BEREAVEMENT, GRIEF, AND MOURNING IN DEATH-RELATED LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

In preparing a series of annotated bibliographies on death-related literature for children and adolescents (Corr, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b), it became evident that this literature discusses topics related to bereavement, grief, and mourning in a variety of ways. That should not be surprising, since much of this literature was written to help children cope with experiences of death and loss. What is surprising, however, is the apparent absence of formal studies of bereavement issues in this body of literature in the major professional journals in the field of dying, death, and bereavement. This article is an initial attempt at rectifying that apparent gap in attention. It is also an effort to stimulate increased appreciation of these and other noteworthy aspects of death-related literature written to be read by or with children.

INTRODUCTION

Before describing some reasons to engage in a study of this type, and some of its limitations, it may help to note some concepts that underline this effort and to outline the structure of the article that follows. From a conceptual standpoint, bereavement is the objective situation of an individual who has experienced a loss (especially a loss that is associated with death) of someone or something that is valued (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). In other words, the key structural elements of bereavement are an attachment, a loss, and a bereaved person (someone who is victimized or made bereft by the loss or ending of that attachment). From a subjective standpoint, bereavement typically involves a wide range of possible reactions to an actual or anticipated loss (grief); efforts to cope with both the loss and one’s reactions to that loss (mourning; also called grieving by some authors);
and efforts to go forward in life and find ways to live healthfully in the new world brought about by the loss (another aspect of the mourning process; also called adaptation by some authors). Thus, the central functional elements in bereavement are grief or grieving and coping or mourning.

In the following survey, these basic concepts guide an examination of 99 selected examples of death-related books for children under the following seven primary headings: 1) children’s thoughts and questions about death and loss; 2) children’s feelings about death, loss, or scary situations; 3) some efforts to explain death and loss; 4) three examples of efforts to prepare children for death and loss; 5) grief reactions to death and loss; 6) coping with death, loss, and grief (being left out; sharing questions and feelings; coping by oneself; coping through funeral rituals; coping through other memorial activities; and coping through memories and legacies); and 7) moving on with living and loving. Some of these headings overlap and some books touch on more than one of these headings, but each heading may help to bring out a particular aspect of the books we will survey. Our work then concludes with some suggestions about helping bereaved youngsters drawn from the books we have examined.

**WHY UNDERTAKE THIS STUDY?**

There are at least four different reasons to undertake a study of this type. First, many readers may be surprised to discover the extent and variety of death-related literature for children that has been published in recent years. In fact, ever since the publication of such early books as *The Big Wave* (Buck, 1948), *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952), and *The Dead Bird* (Brown, 1958) this body of children’s literature has expanded greatly.\(^1\)\(^2\) Especially during the 1980s and 1990s, there was an explosion of published literature written for young readers that addresses issues related to death, dying, and/or bereavement. Currently, my master list of titles contains 159 titles for pre-school and elementary school readers, along with 80 additional titles for middle school and high school audiences.

Second, it is interesting simply to learn more about what authors of children’s literature are offering to young readers in their stories about bereavement. What examples of loss and grief are these authors presenting to children? What suggestions are they making about coping with loss and grief? Adults cannot know whether or not these examples fairly represent death-related experiences that children might encounter, nor can we determine whether or not we are content

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\(^1\) Full bibliographic data for titles highlighted in boldface are given in a separate list of “Children’s Literature” at the end of this article.

\(^2\) In addition to local bookstores, national book chains, and Internet Web sites like Amazon.com, two good sources that specialize in publishing and distributing death-related literature are identified in the next section of this article. Even when books are out of print from their publishers, they are often still available in local and school libraries.
with the coping suggestions in these books, until we look at this body of literature itself.

Third, this body of literature provides an opportunity to approach topics related to childhood bereavement in an unusual way. We are all familiar with examples of books in which adults describe their own bereavement. We may also be familiar with some of the many books in which lay and professional authors suggest how adults should act to help bereaved children (see the article “Literature for Adults to Assist Them in Helping Bereaved Children” elsewhere in this special issue). However, we may not know much about the parallel body of literature in which bereavement is depicted in the lives of children. This article focuses mainly on stories about children who encounter loss and grief, stories that were primarily written for young readers who may read them on their own or together with a caring adult.

Fourth, it may be important to determine whether or not an analysis of lessons about bereavement in death-related literature for children can be of value for adults who undertake this study. Even though loss and grief may take on particular forms in the world of a child, they are universal human experiences. Simple descriptions of bereavement written for children need not be simplistic in the lessons they offer. Therefore, death-related literature designed to be read by or with children may help adults identify lessons about bereavement that are fundamental to all humans. The only way to determine whether or not that is so is to look at the literature itself.

SOME LIMITATIONS TO KEEP IN MIND

The investigation that follows is only an initial survey of selected examples of death-related literature for children. No one could hope to provide a comprehensive account of this body of literature. Several new books were published while this article was being written, and new titles appear every day from both well-known commercial and lesser-known private or independent publishers. Despite the limited topical scope of our concerns, one could hardly hope to keep up with this flood of materials in any really thoroughgoing way. Even though my own personal and published bibliographies in this field are confined to books in English that have been published in North America, they are still likely to be incomplete.

