LITERATURE FOR ADULTS TO ASSIST THEM IN HELPING BEREAVED CHILDREN

DONNA L. SCHUURMAN, Ed.D., CT
The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families

ABSTRACT
The assignment sounded simple enough: “Describe, analyze, and evaluate literature available for adults to help them in their efforts to assist bereaved children.” Plodding into it, however, proved daunting. A Google search yielded 143,000 matches for “bereaved children” and 283,000 for “grieving children.” Reviews of death-related catalogs and books available through Amazon.com unveiled a dizzying array of options. Clearly, boundaries would need to be set. Having been instructed to include only written publications and not videos, DVDs, or other media, this is the question I opted to address: What are the “Top 20” publications for a professional wanting to start a library of written resources directed at adults who help grieving children? In my search, I enlisted the input of over 200 professionals and para-professionals in the field, in person (at the 7th Annual Children's Grief Symposium in San Antonio, Texas; among my colleagues at The Dougy Center, with a collective 40 years of work with bereaved children), and by e-mail (to selected members of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, and a gathering of Women in Thanatology). I filtered through their recommendations, and landed on the 20 listed here. I also decided to focus on two reading populations: professionals and parents. In so doing, I asked myself the following questions: What kinds of publications ought a person in a professional helping role, whether a psychologist, aftercare provider, counselor, therapist, or educator, be minimally familiar with to better assist bereaved children? And, what resources might those professionals recommend to individuals who are parenting children grieving a loss through death? You will note that I have excluded publications solely geared to classroom teachers or the school environment, not because they aren’t important or voluminous, but because that topic is a full article in itself, and outside the scope of my assignment. Another qualifier: with the exceptions of co-editors, I chose to limit an author to one selection in order to broaden the range of topics and contributors. Caveat emptor!

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Twelve books for professionals made the final cut. The first four are good reference books edited or written by five excellent authors in this field:


This wise old tome includes helpful chapters on “Parents, Teachers, and Health Professionals as Helpers” (Wass) and “Helping with Death Education” (Corr), in addition to Sandra Bertman’s guidelines on the thoughts and expressions children have around death, and Edgar Jackson’s piece on pastoral counseling and the child facing death. With the inclusion of tips for effective care as well as clinical findings on children and death, the book includes guidelines and suggestions for parents, health professionals, educators, and others interested in a foundational understanding of the child’s experience. Although the 111-page resource section of annotated books for adults and children, as well as audiovisual resources, is dated, there are still gems worth mining for.


Webb’s handbook is divided into three sections. The first presents a theoretical framework for understanding how children understand and respond to death, including a thoughtful discussion of “normal” and “disabling” grief, and sample assessment tools to utilize in evaluating suicidal risk. Samples of what Webb terms a “tripartite assessment of the bereaved child” include surveys of individual factors, issues relating to the death itself, and cultural influences such as family, religion, and community aspects. Section Two delves into seven different contributors’ case histories of deaths, including families experiencing the death of a grandparent, a father, dual losses, a sibling, mother, and both parents, affecting children ages two-and-a-half to 11. Section Three details case stories in four schools or communities where children were faced with the death of a friend, a teacher, a school counselor, and violent death in a classmate’s family. A chief benefit of this book is the hands-on insight to real situations and the variety of ways professionals responded.


This contributing authors’ book contains chapters from 22 contributors designed to assist helpers in understanding and responding to the needs of infants, toddlers, and young children. Part One in this book addresses encounters with death during childhood, children’s developing understandings of death, and children who are coping with HIV/AIDS, suicide, or life-threatening illness. Part Two provides an overview of how bereaved children cope with loss, as well as separate chapters on the death of a sibling, the death of a friend, loss of a pet, and traumatic experiences. Part Three on interventions explores the family as a healing
resource, preparation before a trauma, postvention with elementary school children, support groups, and individual treatment for a bereaved child. Overall, this book offers a thoughtful and useful resource for helping children before, during, and after a death.


