions, however, about group interactions and asking questions elicited little response from the younger children. The Companions explained that it was part of their training to turn the children’s questions back to them for individual and group discussion and exploration. They noted that, although many of the younger children had not previously met, they drew enormous strength and encouragement from each other. For example, two of the 7 year old girls shared so
completely that when one mentioned a particular support person or coping strategy they had used the other would add it to her list. Their Companion observed that they had really encouraged each other to expand their belief in their own strengths and coping capacities.

Five focus groups were held with children aged 12 years or older and all 23 children were girls. These older children noted the aspects of the programme that they particularly liked: 12 talked about managing feelings and the chance to make friends; 4 appreciated the confidentiality and trust within the group; and, 2 enjoyed the fun and the food. There was little reference to any negative aspects of the programme and the overwhelming majority expressed sadness at seeing it coming to an end. Responding to the question about their feelings now toward their loss experiences, the girls spoke about making changes and a growing facility to talk about feelings of loss within the group and outside of it, “Yes, before I was lonely and there wasn’t anyone to talk to but now I feel more confident”, “I’ve learned to accept my loss – to know they are not in pain. I feel relieved too”. All 21 girls who responded the fourth question agreed they would recommend Seasons™ to a friend, “Yes, ‘cause if they couldn’t open up to anyone they probably could here”. In terms of the fifth question, some groups had posed a lot of questions and others only a few. As with the younger group, many questions were asked and answered amongst the children themselves, especially as they were working on activities. Some girls said it was a real relief to have some questions answered without having to ask, and all who responded said that the answers provided were helpful whether the answers came from the Companion or other group members. A recurring key theme in all of the children’s responses to the final question about group process was how much they had valued the trust and confidentiality agreement within their groups. One girl said she had learned “That we can help each other outside the group too, because of the trust and also because we know their story”. The girls valued the possibility of their peer’s support continuing beyond the programme’s ending. A recurring
theme was the value of sharing, being understood and learning that there were others who were experiencing the same things, “Just having someone you know you can talk to, because they know how you feel”. It was clear that for this group of 23 young teenage girls the aims of the Seasons™ programme had been achieved. They were provided with opportunities to express themselves freely, to be heard and to ask questions that helped them to manage the changes in their lives.

There is evidence to suggest that the teenage groups developed some ‘transferable skills’ that will enable them to meet other challenges in the future (Rolls & Payne, 2007). One companion noted that by the end of the term the girls were all able to express personal strengths, identify preferred activities in self care, name nurturing people in their lives and safe people to share worries with. One Companion saw this as indicative of the development of important personal skills and resources. Another Companion’s descriptions of her work with her particular group illustrated very effectively how this facilitating role enables the programme’s aims to be achieved.

**Variations in programme impact**

The Seasons™ programme is currently running in a number of primary (5-12 years) and secondary (13-18 years) schools in New Zealand. It is particularly valued by a kura kaupapa/Maori school where the instruction is in the Maori language and where the philosophy and practices reflect Maori cultural values. Here it is organised in a mutually respectful and beneficial partnership between the school and Seasons™ two or three times a year with children from 5 to 18 years of age. The school principal believes that the model of partnered delivery between local kuia/female elder and Seasons™ coordinator works particularly well for the children in her community, and the process of respectful listening and loving acceptance of their stories is very helpful for children who have witnessed multiple loss, violence and family dysfunction. Parents of Maori children who attended after-
school programmes also spoke of the fun their children had and the difference it had made to their negative mood and behaviours. One mother commented that her seven year old daughter “loved the programme and enjoyed each session, she bounced in and out of each one”. She continued that she “still doesn’t talk about her loss and I don’t push it but I think it has done her the world of good because her manner has changed”.

There were 3 children in this study affected by the suicide of someone close who had also experienced other recent family deaths. Typically, they were part of a small group whose parents had not noticed any positive change in mood or behaviour and who had not gained what parents had hoped they would. The literature suggests that children who have been exposed to: traumatic or violent deaths; or, perceive a threat to their own lives; who have disenfranchised or unresolved mourning; and, who may also lack parental emotional support and guidance, are likely have complicated grief reactions which prevent them from engaging in the necessary tasks of mourning (Rando, 1993; Worden, 2009). However, as this issue and these children were not particularly identified in the groups there is no direct way of knowing how the programme affected them. Nevertheless, they did participate in focus groups who, together, spoke extremely positively of their Seasons™ experience.