For these reasons, I regularly turn to others to learn about new death-related children’s books. In my own work, these others have included: bibliographers whose concerns touch on this field or on larger issues of separation and loss (e.g., Rudman, Gagne, & Bernstein, 1977-1993); educators and experts in instructional materials whose professional responsibilities involve teaching children about death and loss, or providing them with educational resources in those subject areas; nurses, social workers, clergypersons, counselors, and others who provide care to ill, dying, or bereaved children; and specialists in publishing and
distributing children’s literature such as Joy Johnson at the Centering Corporation (P.O. Box 4600, Omaha, NE 68104-0600; telephone 402-553-1200; www.centering.org) or Donna O’Toole at Compassion Books (477 Hannah Branch Road, Burnsville, NC 28714; telephone 828-675-5909; www.compassionbooks.com).

In fact, as will become evident in this article, this body of literature ranges from simple activity books and storybooks that permit very young children to color and/or draw on their pages or to follow a short, easy text and an associated set of pictures or drawings (perhaps in the company of a caring adult), through more sophisticated stories and artwork for elementary school audiences, to quite advanced and often moving fiction and other forms of writing for middle and high school readers. As a result, this study explores a rich and varied body of literature for young readers whose combined resources have not been given sufficient attention either by themselves or in relation to what they have to offer about bereavement, grief, and mourning.

A final caution to keep in mind is this: not every death-related book for children has much to offer about issues related to bereavement. Some address other aspects of death and dying, while others are not very distinctive or imaginative in their contents. Nevertheless, many children’s books on bereavement—the real treasures in the field—have so much to offer that they resist being summarized in just a few words, as we must inevitably do here, or being confined to a single category of the type that dominates surveys like this one. Perhaps that suggests we might hope that the future will witness more narrowly focused and richer analyses than might be expected from this initial foray into the field of lessons about bereavement in death-related books for children.

CHILDREN’S THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH AND LOSS

Many adults seem to assume that children are not aware of significant losses in their lives and will not come to such awareness unless others around them explicitly draw their attention to those losses. As a result, such adults try to distract children from such losses or divert their attention to what are assumed to be more acceptable topics. These actions are undertaken in accord with the mistaken belief that, in so doing, such adults are acting in the best interests of the children. In fact, even when they do not completely understand what has happened, children notice changes in the lives of those around them. They are concerned about separations and endings. They speculate in their own ways about subjects they do not fully understand, even though they do not always know how to articulate what they are thinking and feeling. And, they often pick up cues from the adults around them to the effect that strange things are happening and some topics seem to have been ruled out of bounds for discussion in their presence.

Several death-related books for children emphasize in various ways the importance of questions and the process of questioning in coping with death and loss.
For example, in Allison’s Grandfather (Peavy, 1981), while her friend’s grandfather is dying, Erica asks the questions that all children might ask: Is he ready to die? Would she be told if her own grandfather was dying? When Allison’s grandfather does die, Erica’s mother is able to be there and to hold his hand, and to tell Erica about what it was like.

Also, in This Book Is for All Kids, but Especially My Sister Libby, Libby Died (Simon, 2001), young Jack Simon’s mother shares with readers some of the questions he asked and the comments he offered when he was five and his sister died of a rare disorder. Examples of Jack’s questions include: “Mom, what if Libby was your first baby, and I was the middle kid? Would it have been me? Would I be dead now?”; “You’re dead. So how exactly do you live?”; “And if you don’t need your body anymore, are there just heads floating around?”; “Mom, will Libby have the same face and clothes on when we see her as an angel?”

Another book follows the concerns of a young girl through the illness, hospitalization, death, and funeral of her baby sister, and the subsequent birth of a new brother. A major issue for the girl is made clear in the title of this book: Am I Still a Big Sister? (Weir, 1992).

A book that is a classic in the field, A Taste of Blackberries (Smith, 1973), tells a story about events surrounding the death of a mischievous boy named Jamie as a result of an allergic reaction to a bee sting. His best friend (the book’s unnamed narrator) reflects on a series of questions about this unexpected event: Did it really happen, or is it just another of Jamie’s pranks? Could it have been prevented? Is it disloyal to go on eating and living when Jamie is dead? The narrator talks about issues like these with his parents, but their responses are not always helpful. Eventually, he shares his questions with a sympathetic neighbor, Mrs. Mullins. She responds, “Honey, one of the hardest things we have to learn is that some questions do not have answers” (p. 43). In return, the boy thinks to himself, “I nodded. This made more sense than if she had tried to tell me some junk about God needing angels.”

That comment may appear to be a bit irreverent. However, it does remind us that when one asks, “Why did someone die?” and the response is “because God loved that person,” that answer can be perplexing to some children. Such children might conclude from this that God’s love is expressed in strange ways if it involves taking someone we love away from us. Alternatively, some children might wonder if this manifestation of God’s love could mean that God does not love those who are left behind.

