Grief-Themed Literature for Elementary School Children

Melissa Allen Heath

Abstract

Although children grieving over the death of a loved one are common in today’s elementary classrooms, teachers are not adequately prepared to offer their students the support that they need. Dr. Heath, internationally recognized for her work with traumatized and grieving children, describes the tasks of grieving that children go through and explains how bibliotherapy can be used by teachers to “compassionately companion” a child or group of children going through the grieving processes. A sample lesson plan is included along with lists and summaries of recommended books and a list of resources for parents and teachers.

Disney’s “happily ever after” endings are not the same fairy tale endings originally envisioned by authors such as Hans Christian Anderson and the Grimm brothers. For example, in Anderson’s original 1837 tale of The Little Mermaid, the story ends with the mermaid throwing herself into the sea to end her life (Anderson, 2014). She does not marry the handsome prince as portrayed in the 1989 Disney movie. Similarly, the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales are often considered quite harsh and brutally graphic in representing human suffering, abuse, and death. According to many adults, such fairy tales as originally written are not appropriate for sharing with young impressionable children. Whenever possible, caring adults take precautions to shield children from life’s harsh realities.

One topic that is particularly difficult to discuss with children is death. In fact, most parents and teachers are uncomfortable talking with children about death (Goldman, 2014; Worden, 2008). Based on a survey of 1,253 members of the American Federation of Teachers, (including 813 classroom teachers and 440 teaching assistants, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and support staff), even though seven out of ten teachers report currently having a grieving student in their classroom, less than one in ten teachers reported feeling prepared to address grief issues with their class (The American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation, 2012). Additionally, half of participating teachers reported that over the past year students had asked them for advice on how to support a grieving peer.

According to the same study, 92% of teachers, teaching assistants, and school staff reported that childhood grief is a serious problem in schools, and that this issue deserves more attention from school personnel. Furthermore, in regard to how schools are addressing children’s grief-related needs, half of the participating teachers graded their school as a C or lower. One barrier that most
significantly kept teachers from adequately supporting grieving children was insufficient training and/or professional development.

**Purpose**

In contrast to happily-ever-after book endings, in real life children must adapt to death and loss. Death is a part of life. With basic guidance and age-appropriate resources, teachers and parents will be better prepared to address grieving children’s emotional needs. Having age-appropriate resources will also assist caring adults in guiding children, not around, but through the intense and challenging feelings associated with grief.

In this article, I focus on meeting the grief needs of elementary school-aged children. As a basic foundation, I describe the tasks of grief children commonly face (Wolfelt, 2002; Worden, 1996, 2008). I then provide a brief overview of bibliotherapy. With this understanding of needs and a method, I recommend children’s literature that addresses the tasks of grief, offering a sample bibliotherapy lesson plan for K–6th grade teachers. As an appendix to the article, I provide a list of grief-themed educational resources for elementary school teachers (Table A-2) and a table listing and describing specific children’s picture books that align with one or more tasks of grief that grieving children must go through (Table A-2).

**Tasks of Grief**

Following the death of a loved one, each person’s grief is unique. However, common challenges arise during the healing process. Rather than the linear stages of grief, as described by Kuübler-Ross (1969), Worden (1996, 2008) identified tasks of grief. Based on his extensive work with bereaved children, Worden (1996) described the following challenges that children struggle to resolve: (a) accepting the reality of death; (b) facing the intense emotional pain of grief, not turning away; (c) adjusting to changes resulting from a loved one’s death; and (d) remembering and memorializing the death and life of the deceased person, not attempting to forget.

The tasks of grief are not sequential, nor is there an endpoint for grief. A person is never really finished grieving, because grief is a process that ebbs and flows across one’s lifetime. For example, if Maria’s mother died from cancer when Maria was 8 years old, this loss will be keenly felt during holidays and special occasions (e.g., Mother’s Day, Maria’s graduation, her wedding, and the birth of her children). Maria’s loss will elicit various emotions across time as she understands death and grief through the lens of her maturing developmental perspective.

As children’s grief becomes integrated with daily life, with support the sadness softens and intense emotions become less intrusive and more manageable (Worden, 1996, 2008). However, Wolfelt (2002) offered a warning: “If over time, children are not compassionately companioned through their complicated mourning journeys, they are at risk for behavioral and emotional problems” (p. 655). Caring adults, including teachers, have opportunities to compassionately companion children who grieve the death of a loved one.

**Bibliotherapy**

Timeless stories such as Aesop’s fables teach children about society’s moral and social expectations. Comparable to this, bibliotherapy uses children’s literature to teach and encourage individuals to heal on an emotional level. Stories support individuals in better understanding their own and others’ emotions and perceptions. Carefully selected books provide examples that model adaptive coping strategies and open opportunities for increased insight.