The data provided ample evidence that the Seasons™ programme is achieving its stated aims, particularly in providing young people with: the opportunity to express, normalize and integrate their grief experience; a place to tell their story and receive support; an environment that nurtures self esteem, trust, confidentiality, hope and the uniqueness of each individual; and the freedom to ask questions. The findings suggest that the nurturing and emotional safety provided by Seasons™ Companions is a crucial aspect of its success and that the current training, support systems, and care over settings in which Companions are placed are providing good outcomes.
Achievement of programme aims

A key finding of the research is that Seasons™ reduces parent anxieties and children’s sense of isolation and uniqueness. By sharing in their groups and hearing the stories of others, the children’s fearful or angry reactions to their experiences are normalised. One teenage girl told the researcher, “I was thinking ‘Am I normal?’ and then I’d realise that everyone was in the same boat – that was relieving! – I am normal!” For many this is a huge relief. As research studies have demonstrate (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2003), children are careful where they place their trust when confiding in others following parents’ divorce or separation and they particularly value the chance to share with other children who have had a similar experience (Amato, 2000; Grych & Fincham, 1992). The findings of this research replicate findings by Kalter and colleagues (2002) regarding the value children placed on having someone to “just listen” without judgement. A younger focus group participant suggested that what he most liked was “being able to talk and knowing people were listening and not shutting you off”.

The younger children’s responses overwhelmingly suggested that they valued going to Seasons™. They enjoyed the activities and also appreciated the less tangible, people-related aspects of Seasons™ such as making friends, listening and talking with each other. However, what they seemed to value the most was the safety, trust and confidentiality which are foundation principles of Seasons™. Similarly, the older children were greatly relieved to learn they were not the only ones struggling with their emotions following major changes in their families. Some acknowledged that, while nothing at all may have changed around the distressing situations at home, they were feeling much more able to look after themselves and advocate for themselves. For these older students the most valued aspects of Seasons™ were talking about feelings, making friends, and the confidentiality and trust agreement within the group. Like the younger children and those described in similar studies, these young people
valued a reduction in loneliness and isolation, belonging to a group where they could express themselves honestly in an environment where they felt emotionally safe. In addition to these emotionally nurturing aspects, all of the children enjoyed the physical nurturing they received at the programme in the form of the hot drinks and food.

**Grief support needs for children in the community**

Finally, the professionals participating in this study who refer families and children to the programme identified a number of concerns about the provision of support to children who experience loss and grief in their communities. Points that have a direct bearing on how Seasons™ is currently delivered and validated by the findings are included here:

1. Whilst very positive about Seasons™ and the support it provides most children, professionals in the Family Court system believe that, on its own, the help that Seasons™ provides is presently not enough for those children caught up in badly-handled parental separations.

2. Programmes like Seasons™ are not available or accessible to all children. Children need a reasonably confident and functioning adult, with reliable transport and time available to take them to the programme each week, and some do not have that.

3. School guidance and mental health professionals indicated a gap in support, particularly for parents of children under five years who are experiencing distress as a result of family change and/or immediately after a sudden and unexpected death in a child’s close family or social circle.

4. Parent/caregiver’s would benefit from supplementary parenting skills courses while their children were at the programme, to more effectively manage themselves and their children’s behaviours and moods.
CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this evaluation strongly suggest that participation in the Seasons™ programme is a very positive experience for almost all of those children and families involved. It is also very clear from participants’ feedback that future research and development pathways might productively explore the desirability of: extending the programme into higher needs communities; offering parents and caregivers more information about the grief process and the availability of other support services; enhancing support for children who are affected by violent death or complicated mourning; and, a longitudinal study examining the extent to which children’s positive gains are maintained.

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(This research was made possible by funding from the New Zealand Lottery Community Sector Research Fund and with the support of the Waiapu Anglican Social Services Trust Board.)