Perhaps, as Mrs. Mullins seems to suggest, there may be some questions for which we do not have completely satisfying answers. That does not mean that such questions should not be posed. Sometimes they lead us to other, more important, questions. In any event, they are part of the process of reflecting on what happens to us and on life itself. In other words, they are efforts by children and adults to resist settling for what Socrates called an “unexamined life,” which he said was “not worth living.”
CHILDREN’S FEELINGS ABOUT DEATH, LOSS, OR SCARY SITUATIONS

A number of books for children emphasize in various ways issues related to children’s feelings about death, loss, or scary situations. For example, The Very Beautiful Dragon (Johnson, 2001) is an unusually attractive book from a visual standpoint. According to the story, two young children are scared when they first encounter a dragon, and they become even more frightened when they see it again on other occasions. It isn’t enough for them to be shown that there is actually no dragon present. What really helps is a neighbor who teaches the children that they have to confront their fears and get to know what scares them. That’s the way to face down one’s dragons and recognize one’s own strengths and power.

The Hurt (Doleski, 1983) describes responses to situations that are broader than death-related losses. When Justin is hurt by an angry insult from his friend, he doesn’t share his feelings with anyone. Instead, he takes “the hurt” into his room, like a big, round, cold, hard stone, but it just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. It is ruining everything until he finally tells Daddy about what is going on. As Justin gradually lets go of “the hurt,” it gets smaller and smaller until at last it goes away. This is reminiscent of “The Horse on the Dining-Room Table” (Kalish, 1981; reprinted in Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003, pp. xxvii-xxix), a parable about the potential harm that can arise when certain death-related topics are treated as taboo or off limits for discussion, and an allegory that affirms the value for most people of gently taking down such barriers to achieving communication and obtaining support.

A story about the belief of many young children that they must somehow be responsible when bad things happen appears is I Know I Made It Happen: A Gentle Book about Feelings (Blackburn, 1991). Here, adults explain that bad things don’t happen because of a child’s words or wishes. The lesson is that it helps to share bad feelings and to know you’re not at fault.

We learn about a raccoon named Sherman Smith when A Terrible Thing Happened (Holmes, 2000) and it made him afraid. At first, he just tried not to think about it, but something inside began to bother him. Sometimes his stomach or head hurt, sometimes he felt sad or nervous, and sometimes he didn’t feel hungry, couldn’t sleep, or had bad dreams. Often he was angry and he got into trouble at school. Ms. Maple helped Sherman understand his feelings; she listened while they talked and played together. It helped Sherman to let his feelings out by drawing pictures and talking with Ms. Maple.

Something like this is also offered by Thumpy’s Story: A Story of Love and Grief Shared by Thumpy, the Bunny (Dodge, 1984)—which is available in picture book, coloring book, and workbook formats (in both English and Spanish)—when a rabbit tells a simple story about the death of his sister, Bun, and its effects on their family.
The value of a caring presence to someone who has experienced a significant loss has already been made evident in several of the books we have mentioned. It is emphasized even more clearly in two other animal stories, *Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope* (O’Toole, 1998) and *Ragtail Remembers: A Story that Helps Children Understand Feelings of Grief* (Duckworth, 2003). Aarvy’s story is about his experiences after the loss of his mother and brother. Many animals offer unhelpful advice, and his situation seems bleak. Only one friend, Ralphy Rabbit, stays with Aarvy, really listens to him, and is truly helpful as the two of them share their losses. Ralphy’s empathy is obviously the key factor in making it possible for Aarvy to find hope. Similarly, Ragtail is a mouse who is sad, lonely, and angry when he learns that his friend, Old Tim the cat, is dead. Ragtail wishes Old Tim would come back, but a new bird friend named Frazzle helps him learn what dead means and begin to come to terms with his loss.

*A Bunch of Balloons* (Ferguson, 1992) combines a story and a more direct approach to the reader. Here, a narrator begins with some admiring comments about balloons and then tells a story about a child who loves to play with balloons. In the story, the child loses his balloon one day when the string slips out of his hand. At that point, the narrator addresses the reader directly in order to ask if he or she may also have lost someone or something. Many different types of reactions that the reader may be experiencing are described, and two pages offer blank balloons in which the reader can write or draw something about what has been lost and what is still left.

### SOME EFFORTS TO EXPLAIN DEATH AND LOSS

Some death-related books attempt to explain death and loss to children. Elsewhere in this special issue in an article on “Spirituality in Death-Related Literature for Children,” I have examined ways in which spiritual beliefs are used to explain death and loss to children. Other ways to explain death to young children appear in books like *Why Did He Die?* (Harris, 1965), in which a mother explains to her young son that death is something that happens when someone’s body, like an engine in a car, no longer works. Another approach is found in *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* (Krasny & Brown, 1998), which establishes a safe psychic distance for the discussion by using a cartoon-like format and dinosaur characters to represent the questions and concerns of children about this all-too-often forbidden subject matter. (Note: These and other books mentioned here take care not to use euphemistic language like “he expired”; in that way, they avoid traps such as those highlighted in the familiar joke about a child who responded to that language by asking, “Why don’t you get him renewed like your driver’s license or library card?”)