Certain stories pique our interest and stick with us (Heath & Heath, 2008). Some stories are especially powerful; they stir deep feelings within us that propel us to action and promote change. We remember such stories.
In a school setting, teachers have the option of using bibliotherapy to open conversations about tough topics, such as death and grief. It is important for teachers to understand that the use of bibliotherapy is not limited to therapists. Although teachers are not expected to provide mental health care, they are expected to provide a physically and emotionally safe learning environment for their students.

Bibliotherapy, like medical care, is provided on varying levels of skill and expertise. For example, an individual does not need to be a doctor in order to place a bandage on a child’s scraped knee or to provide CPR; but a doctor’s skills and expertise are required to perform surgery. Similarly, a teacher does not need to be a therapist to share a self-help book that addresses a personal need or to read a picture book with students to prepare them for attending a funeral. However, a therapist’s skills are needed to use bibliotherapy in addressing the needs of an individual who is coping with the aftereffects of sexual abuse and struggling with posttraumatic stress. Situations considered clinical require the expertise of a seasoned therapist. On the other hand, we all face the challenge of coping with a loved one’s death and living with grief.

When reading carefully selected grief-themed stories, teachers help support students’ emotional understanding and healing. These stories also encourage and reinforce adaptive coping strategies. In identifying specific books that best fit a situation, teachers might talk with a librarian or ask the school-based mental health professional for assistance. To gain a better understanding of children’s grief, teachers might also search the Internet for book lists and short instructive handouts on supporting bereaved children. Internet sites that specialize in children’s grief include the Dougy Center (http://www.dougy.org/) and the National Alliance for Grieving Children (https://childrengrieve.org/resources-0). Additional resources are listed in the Appendix in Table A-1.

**Literature Selection**

I propose teachers use children’s grief-themed literature to teach and enhance the coping skills of bereaved youth. Based on my experience in selecting children’s books, I provide the following advice for teachers’ and parents’ consideration. First of all, the type of death should be considered so that the book matches the context of what children are experiencing. For example, the death of a pet may be a safe starting place to initiate a classroom discussion about death; most children have experienced the death of a pet. Two book lists, with details and summaries, are provided in this article. The book list at the end of the article (Table 1) includes the books discussed in the article in the sequence in which they are mentioned. The list identified as Table A-2 in the appendix includes several additional books that I recommend.

Although not about a pet’s death, the lesson plan at the end of this article is based on a story about an animal “disappearing.” Although one might conclude the rabbit in Rabbityness died, this is not directly stated in the book (Empson, 2012). With this story merely talking about being separated from a loved one or a pet offers a prelude to discussing death.

Another caution is to carefully read the book prior to sharing it with students. In previewing the book, I always consider the quality of the story and whether children will enjoy the book’s illustrations. I also consider whether or not the book contains religious beliefs or dialogue countering religious beliefs. This is a very important consideration because of the wide range of religious and
spiritual beliefs represented in a classroom. Sometimes I consider skipping a page or two of religious information if the book’s story is not affected by omitting those pages.

For example, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* (Viorst, 1971) is one of the most commonly recommended grief-themed books for young children. After the death of Barney (a pet cat), the young pet owner and his parents prepare for the pet’s funeral. For the funeral, the boy is assigned to come up with a list of 10 good things about Barney. A young neighbor, Annie, comes to visit and starts an argument with the boy about whether Barney will go to heaven or not. The father weighs in on the argument by saying *maybe* and *maybe not.* The father expresses his questioning attitude about heaven, “We can’t be absolutely sure that it’s there” (p. 14). Some parents may not agree with this statement. They may have strong beliefs regarding the eternal nature of human souls. Also, some children may find comfort in believing in an afterlife, and this father’s questioning may be unsettling. You will note that in Table 1 and Table A-2 I have added a warning about religious issues in several book synopses.

Before sharing the book with children, make sure that you are comfortable with the wording and with the book’s message. Also consider if the book will be interesting to your students. Some books are didactic in nature and do not have a story line. Examples of this type of book include *When Dinosaurs Die* (Brown & Brown, 1996) and *The Goodbye Book* (Parr, 2015). In some cases, didactic books may be needed; at other times a good story may be preferable. Consider the book’s content, including whether the story contains good role models and information about adaptive coping strategies.

Consider how you want to present the book, including whether you want to rely on an organized lesson plan. Review the lesson plan at the end of the article and consider adjusting this template to fit your classroom’s needs. The lesson plan template includes several sections: information about the book, a synopsis of the story, a lesson objective, lesson materials and advance preparation, key vocabulary words and concepts, and a short pre-reading activity. After the book has been read, a post-reading discussion helps pull together important information and clarifies specific points you may want to emphasize. Following the short discussion, an activity helps children to apply what they have learned and extends the story into real-life application. Following the activity, the students need to come back together as a group so the teacher can clarify the lesson’s objective and highlight the major take-away points of the bibliotherapy experience.

### Classroom Activities Supporting the Tasks of Grief

As described in the previous section, an activity is intended to fortify important concepts. The following are examples of activities that supplement children’s grief-themed literature in helping children to address the tasks of grief.

