Sowing Seeds of Healing: Evaluation of a Bereaved Parent Peer Mentor Program

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KEYWORDS
Bereaved parents; Peer Mentor Support; Public Health Bereavement Care; Lived Experience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This presentation shares findings from the evaluation of the first cohort of Ladybird Care Foundation's bereaved parent Peer Mentor program. The program pairs newly bereaved parents (Mentees) with trained Peer Mentors who have experienced the death of a child of any age, including adulthood, and is delivered with ongoing support and oversight from bereavement care professionals. An independent qualitative evaluation explored Peer Mentor experiences before and after the mentoring process through focus groups, and Mentee experiences following completion of the 15-month program through individual interviews. Findings highlight rapid trust, meaningful connection, reduced isolation, and personal growth for both Peer Mentors and Mentees. Integrating lived experience with evidence-informed practice, the program demonstrates the value of peer support within a public health approach to bereavement care in Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Bereavement after the death of a child is a devastating life experience. Learning to live without a beloved child can take a lifetime, alongside adjusting to significant secondary losses. Ladybird Care Foundation (LCF) is a national charity addressing the support gap experienced by bereaved parents. LCF's Peer Mentor program connects newly bereaved parents with trained Peer Mentors who have experienced the death of a child. Mentors are selected, trained, and supported within a framework of professional oversight to provide compassionate, one-to-one support over 15 months. Peer support models are recognised as a targeted response within the public health model of bereavement care. LCF's program integrates lived experience with evidence-based practice to reduce isolation and foster connection.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Peer mentoring created rapid trust through shared experiences of child death.
- Mentees reported reduced isolation and increased coping strategies.
- Peer Mentors experienced personal growth and a renewed sense of purpose.
- Professional oversight strengthened safety and consistency of support.

METHODOLOGY/ PROCESS

Evaluation Design

Ladybird Care Foundation engaged an independent evaluator, Young Futures Consulting, to assess the implementation and impact of the program's first cohort.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods included pre- and post-mentoring focus groups with Peer Mentors, and semi-structured interviews with Mentees conducted at the conclusion of the 15-month mentoring period.

Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify shared experiences, perceived impacts, and key elements contributing to effective peer support.

RESULTS/ OUTCOMES

The evaluation found the program successfully facilitated meaningful, trusting relationships between bereaved parents. Access to ongoing support from bereavement care professionals was a critical enabler, strengthening safety, consistency, and confidence for both Peer Mentors and Mentees. Careful matching, comprehensive mentor training, and flexible communication further supported effective connections. Shared lived experience enabled rapid trust and a depth of understanding often described by Mentees as distinct from traditional counselling. Mentees reported reduced isolation and improved coping in daily life, while Peer Mentors described increased confidence, reflection, and a renewed sense of purpose through supporting others.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the first cohort demonstrates that structured peer mentoring offers a valuable and effective model of bereavement support for parents following the death of a child of any age. By combining lived experience with ongoing professional oversight, the program addresses complex emotional and social needs not always met by clinical services alone. These findings support the inclusion of peer-led initiatives within a public health approach to bereavement care and highlight the importance of community-based, parent-to-parent support within palliative and bereavement care systems.