Concrete, biological explanations of death also appear in two early books from the Centering Corporation and a third book published more recently. *Tell
Me, Papa (Johnson & Johnson, 1978) expands on points like this: “When someone dies, everything inside of that person stops. The heart stops. The breathing stops. The thinking and the feeling stops.” Similarly, in Where’s Jess? (Johnson & Johnson, 1982), a straightforward book for the youngest readers, when a child is told that a sibling is dead, the book confirms that death is not like sleeping or going on a trip. Instead, “Mommy says dead means Jess doesn’t breathe in or out now. All the parts in Jess’ body stopped working. Daddy says dead means Jess doesn’t think or feel anymore. He says Jess won’t come home.” And “Why Do People Die?: Helping Your Child Understand—with Love and Illustrations (MacGregor, 1999) explains dying and death as a process in which our bodies wear out and just stop working. All three of these books affirm that it is normal to be sad and okay to cry when a death occurs.

In Daddy’s Chair (Lanton, 1991), when Michael attempts to prevent everyone from sitting in his father’s favorite chair, his mother reminds him that Daddy is dead. She explains that he was sick, that sometimes good people die, and that dead means he won’t be coming back. Mommy also describes the Jewish custom of “sitting Shiva” as a time when people come to the house to comfort the family of the deceased person.

Earl Grollman and Joy Johnson (2001) have published three attractive workbooks, A Child’s Book about Death, A Child’s Book about Funerals and Cemeteries, and A Child’s Book about Burial and Cremation that are intended to teach important lessons about death, loss, grief, funerals, and body disposition. These workbooks provide spaces and cues to encourage children to write or draw about their own death-related experiences. They also suggest things children might do to remember the person who died and to cope with their losses.

An unusual and complex explanation of death and loss is found in The New King (Rappaport, 1995). When his father dies suddenly, young Prince Rakoto simply cannot accept that harsh fact. He commands the Royal Doctor and the Royal Magician to bring his father back to life; they reply that they cannot do such a thing. Finally, a wise woman tells a Malagasy tale according to which God gave the first human couple a choice when the earth was new. God said, “One day you must die. When it is your turn, do you want to die like the moon or like a banana tree?” The moon starts out like a sliver, grows bigger and bigger until it is full, then gets smaller and smaller until eventually it disappears, only later to begin growing all over again. By contrast, the banana tree grows and sends forth shoots. When the tree eventually dies, the shoots keep growing until they are big and strong enough to send out their own shoots. Although the man at first wants to die like the moon so as to come back to life and live forever, the woman eventually persuades him that it would be better to live, love, and die, only to have one’s children carry on, and thus to find a way of living forever by giving life to others. With this realization, Prince Rakoto saw that his father had given him life and taught him many lessons. In turn, “He ruled with love and justice as his father had taught him, and he passed his father’s lessons on to his children.”
**My Turtle Died Today** (Stull, 1964), however, seems to me to go awry in the way it asserts the primacy of life over death. In this story, after they experience the death and burial of a pet turtle named Boxer, some children turn their attention to the newborn kittens of their cat, Patty. That leads them to the following discussion about life and death.

Tommy said, “Will the kittens die, too, like Boxer?”
Billy said, “All living things must die.”
“But not for a long time,” I said. “The kittens will not die for a long time.”
Tommy said, “They have to live first.”
“Yes,” I said. “They have to live first, before they die.”

Clearly, it is true that one must live before one can die. Life is a prerequisite to death; non-living things do not die. However, the claim that a newborn kitten will not die for a long time is not sound as stated. That claim could accurately reflect what some children might say about death, but I would not want to let it stand without some comment by a caring adult who knows that infants of all kinds might, in fact, die before, during, or shortly after birth. No living thing is born with a guarantee of a long life however much we might hope for that prospect, and even though we can expect it to be fulfilled in many, perhaps most, cases.

**THREE EXAMPLES OF EFFORTS TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR DEATH AND LOSS**

There are many ways in which adults might try to prepare children for death and loss. **So Long, Grandpa** (Donnelly, 1981) offers one example of a grandfather who takes his grandson to a funeral in order to try to help the boy get ready for the grandfather’s own anticipated death. **Sky Memories** (Brisson, 1999) describes a mother with a life-threatening illness who uses the time before her death to create, with her 10-year-old daughter, a ritual to celebrate and commemorate their relationship. Together they gather “sky memories,” mental pictures of the ever-changing sky in all its variety and wonder that they take together with an imaginary camera. These sky memories reflect the phases of the mother’s illness and the vitality of her soul. They also create a legacy that the girl is able to keep with her and treasure after her mother’s death.

**The Christmas Cactus** (Wrenn, 2001) begins as a story about the time when Megan could feel no joy in the approach of Christmas because her nana was in the hospital. Then, when they were called to the hospital, Megan asked her father if Nana was dying. He said, “We never know for sure when someone will die.... So what we need to do is tell the people we love just how much we love them, every chance we get.” As an expression of her love for Nana, Megan brought a Christmas cactus with her. When she saw the plant, Nana told Megan that a Christmas cactus waits all year for Christmas, the one time of year when it blooms. “Well, I think our lives are like that. We live and grow for a whole lifetime.
And then, at the end of our lives, we bloom. We become something very different and wonderful.” So Nana asked Megan to take care of this plant and, when it blooms, to think of her. Megan did, and that made Christmas good despite Nana’s death.