**Accepting the reality of death.** Have a discussion about accepting tough situations or accepting situations over which we have no power. Ask students to raise their hand if they have ever fallen and been hurt. Explain that gravity pulls things down to the ground. It is a law of nature. Even if we do not like it, even if we do not want it, gravity will continue pulling things down to the ground. That is how gravity works.

Then go into a deeper discussion about pets dying. Ask students to share examples about how hard it was to say their final goodbye to a beloved pet. Explain, “None of us wants our
pet to die. But after a pet dies, even if we choose to not think about the pet’s death, the pet is still dead. This is so hard to accept!” On the blackboard, list the names of individuals that students could talk with when they have trouble accepting a pet’s death. Because most students will have an example of a pet dying, keep the discussion focused on a pet’s death rather than on a person’s death. Also talking about an animal’s death is a safer and less intense starting place for this type of discussion.

**Facing the intense emotional pain of grief.**
This activity, *strong hands*, helps children understand the importance of others’ support as we face our grief. Ask, “What is the strongest and biggest part of your hand?” Explain, “Your palm holds and pushes heavy things.”

Ask students to push on their desk with one finger. Then ask them to push with the palm of their hand. Explain that if you are stopping something that is coming toward you, your palm or fist is a much stronger force than one finger.

Give each student a piece of blank paper and a pencil or crayon. Ask students to make an outline of their hand by placing their hand on the paper and drawing around their fingers and the rest of their hand. For children ages 8 and older, ask them to write words on one or more of the paper fingers to represent things they do not understand about death or things that make them feel anxious or afraid (e.g., funeral, grave, casket, bad dreams, ghosts, illness, cancer, seeing dead person, getting sick, having an accident). For younger children, ask them to draw small pictures or symbols.

Then ask students to write/draw on the palm of the paper hand, things they can do (coping strategies) and names of trusted individuals who will comfort them when they are afraid. After the drawing is complete, have them cut around the outside of all the fingers (not between them).

Ask students to fold the paper fingers in to the palm of the hand. This represents that we are stronger when we rely on trusted individuals for support and when we use coping strategies. Explain that we are not alone when we grieve; we have others to help us face tough feelings.

**Adjusting to changes resulting from a loved one’s death.** This activity involves listing details that describe “before the death,” and “after the death.” After reading *Mama Does the Mambo* (Leiner, 2001), draw a line down the middle of a poster board. At the top of the first column, print the word BEFORE. At the top of the second column, print the word AFTER. Review the details in the book. Ask the students what Sofia’s life was like before her father’s death. Children might say, “The mother and father danced.” “Sofia enjoyed watching her parents dance.” “She enjoyed how her parents were loving to one another.” Write the children’s responses in the first column. Underneath *after* in the second column, write the children’s responses telling how things were different *after* Sofia’s father died. Children might say, “Mother was sad.” “Mother did not want to dance.” “Men were dating Sofia’s mother, and Sofia did not like
them.” Close the discussion by reviewing how the things that were different were not necessarily always bad, but having our lives change requires us to change how we do things. It pushes us beyond our regular and familiar routines. Sometimes these changes make us sad, sometimes angry, and sometimes confused or frustrated. On a positive note, sometimes good things might come about because of the changes, like Sofia’s mother asking her daughter to dance the mamba with her.

**Remembering and memorializing the death and life of the deceased person.** The following activity is based on the sea glass metaphor by Heath and Sheen (2005, p. 121). The purpose of this activity is to help children understand that over time, with the support of others, the sharpness and intensity of painful feelings associated with grief become smooth and rounded like sea glass. Sea glass can be collected from a seashore or purchased from a craft store.

Ask the children, “What is sea glass?” Pass pieces of sea glass around the classroom. Explain that over time ocean waves and sand gradually smooth out the sharp edges of broken glass. As we walk in the sand along a seashore, ordinary broken glass will cut our feet, but the softened edges of sea glass will not cut our feet. At first when someone dies, we have very strong feelings. We are sad. We cry. We may be angry. Our hearts hurt! Our feelings are very strong. We may feel overwhelmed! We wonder if we will always feel this way? Our feelings are like the sharp edges of broken glass: they cut us and we hurt. But our feelings will not always be this intense and powerful. Just like sea glass, over time and with others’ support the edges of our feelings are smoothed and rounded. At some point we will be able to think about our loved one and enjoy our memories of being together. We will be able to look at pictures and smile. We will be able to talk with others about our loved one, and we will be able to enjoy our memories together. We will always have our memories, but they become softer and less painful. As a reminder, display the sea glass in a visible place in the classroom.

**Summary**

Children’s grief is a highly sensitive and significant issue that is not sufficiently addressed in schools (The American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation, 2012). In this article, I described bibliotherapy as a possible classroom strategy to support children as they face the challenges inherent in being separated from deceased loved ones. In Table 1 I listed the four tasks of grief, and included information about and summaries of the books described in this article that are especially helpful for each task. Table 1-B of the Appendix continues the list to include books I recommend but have not discussed specifically in the article.