Corr and Balk have assembled a professional cast of 27 authors addressing a comprehensive range of topics relating to adolescents in three principal topic areas: coping with death and dying, handling bereavement, and interventions designed to help them. The first six chapters look at developmental tasks of adolescents and their ambiguity in understanding death, as well as their reality and responses to homicide, suicide, AIDS, and life-threatening illness. The bereavement section homes in on parent and sibling loss, and the issues and impacts of the death of a friend during adolescence. Seven chapters explore interventions with adolescents through family, education, support groups, and professional settings. With a blend of professors and practitioners, the reader is treated to a thoughtful exploration of theoretical and practical issues related to working with adolescents prior to, during, and following a death.

**CHAPTERS IN A BOOK**

The following two publications stand out for single chapters pertaining to bereaved children, though the entire books well serve professionals interested in bereaved children.


This outstanding chapter is one of ten in a book that should be on the shelf of every therapist who works with adolescents and every professional who seeks a deeper understanding of the research underlying resilience in this population. The 46 pages of this chapter alone are worth the investment. From the reliable statistics to a review of valid studies, the authors provide an examination of models, pose questions, and probe deep into the issues of depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other possible symptoms of adolescent bereavement, searching for the illusive operationalizing of “pathological” bereavement. Their conclusion? “Despite almost 75 years of theoretical formulation and debate, the problem remains far from solved” (p. 122). I found myself underlining almost every line of this chapter! Other chapters, though not specific to bereavement, lend assistance to those working with bereaved adolescents through related topics including depression, social competence, and stress.

There is no better synopsis of the research on the effects of parental bereavement in children and adolescents than this chapter by an outstanding research team from Arizona State University. It covers a comprehensive review of studies examining the relationship between parental death and child and adolescent mental health problems, as well as other developmental outcomes. The authors analyze previous research studies for hypotheses on how parental death may contribute to depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms, as well as complicating developmental tasks. Their findings and summaries contribute a much-needed foundation for frequent claims, some supported by research and clinical practice, and others unsupported. They discuss risk factors for parentally bereaved children, as well as protective factors that mediate adjustment. The authors also review the sparse research on the effect of childhood parental bereavement into adulthood, with an excellent discussion on directions for future research. This chapter is a doctoral student’s dissertation research dream, both because it analyzes existing research and provides ample ideas for areas still needing attention. Whether your interest is primarily in practice or in research, this chapter is a must-read for bridging the unfortunate gap that exists in tying together clinical experience and solid research findings.

FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

The following two books look at grieving children within the context of their families and are two of the top in the field:


Shapiro’s book introduces professionals who provide bereavement counseling or therapy to children, adults, and/or families to an integrative, systemic model of grief. Weaving family systems and relational developmental perspectives into practical application, the author blends individual, family, and cultural dimensions. In a critique of individually-oriented bereavement literature, she highlights the value of relationship-oriented approaches. Part One provides an overview of the systemic developmental approach to family bereavement. Part Two describes the individual grief of children and adults within a systemic context, emphasizing in particular the importance of recognizing how a bereaved adult’s needs impact the parenting process, which, in turn, affects a grieving child’s developmental outcome. Part Three explores further the shared development of grieving families, through a look at family systems and coping strategies, and the family impact following the death of a child/sibling. In Part Four, cultural
and social factors in family bereavement are surveyed, including a theoretical overview and clinical case vignettes. The final chapter ties the theoretical and practical together in an outline for an approach to assessment and treatment, which is clinically useful for helping professionals working to support grieving families.


As is evident in the title, Nadeau’s work explores the healing process after a death within the context of the family. In a qualitative research model, she shares stories that illustrate how families come to terms with their grief and make sense of death, emphasizing the often underemphasized importance of meaning-making. Through intensive, or unstructured, interviewing, the author includes the experience of 10 families with deaths ranging from a 39-year-old man who died in an airplane crash to a 90-year-old who succumbed to pneumonia. By including sons, daughters, grandchildren, spouses, and other family members in extensive interviews, patterns of meaning-making emerge. A helpful addition of this book to the field is a look at the implications for theory, research, and practice, as well as the need for those in “grief literature” and “family literature” to integrate for best service to families following a death.

**PARENT DEATH**

William Worden and Phyllis Silverman were co-principal researchers of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Funeral Directors Association, and the Hillenbrand Corporation. Each has written an outstanding book following the study’s completion.


