

January 2014

CASE STUDY
Calum and Erin's story

Please note names and some of the details about this family have been changed to protect the identity of the family involved.

Calum and Erin were referred to our charity via their doctor's surgery. At the time of referral Calum was 7 and Erin was 4, they lived with their mum, Karen in South Devon. Karen's partner and Dad to the children, Pete, had died by suicide 2 years previously.

The initial referral from the family's GP laid out the concerns around the children's behaviour following the suicide. Calum had become very withdrawn, he would have bursts of severe anger and was very clingy to his mum and Erin was having a lot of uncontrollable anger outbursts that was leaving Karen at a loss as to what to do for the best.

Following a telephone assessment with our Lead Therapist, 2 of our therapists were assigned to work with this family and they went to the family's home for the initial home visit after school one afternoon. At this visit introductions were made and the therapists encouraged the children to talk about themselves, what they liked and didn't like and to talk about their relationships with each other. Karen started to open up about the death of Pete at this visit and the therapists could see from Erin's reaction that she was not comfortable to hear this, Erin became very angry and started shouting and throwing things. The therapists could see the impact of Erin hearing her mum talk about her dad's death. Karen explained that at the time of Pete's death Erin was a toddler and she had seen and heard a lot of the suicide, Karen hadn't thought how this might affect Erin at the time, but had since realised that it had had a massive impact and her distress was now being displayed through the anger outbursts.

On the second home visit the therapists took a game called "All about me" for the family to play, this game enabled the whole family to talk and listen to each other as they spoke about their thoughts, feelings and memories. It became clear through this game that both Calum and Erin had a lot of confusion in their minds about their dad's death and on one hand wanted to remember him as a loving dad and on the other hand didn't understand why he would have "chosen" to leave them through suicide.

On the third home visit the therapists were able to explore the confusion that children had regarding their dad's death a little further using a game that looks specifically at grief. It also became clear that Karen was very angry with Pete for taking his life and was trying not to express this, as she feared it would damage the children's memory of their dad. Karen said she wanted the children to keep good memories of their dad and not have that tainted by the way his life ended.

At the bereavement weekend Karen, Calum and Erin were all able to meet other people who had been through a similar experience. There was one other family at the weekend that had also experienced death through suicide, which seemed to especially help Karen. Karen had found that a lot of people had avoided talking to her about Pete's death and she wondered if that was because of the nature of his death. In our experience as therapists we often find that families that have been bereaved through suicide feel very isolated and don't receive as much support from friends and the wider family as families who have experienced a natural death. This is because people simply don't know how to respond or what to say and so tend to take the more hurtful route of ignoring the issue and the family concerned altogether.

The bereavement weekend offers a unique opportunity for families to come together that have been bereaved. We encourage families to bring a photo of the person who has died and to share with the rest of the group. Karen didn't bring a photo of Pete on the first day but when the family returned for the Sunday session the children brought in a couple of photos that they wanted to share with the group. This felt like a very significant shift for them to be able to share this photo and talk about their dad to the other children.

The weekend also offers an opportunity for families to explore their thoughts and feelings in the safe hands of trained therapists who have a thorough understanding of the grieving process and how to help a person to work through the pain of grief. This leads to the family communicating and supporting each other as they are often in very different places and need to be able to say what is going on for them. We also spend time helping families to find a safe way to remember their special person and to be able to move forward taking the memory of their special person with them.

The weekend provided Karen, Calum and Erin with the opportunity of exploring their grief and realizing that a lot of the feelings they were having were 'normal'. The children found it particularly helpful to use the puppet hedgehogs that we gave them at the beginning of the weekend, to talk about how they were feeling and these puppets are kept by the children as a way to be able to continue to talk about their feelings when they are back home.

Karen made particular connection with 2 of the families who she swapped telephone numbers with and agreed to meet up following the weekend.

When we returned for the closing visit we noticed a big change especially in Erin, who seemed much calmer and was comfortable to talk about her dad. Karen said that Erin had not had any anger outbursts since the weekend. Karen had realised through attending the weekend how much anger she had been holding and how that had been being displayed through Erin's anger. Karen was planning to access some counselling for herself so that she could work with this deep routed feeling of anger. Calum said that he felt much better having met other children who had also had a dad or mum die. Calum would continue to see the school counsellor for on-going support and also felt that he could talk to his mum more easily now.

The family asked to keep in touch with our charity through our social events as they felt this would be a way to continue to have a network of support over the coming months and years.

Francesca Raymont
Lead Therapist
January 2014