Reading grief-themed books in classrooms helps children understand the reality of death and helps children know that they are not alone in facing their grief. With added support from peers and teachers, children will be prepared to adjust to the changes following the death of a loved one. They will also understand the importance of remembering and memorializing their deceased loved one. These are important life skills that will help children adapt to loss and change across the life span.
Table 1: Description of Grief-Themed Books Described in This Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book information and synopsis</th>
<th>Interest level Grade range</th>
<th>Main character</th>
<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Task of grief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rabbitlyness (Empson, 2012); 27 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-6</td>
<td>Black rabbit (no name)</td>
<td>Rabbit disappears one day, no explanation of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This colorful and quirky book, with few words, tells a story of a unique rabbit who loved doing typical rabbit things, but also loved sharing his unrabbity talents—painting and music. The happy forest is filled with his unrabbity. Then one day rabbit is gone. The forest turns gray; the bright color and music are gone. Nothing is left but a big black hole. As the rabbits venture down the hole they discover rabbit’s gifts. Soon the forest is again filled with color and music. All the rabbits join in painting and music.

| The Tenth Good Thing about Barney (Viorst, 1971); 25 pages | Grades K-4 | Written in first person from young boy’s perspective | Barney (cat) dies; no mention of cause | X | X | X |

A young boy’s cat, Barney, dies. His mother asks her son to think of 10 good things about Barney to share at the funeral. He thinks of nine but has trouble coming up with the tenth good thing. He finally thinks of all 10. Black and white pen and ink illustrations are nicely detailed. Religious information: A disagreement about heaven arises between the boy and his friend. Father states, “We don’t know too much about heaven . . . we can’t be absolutely sure that it’s there” (p. 14). This might not align with some families’ religious beliefs about life after death.

| When Dinosaurs Die (Brown & Brown, 1996); 32 pages | Grades K-3 | No main character, many dinosaurs of all ages | Briefly describes types of death, such as old age, illness, accidents, infant death, war, drug abuse, suicide | X | X | X | X |

This informational book has small detailed pictures with information about many types of death. Pages 18 and 19 have ideas for how to welcome someone back to the classroom after a classmate’s family member dies. Religious information: On pages 28–29 information about life after death is discussed. The following statement may be offensive to those who have strong spiritual beliefs about life after death: “No one can know for sure what comes after death, but almost everyone has an opinion about it” (p. 28). The book includes a glossary with common terms related to death and customs related to honoring the dead. Because of all the small details, unless using a projector this book would be difficult to share with a whole classroom.

| The Goodbye Book (Parr, 2015), 30 pages | Grades K-3 | Fish (no name) | One fish says it is hard to say goodbye to someone | X | X | X | X |

The book covers the wide variety of feelings associated with loss and saying goodbye. Although death is never mentioned, readers assume a fellow fish died. The fish reminisces about memories with the friend. This book is about coping with separation from a loved one and ends on a positive note, that there will always be someone to love you and hold you tight. The story could address topics such as death, divorce, moving, etc. Parr’s brightly colored, simplistic, thick black-line drawings are eye catching and will hold children’s attention.

| Mama Does the Mambo (Leiner, 2001); 40 pages | K-6 | Sofia | Father’s death, no mention of cause | | | | X |

In this story, set in Cuba, Sofia describes how after her Papí’s death, Mama stopped dancing. Sofia especially missed watching her Mama and Papa dance the mambo. Sofia tells how life was before her father’s death and how life was after. The story ends with Mama, her new friend Eduards (who unfortunately cannot dance). and Sofia attending the dance at the Carnival. When the dance music starts, to Sofia’s amazement, Mama motions for Sofia to be her partner in dancing the mambo. Illustrations are bright and colorful, giving the flavor of the Cuban community.
Bibliotherapy Lesson Plan

Created by Melissa A. Heath

**TASK OF GRIEF: REMEMBERING & MEMORIALIZING**

**BOOK INFORMATION**

Book Title: *Rabbityness*
Author: Jo Empson
Publisher: Child’s Play
Year: 2012
ISBN Number: 978-1-84643-482-2
Number of Pages: 32
Reading Level: Early second grade, but interesting to all ages

**BOOK SYNOPSIS**

This book starts out in black and white, but later incorporates vivid colors to express the influence of Rabbit’s music and art. Rabbit not only likes rabbity activities, he also likes unrabbity activities. Sadly and unexpectedly, one day Rabbit is gone. Nothing remains, except a black hole. Everyone in the forest community misses Rabbit. Representing the community’s grief, the woodland loses its brilliant colors. Wondering what happened to Rabbit, the rabbits go down the dark hole. Although they do not find Rabbit, he left gifts behind—musical instruments and art supplies. The rabbits fondly remember Rabbit, and following his example they begin to participate in creative unrabbity activities. Once again the forest becomes filled with music and bright colors.