William Worden wrote about this longitudinal, prospective study involving a non-clinical, representative community sample of 125 children ages six to 17 from 70 families in the Boston, Massachusetts, area who lost a parent to death. The study assessed the families at four months, and at the first and second anniversaries following the death with a variety of testing instruments. They included a matched, non-bereaved sample of children, a shortfall of many previous existing studies. This pivotal research and consequent analysis of findings provides perhaps the best information we have around the early impact of the loss of a parent. Worden looks at issues that affect coping, including gender, age, developmental aspects, family and community influences, and much more. For a comprehensive survey, Worden’s book is readable, packed with information that will help researchers and practitioners, and is an absolute must-have book for anyone who works with or seeks to understand children and their responses to the death of a parent.

Phyllis Silverman’s book builds on the data and stories from the Harvard Child Bereavement Study to weave together scholarly research, relevant historical perspectives, and the insights of the real experts—grieving children. As co-principal researcher, Silverman’s unique gift is in humanizing the stories shared by the six to 17-year-olds included in the study, concluding that while most children and adolescents crave opportunities to talk about their deceased parents, they are rarely provided that chance. While presenting historical and theoretical constructs for a foundation of understanding and assisting grieving children and families, Silverman’s style is to listen to what the grieving persons tell us. Her work is incisive, thoughtful, and compassionate. This book challenges many long-standing and erroneous beliefs about how children grieve, and how they heal.

SIBLING DEATH

In a small field of books relating to sibling death and its effect on children, this one stands out:


There are few rivals to Betty Davies’ excellent review of the immediate, short-term, and long-term effects of the death of a brother or sister. With over 25 years as a practicing nurse, nurse educator, and researcher, her informed and practical book provides the theoretical and practical groundwork for understanding and assisting those who are bereaved by sibling loss—an often overlooked phenomenon in mental health, bereavement, and family therapy literature. Ten information-packed chapters explore the unique features of the sibling relationship, common reactions of grieving siblings, family functioning, long-term effects, and the individual, situational, and environmental variables affecting sibling bereavement responses. Also of special note are the two Appendices, which summarize respectively anecdotal/scholarly articles and research reports in the literature on sibling bereavement. This unparalleled resource is a must-read for any professional whose work includes children or adults who experienced the death of a sibling in childhood.

STIGMATIZED DEATHS

Now in its second edition, Linda Goldman’s book on children dealing with deaths that are often stigmatized is an excellent resource:


This is a helpful resource for those working with children impacted by deaths that are often stigmatized—suicide, murder, and AIDS. This updated
edition also explores the effects of bullying, and how large-scale community violence influences children. The 284 pages are brimming with practical suggestions, case examples, national resources, and copious other resources including books, CD-ROMS, videos, curricula, and Web sites. Emphasizing practical ways to help children victimized by violence, abuse, and what are often thought of as “preventable” deaths, Goldman includes many activities and techniques for use with children, including visualization, dream work, puppetry, photography, punching bags, art work, and storytelling.

FOR PARENTS

The following six resources are the pick of the lot for parents seeking to understand and help their children or adolescents following a death. While geared to parents, they’re also helpful resources for professionals.


Elisabeth Kübler-Ross called this book “a primer for parents in helping their children through the process of grief.” Helen Fitzgerald’s decades of experience working with grieving children as the director of the first grief program in the nation established in a community mental health center inform this easy-to-read book with resources and topics ranging from how to explain death to children to handling funerals. The book is arranged by topics and is easy to negotiate, so that the reader may hunt and peck for relevant concerns, rather than needing to read the entire text chronologically. For the already stressed and stretched parent with ebbing energy and crunched for time, this is the resource to turn to.

*Helping Children Cope with Death,* The Dougy Center, Portland, OR: The Dougy Center, 1997.