GRIEF REACTIONS TO DEATH AND LOSS

Grief experiences are described in many books for children. Perhaps the simplest of all is Tough Boris (Fox, 1994), a charming little tale for very young readers. Using just a few words on each page, this book describes Boris von der Borch as a pirate who is tough, massive, scruffy, greedy, fearless, and scary—just like all pirates. When Boris’ pet parrot dies, he cries and cries. The lesson is that Boris experiences grief just like all pirates do, and just like everyone else does when they encounter a significant death-related loss. (“Pet Loss in Death-Related Literature for Children” is examined more fully in another article in this special issue.)

Several stories about the death of a grandparent or a parent highlight children’s responses to these losses. For example, Why Did Grandpa Die? (Hazen, 1985) stresses how frightened and awful young Molly feels. She is just not able to accept the fact that her much-loved grandpa has died suddenly. Molly misses her grandpa very much, but she cannot cry. (Many other descriptions of “Grandparents in Death-Related Literature for Children” are examined in another article in this special issue.) After the Funeral (Winsch, 1995) seeks to normalize grief reactions that people have after a death, like crying and feeling sad or scared. This book says that “everyone handles sadness in their own way,” recommends sharing feelings, and affirms a hope in everlasting life. Rachel and the Upside Down Heart (Douglas, 1990) describes the multiple losses that followed the death of Rachel’s daddy when she was four. For example, Rachel and her family had to move from a house in Kentucky with a yard, green grass, and two dogs to a noisy apartment in New York City. Although Mommy said Daddy would always be in Rachel’s heart, when she began to draw hearts she could only make them upside down—the way her own heart felt. How It Feels when a Parent Dies (Krementz, 1981) and How It Feels to Fight for Your Life (Krementz, 1989) each offer short essays by children and adolescents (7-16 years old) that describe their individual reactions to the death of a parent and to a variety of life-threatening illnesses. A photograph of its author accompanies each essay.

Four other short books for young children address issues associated with parental death. I Heard Your Mommy Died (Scrivani, 1994), I Heard Your Daddy Died (Scrivani, 1996), Molly’s Mom Died (Holmes, 1999) and Sam’s Dad Died (Holmes, 1999) all offer an empathic approach to a child whose parent has died. In each case, the child’s feelings and needs are recognized and affirmed,
as are the ways in which the child’s world has been altered. Suggestions are proposed for expressing strong feelings in constructive ways, and for things that a child can do for self-help. Permission is given to go on with living and loving, even while the child remembers the deceased parent.

Other aspects of grief are brought out in stories about the death of siblings. It *Isn’t Easy* (Connolly, 1997) depicts a little boy’s sadness, loneliness, and anger when his nine-year-old big brother is killed in a car accident. *Sam’s Story* (Chin-Yee, 1988) tells about the confusing experiences of a child in a family that has recently experienced the sudden death of his infant brother. *Beat the Turtle Drum* (Greene, 1976) describes a loving, warm family that includes 13-year-old Kate and 11-year-old Joss. When Joss is abruptly and unexpectedly killed in a fall from a tree, the story shifts to emphasize how the family is flooded with grief, and to convey a sense of the many dimensions of living after loss. *Nadia the Willful* (Alexander, 1983) is a story about a determined child who helps others cope with grief. After her older brother dies, Nadia’s grief-stricken father decrees that no one in his kingdom may speak about this son or his death. Nadia deliberately defies this edict, thereby helping her family—particularly her father—deal with their grief by talking about her brother.

*The Saddest Time* (Simon, 1986) offers three situations in which children experience powerful emotions when someone else has died: Michael faces the death of his Uncle Joe who has been sick for some time; the children at Fleetwood School cope with the death of Teddy Baker, who was hit by a car and killed as he rode his bicycle; and Emily confronts the death of her grandma in the hospital. In each case, the children are confused, sad, frightened, and angry even as they are comforted by good memories, receive support from those around them, and seek out constructive things to do.

*Lucy Lettuce: A Head of Her Time* (Loring & Johnson, 1994) provides an imaginative and humorous description of grief experiences encountered by a head of lettuce. After Lucy is told that the person she most loved in the whole world has died, she feels as if she has been smashed down onto the countertop and had her gentle heart cut out of her. Lucy cries and cries; it seems as if her world has turned into a giant salad spinner going around and around. She wonders whether she is somehow responsible for her loss, whether she really wants to live, and whether her life will ever have meaning again. In fact, Lucy’s story goes beyond mere descriptions of grief as she learns that the lid of sorrow can be lifted, and realizes some important lessons, such as:

> Her life would never be the same. She would always have part of her heart missing. She would get tossed around now and then. Her person lived on in her memory and in the new part of her that was her heart. . . . Now that she had finally reached this place in her life she could go out and nurture others. Life was still good, after all.
COPING WITH DEATH, LOSS, AND GRIEF

Being Left Out

Sadly, some children are left to be on their own in death-related situations, and do not get help in their coping from the adults around them. For example, after the death of their mother in the early 1900s, 11-year-old Tempe and her four-year-old sister, Laura, have only The Mother Tree (Whitehead, 1971) to which they can turn. However, this large backyard tree provides a temporary spiritual refuge where the girls can be together and, eventually, find comfort in the good memories of their mother that live on within them.