**LESSON OBJECTIVE**

Children will identify reminders of a person who is no longer present with them.

**LESSON MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION**

Materials for post-reading activity: (select type of activity—drawing or writing)
- **Drawing activity:** plain white typing paper and colored markers for each child
- **Writing activity:** lined paper and pencil for each child

**KEY VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS**

Review the following terms or concepts that might be unfamiliar to your students.
- **Rabbity:** Normal, common, typical activities that are expected of rabbits (or children), such as going to school and doing homework
- **Unrabbity:** Uncommon, unusual activities that might not be expected of a rabbit (or child), such doing more than required, learning karate, speaking more than one language, writing a story, playing a musical instrument, etc.
- **Joy:** A feeling of great happiness
- **Disappear:** When something is gone, and you can no longer see it
- **Remember:** When you think back on something that happened in the past—you don’t forget it because you can no longer see it.
**PRE-READING ACTIVITY**

Show: The front cover of the book, a black rabbit with splotches of colorful paint

Ask: *Have you ever seen a rabbit? What do rabbits do most of the time?*

Explain: *Today we will learn about a rabbit that did uncommon things.*

**READ THE BOOK**

**POST READING DISCUSSION**

The rabbit was gone one day (disappeared). Ask the child/children, *“Where do you think Rabbit went?”* Explain reasons why you might not see someone. Examples might include a friend moving far away, a grandparent dying, someone becoming very sick and not able to come to school, etc. Ask the students the following questions: *What do you think happened to Rabbit? Why do you think Rabbit left his friends gifts? Has anyone ever given you a gift that helped you to remember them after they were gone* (moved away or died)? We are sad when we cannot be with the ones we love. However, even though we feel sadness, we do not want to forget these people and what they mean to us.

**POST READING ACTIVITY**

Adjust the following activity to children’s developmental level and specific needs.

Ask the children to think about something that helps them remember a person who is no longer with them. Have them either draw a picture (for younger children) or write a short description (for older children) of what helps them remember that person. Then ask the children to break into dyads and “pair and share” their drawings or written descriptions. Make sure all children have an opportunity to explain their remembrance. Some children may need some help in identifying an object that helps them remember a person. Share examples, such as grave stones, pictures, favorite books, letters, and other examples of keepsakes.

**CLOSURE**

Our classroom benefits from each student’s unique qualities. Years from now, when we are no longer in the same classroom, we will remember each person—the things the individual said and did; our school classroom pictures; something we wrote in our journal; a good time we had together, etc. As a reminder to the child/children, place the drawings/written descriptions in a visible place. Add a word strip “REMEMBER” above the students’ work.
References


Appendix

Table A-1 Sources of Help for Teachers and Parents

Websites with Booklists and Bibliotherapy Recommendations

1. http://librarybooklists.org/fiction/children/jbibliotherapy.htm#jbibdeath. This website includes numerous library booklists on a variety of topics, including death and grief.

2. http://www.ala.org/alsc/compubs/booklists/dealingwithtrag/booksseparation. This link features a list of children and youth books on separation and loss, compiled by the Association for Library Service to Children.


4. http://www.dougy.org/ The Dougy Center website sells books on a wide variety of grief-related issues for individuals of all ages. The site also has recommendations for talking with children and adolescents. Activities are provided to help children and teens cope with grief. The site’s information for parents will help them prepare children to attend—or not attend—a funeral.

5. http://childgrief.org/documents/Bibliography.pdf Children’s Grief Education Association provides an extensive list of children’s books on death and grief. However, this list was last updated in 2004, so newer books will not be listed.

6. http://www.aft.org/childrens-health/mental-health/supporting-grieving-student American Federation of Teachers (AFT; no date). Titled Supporting the Grieving Student, this site has a video webinar on addressing student grief and a presentation for teachers. The AFT also offers a Web-based collection of resources for children, parents, and educators.

7. https://sowkweb.usc.edu/about/centers-affiliations/national-center-school-crisis-and-bereavement This site, sponsored by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, has crisis intervention materials and resources.
8. [http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief](http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief) A free kit, *When Families Grieve* (Sesame Street Workshop, 2010), and a free packet produced by Sesame Street are available online. This Internet site has numerous videos featuring Muppets and people talking about grief. Topics include how children and adults feel after a loved one dies. The videos include a variety of scenarios: an uncle’s death, a father’s death, a mother’s death, a father’s suicide, etc. They show how to talk about feelings that are related to grief. A short booklet contains information about how to support children after a loved one’s death. The kit includes a children’s book (in Spanish and English), *Something Small: A Story About Remembering*.