One of a series of short guidebooks published by The Dougy Center (this one is 52 pages), this conversational chapbook is intended for parents and professionals who don’t have time or energy to sift through lengthier or weightier books. It looks at basic principles for understanding how children grieve, as well as issues for the grieving infant and pre-schooler; six to 12 years old; and teen. Sharing common feelings from over 20 years of experience, the Center staff invite children and teens to share in their own words what they need, and what it feels like to be a child coping with death. A quick read, the guidebook provides tips for helping, as well as how to know when professional help is warranted. Common questions about children and grief, compiled from parents over two decades, address an array of wonderings, from “How do I know if my child is grieving?” to “How do I get my child to talk about the person who died?” Information on this guidebook and others in the series may be accessed from The Dougy Center’s Web site, www.dougy.org.

Wolfelt, a respected clinician and long-time advocate of the “companioning” model of bereavement, utilizes the metaphor of gardening to look at how bereaved children heal. Based on the belief that grief is a natural process, and that dealing with loss can involve not just suffering but growth as well, this book is an excellent resource for professionals and parents. From six needs of mourning through counseling fundamentals and techniques for caregivers, the writing is incisive yet accessible, filled with common sense and compassion. It is just one of many fine publications authored by Wolfelt and available through The Companion Press.


Born from the fire of their own experience after Jim’s wife died and MaryAnn became a step-parent to his grieving children, the Emswilers know of which they speak. They also share many years of working with grieving children and families through The Cove, a group of East-coast based support centers. Weaving some of their own story into a sensitive and well-written book for parents, this book has received kudos from those who count: other parents raising children after a loss through death.


Drawing from Schaefer’s background in the funeral home world, this book helpfully stresses the importance of honesty with children, and assists readers in understanding how to speak the truth with children in a way they can hear and understand. It covers the relevant topics—explaining death, making choices, common feelings—in a readable style.


Part of a parenting series by Barron’s, Joy Johnson’s book is an easy read which spins through the fundamentals of helping children following a death. The co-founder of Centering Corporation, Johnson touches on topics most parents will wonder about: explaining death, what to do about funerals, how religion factors in, and how to help. Included is a helpful glossary and recommended reading.

A BOOK FOR ADULTS BEREAVED AS CHILDREN


Drawing on over 17 years working with bereaved children and teens through
The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, and interviews with adults who had experienced the death of a parent during their childhood, this book is written specifically for adults bereaved in childhood. It draws on the research about bereaved children, and helps readers explore whether and how seven common symptoms of bereaved children may have played out into their adult lives. Using self-assessments and examples, including a 20-question inventory, the author invites readers to look back at their reactions and coping strategies at the time of and following their parent’s death. Moving into the present, the book challenges readers to consider the high cost of unaddressed grief, including depression, anxiety, pessimism, underachievement, and troubled relationships. This is, according to Amazon.com reviewer Barbara Mackoff, “an indispensable guide to the unfinished business of losing a parent at an early age.” The book is also helpful for those who are currently parenting a child or teenager after the death of a spouse who is also the child’s parent. Its preventive discussions about what helps and what hinders healing for children and adolescents following the death of a parent may encourage resiliency and provide a smoother transition into adulthood.

**ONE CHILDREN’S BOOK FOR ADULTS AS WELL**

The field of books for grieving children has grown like, well, weeds over the last decade, and like all books, its entries range from the abysmally laughable to the extraordinarily exceptional. Among the many excellent books out there, I want to close with one that I believe is the best in the class, one that I’d like to see in the library of parents and professionals as well as children:


Don’t be fooled by the cover’s designation of four- to eight-year-old readers for this delightfully illustrated and frequently irreverent book. It’s a wise book, as all good children’s books are, and emphasizes, in its random simplicity, the importance of providing an atmosphere where children can wonder, where no topic is off-limits, and where dinosaurs get to put into words the very questions and concerns children often voice. This book has received some criticism for raising more issues than it answers. Death does that sometimes, doesn’t it?

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The author would like to acknowledge the pioneering work of two people. Even though their books about children and death are somewhat dated and perhaps out of print, I still proudly have copies on my shelf. The legacy they have
left and the initial work they did to stick their necks out in a field few had
written much about make them worthy of special mention: Earl Grollman’s edited
book from 1967, *Explaining Death to Children* (Boston: Beacon Press) and
Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ 1983 publication, *On Children and Death* (New York:
Simon & Schuster).

Direct comments to:
Donna Schuurman, Ed.D., CT
e-mail: donna@dougy.org