Another child is left out after a death in And Peter Said Goodbye (Farrington & Weil, 1993). Here, a boy named Peter is left behind in the care of a neighbor while his parents go to the funeral of his grandfather. Grandpa had moved from near Peter’s home in Connecticut to California, and was then killed when he was hit by a car while crossing a street. The book addresses this situation in an unusual way by introducing a magical character, Mrs. Murgatroyd, who seems to be the only one who understands Peter’s sense of abandonment and his need to mourn this death. Through her enchanted paints, Mrs. Murgatroyd makes it possible for Peter to visit the funeral in a magical dream, and to find within himself ways to accept this death and say goodbye.

A more realistic and complex story is found in Geranium Morning (Powell, 1990), which describes two children who are struggling on their own with strong feelings, memories, and guilt (“if onlys”), and adults who don’t seem to be very helpful. As Timothy, whose father died suddenly in an accident, and Frannie, whose mother is dying, share their losses, they find ways to help each other. Eventually, Frannie’s father and her dying mother are also helpful.

Sharing Questions and Feelings

Legitimizing and sharing children’s questions about death and loss are important themes in several books. We see this in Timothy Duck: The Story of the Death of a Friend (Blackburn, 1987), when a curious little duck tries to understand his own reactions to the death of a special human friend and the ways in which some adults are overlooking the needs of his friend’s sister. Sharing his questions and concerns with his mother and with his best friend is helpful. Much the same point is made in Together, We’ll Get through This! (Carney, 1999), Book 1 in the Barklay and Eve Activity and Coloring Book Series. In the books in this series, two curious Portuguese water dogs named Barklay and Eve learn important lessons such as that although loss and sadness do happen, those events are not their fault; it is okay to have strong feelings as long as they are expressed in constructive ways; and “we can get through anything with the love and support of family and friends” (Carney, 1999, Book 1, p. 5).
Two brothers share their questions and concerns in *The Snowman* (Vogel, 2002). While they build their first snowman since their dad died, eight-year-old Buddy asks a series of questions that eventually lead 12-year-old Tommy to release some of the anger and guilt feelings he has been holding inside. Using Dad’s old pipe, hat, and favorite scarf, the two boys finish the snowman and share good memories of Dad. In both text and art, *The Empty Place: A Child’s Guide through Grief* (Temes, 1992) reflects the emptiness a nine-year-old boy feels in his life and in his heart, along with many other reactions he encounters after his big sister, Jennifer, dies. Sharing his grief with his babysitter Betsy helps, because one of her brothers had also died much earlier. Betsy is a good role model for the boy, and she gives him permission to do many things he needs to do to cope with his loss.

A story about how a girl’s father helped her become a good baseball player provides the background to *Emily’s Sadhappy Season* (Lowden, 1993). After Emily’s daddy died, she and Mom found themselves alone and confronted by a grief that was both confusing and complicated. In particular, Emily was afraid that playing baseball might have caused Daddy’s death, and she worried that now Mom might die. In time, Mom encourages Emily to teach her to play baseball and she says they will feel “sadhappy”—happy remembering the fun times they had with Daddy, but sad because he is no longer with them.

In two books about the death of a friend in a motor vehicle accident, *Dusty Was My Friend* (Clardy, 1984) and *I Had a Friend Named Peter* (Cohn, 1987), a boy and a girl are allowed by their parents and other adults to express their thoughts and feelings, mourn their losses, remember the good times they shared with their friends, and go on with their own lives.

*A Little Bit of Rob* (Turner, 1996) describes the problems faced by a family after the death of Lena’s big brother. At first, Lena and her parents find themselves unable to mention Rob’s name in an effort to be strong and avoid crying. Several weeks later, they take their boat out crabbing again in an effort to resume some of the activities they had shared with Rob. In this way, and when Lena helps them share Rob’s old sweatshirt, they are finally able to speak about him and to realize that they will always have their good memories of Rob to comfort them.

Among storybooks about sharing grief, I particularly like *My Grandson Lew* (Zolotow, 1974), a book for very young readers that is rich in candor and insight. The story begins when six-year-old Lewis wakes in the middle of the night and his mother comes to his bedside to talk. Lewis says he misses Grandpa. Mother is surprised to learn that Lewis thinks about Grandpa a lot, and remembers that Grandpa had a beard that scratched when they kissed. Lewis also recalls some nights when Grandpa would come into his room and give him “eye hugs.” Sometimes, Grandpa would pick Lewis up, hold him close, and walk up and down until he fell asleep again. Grandpa mostly came when Lewis’ parents went away, but Lewis also remembers a day when Grandpa took him to a place with bright-colored pictures (“The museum!” Mother says). Mother admits that
Grandpa died some time ago. She had shied away from sharing this sad news, thinking that Lewis was unaware since he never asked about Grandpa. Many adults will understand her wish to avoid this difficult subject. However, Lewis says that Grandpa always came back without him needing to say anything; so he had just been waiting.