### Additional Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Description of resource</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Activity Book</em></td>
<td>This is an activity book for children, which includes information for parents and caregivers about the impact of grief on children. The activities are designed to help children cope with their grief by better communicating and understanding their feelings. The book also offers information that helps adults communicate with their child about death and grief.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(National Alliance for Grieving Children, 2016); 78 pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kit: <em>When Families Grieve</em> (Sesame Street Workshop, 2010)</td>
<td>This free packet produced by Sesame Street is available online at <a href="http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief">http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief</a>. This Internet site has numerous videos featuring Muppets and people talking about grief. Topics include how children and adults feel after a loved one dies. The videos include a variety of scenarios: an uncle’s death, a father’s death, a mother’s death, a father’s suicide, etc. These videos show how to talk about feelings that are related to grief. A short booklet contains information about how to support children after a loved one’s death. The kit includes a children’s book (in Spanish and English), <em>Something Small: A Story About Remembering</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Children after a Suicide Loss: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers (Montgomery &amp; Coate, 2015); 30 pages</td>
<td>This easy-to-read book helps parents and caregivers understand how to talk about death specifically by suicide. Pages 24–27 include information about addressing suicide in school settings. Practical need-to-know topics are included such as how to help a child or adolescent decide whether or not to attend the loved one’s funeral. The book emphasizes the importance of giving children opportunities to feel comfortable talking about suicide and asking questions about suicide (reducing stigma).</td>
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### Table A-2: More Grief-Themed Books for Bibliotherapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book information and synopsis</th>
<th>Interest level Grade range</th>
<th>Main character</th>
<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Task of grief</th>
<th>Accept reality of death</th>
<th>Face painful emotion</th>
<th>Adjust to Change</th>
<th>Remember &amp; memorialize</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Badger’s Parting Gifts (Varley, 1984)</td>
<td>K–6</td>
<td>Mole</td>
<td>Badger dies (old age)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a principal, teacher, or staff member dies, a teacher might share this book with a classroom of students. This book demonstrates appreciation for an older and wiser person’s leadership and for the integral part these individuals play in our lives. After Badger dies, although it takes a while, eventually all the forest animals are fondly remembering the gifts (lessons) Badger gave them. The book ends with Mole thanking Badger, and Mole believing that somehow Badger heard his thank you. The book’s illustrations resemble Beatrix Potter’s drawings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying Goodbye to Lulu (Demas, 2004); 27 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–4</td>
<td>Written in first-person from young girl’s perspective</td>
<td>Lulu (dog) dies of old age</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>A beloved family dog, Lulu, ages across time. Eventually Lulu becomes very tired, stops eating, goes to sleep, and then dies. This book’s illustrations of tears and hugs show the family’s sadness. The mother, father, and young girl bury the dog in a box with favorite toys and a sock from each family member. When spring arrives, the family plants a cherry tree near the grave. The book ends with the young girl holding a puppy, smiling, and acknowledging that although the new puppy is not Lulu, she will love the new puppy. Illustrations are done in watercolor, pen and ink, and colored pencil.</td>
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<td>Sammy in the Sky (Walsh, 2011); 27 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–4</td>
<td>Written in first-person from young girl’s perspective</td>
<td>Sammy (12-year-old dog) gets sick and dies</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>This story is about the “best hound dog in the whole world” (p. 1). When the dog Sammy was 12 years old he had a large lump on his neck. His health rapidly declined. He became very sick and died. Father buried the dead dog in the backyard woods. (There was no funeral, and kids did not attend the burial). The story concludes with an end-of-summer celebration to remember Sammy: blowing bubbles and imagining that Sammy is in the clouds chasing the bubbles. Beautiful watercolor illustrations are by Jamie Wyeth. <strong>Religious information:</strong> The mother explains that the dead dog’s physical body is like a shell and that his spirit will be everywhere (on the 10th page that includes text) and that the dog will always be with us (last page of text).</td>
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<td>Life and I: A Story about Death (Larsen, 2016); 40 pages</td>
<td>Grades 3–12</td>
<td>Written in first person, with “Death” as the main character</td>
<td>Tells about death in general, including death of animals and people</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Book information and synopsis</td>
<td>Interest level Grade range</td>
<td>Main character</td>
<td>Type of death</td>
<td>Task of grief</td>
<td>Remember &amp; memorialize</td>
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<td>This is a rather unusual story about death and life personified as individuals who work together and keep a balance in nature. I recommend this for older students (3rd grade and above). The artwork is sweet and sensitive. This book asks questions about what individuals believe: “Will they be burned or cremated? Can their ashes be scattered in the winds of a mountaintop? Will they go to Heaven? Will they be born again?” Information is left open to interpretation. Older students could discuss the wide variety of traditions related to death and burial. This book portrays the characters Life and Death as friends, working together.</td>
<td>K–3</td>
<td>Everett, young African American boy</td>
<td>Father’s death, no explanation of cause</td>
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<td>This book portrays a young boy who grieves the death of his father. The charcoal drawings beautifully depict strong emotions associated with grief. Pictures of the mother comforting her son illustrate the importance of feeling loved and supported when facing the death of a loved one. Although this book is based on Kübler-Ross’s (1969) five stages of grief, several tasks of grief are also addressed.</td>
<td>Grades K–6</td>
<td>Gus, polar bear</td>
<td>Ida becomes ill and eventually dies</td>
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<td>This sensitive story is based on two polar bears (Ida and Gus) that actually lived in New York City’s Central Park Zoo. Ida and Gus are very close friends. Ida becomes sick, and shortly thereafter dies. The story emphasizes that those we love, though dead, always remain with us. Always is emphasized. Feelings, such as disbelief, anger, sadness, humor, loneliness, and caring compassion are all woven into the story. Illustrations are beautifully detailed and enhance the story’s emotional message. The story ends with Gus, though alone, confidently assured that Ida is right there. Always.</td>
<td>Grades 2–6</td>
<td>Laura—approximately 10 or 11 years old</td>
<td>Laura’s mother died 3 years ago; no mention of cause</td>
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<td>Laura’s mother died three years ago. Laura now lives with her father and stepmother, Jane. Laura treasures a string of buttons gathered from various relatives’ clothing. The string of buttons, started by her great grandmother, was handed down to Laura. Each button holds special meaning. One day the string breaks and the buttons are scattered across the lawn. Although father and Jane help gather up the buttons, one button remains missing, the father’s military button. This was Laura’s mother’s favorite button. After Laura goes to bed she overhears her father suggest to Jane that they could replace the lost button. Jane says, “No substitute allowed.” Father and Jane continue searching in the darkness with flashlights. Ultimately, Jane finds the missing button. The following morning, Laura asks Jane to help re-string the buttons and considers the future possibility of adding one of Jane’s buttons. In addition to showing how one girl memorializes and remembers her deceased mother with the string of buttons, this story also offers an example of learning to live with change after the death of a loved one. Realistic illustrations show true-to-life emotions.</td>
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<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Task of grief</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Grade range</td>
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<td>Accept reality of death</td>
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<td><strong>The Dead Bird</strong> (Brown, 1938); 42 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Group of children, one girl and three boys (possibly 7–9 years old)</td>
<td>Dead bird; no mention of cause</td>
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<td><strong>Blow Me a Kiss, Miss Lilly</strong> (Carlstrom, 1990); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Sara—approximately 6 or 7 years old</td>
<td>Elderly neighbor becomes ill and dies</td>
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<td><strong>I'll Always Love You</strong> (Wilhelm, 1985); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-2</td>
<td>Boy (no name) who ages across time</td>
<td>Pet dog, Elfie, dies of old age</td>
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<td><strong>Flamingo Dream</strong> (Napoli, 2002); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Young girl (no name), approximately 7 or 8 years old</td>
<td>Father dies of cancer</td>
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<td><strong>Grandma's Gloves</strong> (Castellucci, 2010); 28 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Young girl, possibly 7 or 8 years old</td>
<td>Elderly grandmother gets sick and dies</td>
<td>X</td>
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This classic grief-themed children’s book describes four children coming across a dead bird, which is described in detail. After burying the bird in the woods they have a funeral, and on a rock covering the grave they write, “Here lies a bird that is dead.” Every day they returned to the grave to add flowers and sing, *until they forgot*. The last picture shows the children playing in an open field adjacent to the partially visible grave of the bird.