What Lewis has told his mother about his memories of Grandpa encourage her to share her own memories. She tells Lewis about how Grandpa had visited shortly after his birth, held him gently, and repeated the phrase “My grandson, Lew!” over and over again in the tones of awe that adults often use when they encounter a newborn child. Grandpa also offered to visit and care for Lew whenever he was needed. They both miss Grandpa, but in the end his mother tells Lewis, “Now we will remember him together and neither of us will be so lonely as we would be if we had to remember him alone”—a moral that is relevant to all shared coping in bereavement.

**Coping by Oneself**

Perhaps the most difficult thing for children to bear is when adults exclude them from death-related events. Often, such children sense that something different and out of the ordinary is taking place. Adult behaviors frequently provide cues to stimulate children’s sensitivities, even though those same behaviors may puzzle the children in many ways. One book for children that addresses issues like these is *Mama’s Going to Buy You a Mockingbird* (Little, 1984). In this story, Jeremy and his younger sister Sarah only learn that their father is dying from cancer by overhearing people talk about it. They experience many losses, large and small, that accompany his dying and death, often compounded by lack of information and control over their situation. Their need for support from others is clear.

Traumatic deaths can also highlight differences in grief reactions, and can show how family members may be unable to help each other in coping with their grief. This is evident in books like *Grover* (Cleaver & Cleaver, 1970) and *Tiger Eyes* (Blume, 1981). *Grover* tells about an 11-year-old boy whose mother became terminally ill and took her own life, as she thought, to “spare” herself and her family the ravages of her illness. Grover’s father cannot face the facts of this death or the depth of his grief, so he tries to hold his feelings inside and convince his son it was an accident. *Tiger Eyes* describes the impact on his family when a father is killed at the age of 34 during a holdup of his 7-Eleven store in Atlantic City. Davey (age 15), her mother, and her younger brother all react differently and are unable to help each other in their grief. They attempt to cope with their loss by moving to live temporarily with Davey’s aunt in Los Alamos, but eventually decide to move back to New Jersey to rebuild their lives.

Another book explains that *There Are Two Kinds of Terrible* (Mann, 1977). The first terrible thing involves Robbie’s broken arm, but that tragedy soon comes
The second terrible thing takes place when Robbie’s mother dies. That loss seems to leave Robbie and his “cold fish” father with no conclusion. They are together, but each is alone in his grief and coping until they begin to find ways to share their suffering and their memories.

Several other death-related books describe less exclusionary situations in which children are, nevertheless, coping with loss and grief by themselves. For example, in *Blow Me a Kiss, Miss Lilly* (Carlstrom, 1990), young Sara’s neighbor and best friend, Miss Lilly, is unexpectedly taken to the hospital and dies. Sara cries, looks in vain for the light in Miss Lilly’s house, and is lonely. Finally, in spring Sara finds happiness in Miss Lilly’s garden and in her conviction that Miss Lilly is blowing her a kiss. Similarly, after her grandpa dies in *The Garden Angel* (Czech, 2000), eight-year-old Camilla remembers his many gardening activities. With them in mind, on her own she plants the new garden this year, dresses a scarecrow with her grandpa’s old clothes, and spreads his old quilt behind it like the wings of an angel. Again, in *Bluebird Summer* (Hopkinson, 2001), two children decide to replant Grandma’s abandoned garden after her death, and install a new birdhouse to encourage the bluebirds to return to their farm.

Two examples in which children work out a sense of connectedness to a deceased sister appear in *Meggie’s Magic* (Dean, 1992) and *Lost and Found* (Yeomans, 2000). After the death of eight-year-old Meggie, each member of Meggie’s family is sad and lonely. But one day when Meggie’s sister returns to the special place that they had shared, she finds it still filled with the magic from the games they used to play. She concludes that Meggie’s magic still remains inside each of them. In *Lost and Found*, after her big sister’s death, a young girl realizes many ways in which she still feels her love. So big sister Paige isn’t “lost” forever; she is right there in their hearts, and the young girl knows where she can always find her.

**Coping through Funeral Rituals**

Numerous death-related books for children provide information about funeral rituals or describe children’s involvements in such rituals. *Tell Me about Death, Tell Me about Funerals* (Corley, 1973) presents a conversation between father and a young girl whose grandfather has recently died. In clear language that avoids euphemisms, they discuss guilt, abandonment, and choices about funerals, burial, cemeteries, and mausoleums. *What We Do When Someone Dies* (Arnold, 1987) is somewhat more didactic in providing information about death-related feelings, concepts, and beliefs. It gives most attention to the disposition of the body, funeral customs, and memorial practices. Three books in the *Barklay and Eve Activity and Coloring Book Series* explore issues like *Honoring Our Loved Ones: Going to a Funeral* (Carney, 1999), *What is the Meaning of Shiva?* (Carney, 2001), and *Our Special Garden: Understanding Cremation* (Carney, 1995) in
ways that are appropriate for young children and for the canine narrators who represent them in this series.