Sara lives across the road from an elderly lady, Miss Lilly, and her cat, Snug. They become good friends. Miss Lilly shares stories from her past. To show their friendship, Miss Lilly and Sara blow kisses to one another. Old age is accurately portrayed. Miss Lilly becomes very sick and dies. Sara reflects on fond memories of Miss Lilly. She also takes care of Snug, the cat. Children will identify with Sara's feelings. The book’s pictures are nicely detailed.

Told from a young boy’s perspective, the story portrays Elfie, the dog, and the boy growing up together. The dog gradually ages and becomes old. The boy tells the dog that he will *always* love him. When the dog dies, the family buries the dog, and all cry and hug each other. The boy does not want another dog right away, but imagines that when he does get another pet, he will tell the pet, "I'll always love you."

This true-to-life story is told from a young girl's perspective. As her father's cancer progresses during his final year of life, his physical changes are compared to the changes in the color of leaves from summer to fall. At the end of the book the girl and her mother are shown making a memory book. *Flamingo Dream* does not offer religious or spiritual support, which some parents may want. The colorful collage-like illustrations and crayon drawings resemble a child's artwork.

A young girl describes her close connection with her grandmother. They enjoy each other's company and both love gardening. Soon after the grandmother becomes sick and disoriented, she dies. A memorial with family and friends gives an opportunity for everyone to share their memories of grandma. Upon leaving, each person chooses something to take home to remember grandma. Mama describes a few of grandma's things that are special to the young girl. Feeling sad, the girl gets grandma's gardening gloves. They talk about growing a garden and how the girl will teach mama everything about gardening.
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<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Task of grief</th>
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<td><em>Where Are You?</em> (Olivieri, 2007); 21 pages</td>
<td>Grades pre K–2</td>
<td>Young boy (no name), possibly 4 or 5 years old</td>
<td>Death of a non-specified family member</td>
<td>Accept reality of death</td>
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This story is told from a young boy’s perspective, and the deceased person is not clearly identified. The boy asks questions. Answers are not given, but as parents read the book, these questions can provide them with opportunities to explain their beliefs. **Religious information:** The boy asks one question that has religious implications: “Maybe you are an angel now with beautiful wings” (p. 6). The illustrations are simply and nicely drawn.

| The Velveteen Rabbit (Williams Bianco, originally published in 1922); 41 pages | All ages | Stuffed toy rabbit | Stuffed rabbit is put in a sack of rubbish to be burned | Accept reality of death | X | Face painful emotion | X | Adjust to Change | X | Remember & memorialize | X |

This is a classic story, identified as one of teachers’ top 100 favorite books. Although it is not specifically about death, the feelings and emotions that are portrayed in this book deal with loss and separation. A young boy becomes attached to his stuffed rabbit. The rabbit believes that he will become real if the boy loves him. Over time the rabbit loses his newness, and his material is worn thin. Then the boy becomes ill with scarlet fever. Per doctor’s orders, the rabbit is placed along with other contaminated toys in a sack soon to be burned. The rabbit cries a tear. A fairy appears and takes the rabbit to the forest where he is changed into a real rabbit. Seasons pass. The book ends with the rabbit visiting the forest where he and the boy used to play. The boy catches a glimpse of a real rabbit that strangely reminds him of his velveteen rabbit.

| Sophie Fox, 1989); 32 pages | Grades K–3 | Sophie, starts as an infant and across time grows and becomes a mother | Grandfather becomes old and dies | Accept reality of death | X | Face painful emotion | X | Adjust to Change | X |

This book shows a close-knit African American family across generations. The book starts before Sophie’s birth and ends with Sophie nurturing her own child. Grandfather ages across time and then he dies. The book includes birth and death, the life cycle. The book’s bright illustrations beautifully depict love and family unity.

| A Place in my Heart (Aubrey, 2007); 24 pages | Grades K–2 | Andrew, a young African American boy (4 or 5 years old) | Grandfather dies, no mention of cause | Accept reality of death | X | Face painful emotion | X | Adjust to Change | X | Remember & memorialize | X |

This book is about a young African American boy whose grandfather dies. The family members express feelings about the grandfather’s death, and they support one another (hugs and reassurance). The book ends with Andrew watching ladybirds (ladybugs) and fondly remembering his grandfather. Andrew’s grandfather had said, “When you love someone they have a place in your heart always” (page 23). The final page offers guidelines for using this book to talk with children about death and associated feelings.
Tear Soup
(Schwiebert & DeKlyen, 1999); 56 pages

Grandy suffered a big loss. This loss is not specifically defined, but the reader may assume the loss is the death of a loved one. Grandy goes into great detail about making tear soup (grieving). She talks about the ingredients and the lengthy never-ending process of making tear soup. The story goes into detail about the wide variety of feelings Grandy is experiencing and the many ways others respond to her needs. The story ends with Grandy and her grandson on a porch swing. The grandson asks her what he will do after Grandy dies. She reassures him, “Don’t worry, I will leave you my recipe for tear soup” (page 45). Religious information: On pages 28–29 Grandy is attending church. She talks about being mad at God and yelling at God. She wonders where God was when she was feeling all alone. “Still Grandy trusted God, but she didn’t understand God… Grandy keeps reminding herself to be grateful for ALL the emotions that God had given her” (page 29). The detailed earth-toned artwork aligns with the story’s message. NOTE: I give this book to families who have suffered the death of a loved one. One woman told me that after her husband’s death she and her children (as a family) read this book daily. She gives the book credit for helping her through an incredibly difficult time.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages
Buscaglia, 1982); 32 pages

This classic story demonstrates that death is a part of life. Freddie emerges in the spring and enjoys the life of a leaf. As fall arrives, the weather becomes cold and the leaves turn a different color. Daniel, the wise leaf, explains that it is time for the leaves to change their home (die). The story ends with an explanation that the dried Freddie, which fell from the tree and landed on the ground, would eventually join with the water and nourish and strengthen the tree. Religious information: When Freddie asks, “Where will we go when we die?” Daniel explains, “No one knows for sure. That’s the great mystery!” Religious families who believe in an afterlife may not agree with this statement.
Melissa Allen Heath is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education at BYU, as well as being a licensed psychologist and a nationally certified school psychologist. She teaches graduate classes, primarily in school-based crisis intervention. Her additional research interests include children’s grief, bibliotherapy, suicide prevention, social skills, and social-emotional learning. Dr. Heath has been the recipient of BYU’s Wesley P. Lloyd Award for Distinction in Graduate Education.