Storybooks also describe other situations in which children make up or take part in funeral rituals. For example, The Dead Bird (Brown, 1958) is a book for the youngest readers that describes the activities of some children who are playing when they find a bird that has just died. The children touch and hold the bird to confirm that it really is dead. They then bury it in a simple ceremony, sing a song, mark the gravesite, and return each day to mourn again (“until they forgot”). Similarly, When Violet Died (Kantrowitz, 1973) describes the funeral (with poems, songs, punch, and even humor) that some children have after the death of a pet bird. Also, Nonna (Bartoli, 1975) tells a story about a boy and his younger sister who are allowed to participate in the funeral and burial of their beloved grandmother, and to share in the division of her property among family members so that each receives some memento of her life.

A book that we have already mentioned, A Taste of Blackberries (Smith, 1973) does a masterful job in conveying a young boy’s mixed feelings, concerns, thoughts, and questions in two situations: when he visits the funeral parlor with his parents after his friend dies suddenly, and then later when they attend the funeral service in the funeral parlor chapel and continue on to the graveside at the cemetery. He doesn’t immediately share all of his many reactions with his parents, but they are wise enough to give him some latitude while also offering the support that he needs. At one point, the boy has an interesting realization: “The strange thing is I wasn’t crying for Jamie, I was crying for me” (pp. 37-38).

Following the unexpected death of his uncle in I Don’t Have an Uncle Phil Anymore (Pellegrino, 1999), a boy is allowed to go with his parents from their home in Arizona to New York and attend Uncle Phil’s funeral. Throughout these events, the boy thinks about what this encounter with death will mean for his whole family. In the end, he throws a sparkle blue ball up toward heaven and catches it as he used to do when he played with Uncle Phil.

Among all of these, I particularly like The Happy Funeral (Bunting, 1982), a story about two young Chinese-American girls who are puzzled when their mother says they will have a “happy funeral” for their grandfather. Can a funeral be happy? Isn’t that a contradiction in terms? At the funeral, food is provided for the journey to the “other side,” paper play money is burned, people cry and give speeches, a marching band plays, and a small candy is provided after the ceremony to “sweeten the sorrow” of the mourners. In the end, the children realize that, although no one was happy that their grandfather had died, his good life and everyone’s fond memories of him did make for a happy funeral.

Coping through Other Memorial Activities

Spontaneous memorial activities that do not involve funerals are depicted in two books about children in elementary schools, Rudi’s Pond (Bunting, 1999)
and We Remember Philip (Simon, 1979). While Rudi is sick, his classmates compose poems and messages to send to him; after his death, they build a memorial pond on the school grounds to attract colorful hummingbirds. Philip is the adult son of Mr. Hall, an elementary school teacher. When Sam and the other children in the class recognize some of the ways in which Mr. Hall is affected by his grief, he explains that Philip died in a climbing accident. Subsequently, the children persuade Mr. Hall to tell them more about Philip’s life and death. Mr. Hall does so and he shares a scrapbook and other memories with them. In time, with the support of the school principal and other adults, the children plant a tree as a class memorial in Philip’s name.

The value of coming together as a community can also be seen in a story about a child who is allowed to take part in a memorial ceremony, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You (Carson, 1992). When her daddy’s Aunt Ann dies, a little girl thinks about her parents’ divorce and other losses she has experienced. During the ceremony, the girl watches all the people and everything that happens. She wonders how sorry she will have to get. Being held and holding others is comforting. Something like this in an African-American setting takes place in Sunflowers and Rainbows for Tia: Saying Goodbye to Daddy (Greene, 1999). A 10-year-old girl named Tia describes how she, her seven-year-old twin brothers, her mother, and her grandparents feel when Daddy dies rather suddenly. Tia tells about her sadness and grief, along with her fears that Mama might also die and leave the children alone. She also explains how people came over to the house to share their love for Daddy, support her family, and bring food to share. Being involved in many of the preparations and taking part in the funeral itself helped Tia, especially when she was allowed to bring Daddy’s favorite sunflowers to the ceremony and a big rainbow shone down on all of them.

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing after Loss (Schwiebert & DeKlyen, 1999) employs the metaphor of soup-making as a device for explaining coping in bereavement. This book looks very much like a children’s book with its large page format and colorful illustrations, but it really is addressed both to children and adults. The story follows the experiences of “an old and somewhat wise woman whom everyone called Grandy” (p. 1) who has just suffered a big loss in her life. Grandy faces her loss by making “tear soup,” filling a soup pot over and over again with her tears, feelings, memories, and misgivings. She knows that the work of making tear soup must be done alone, is typically messy, and “always takes longer . . . than anyone wants it to” (p. 6). The resulting broth is bitter and making it is difficult work, but it has to be done. Tear Soup affirms all of the feelings and experiences that bereaved children and others encounter, including their anger at God because they do not understand why this terrible loss has occurred and do not know where God is when they are feeling so alone. The book rejects foolish advice like telling the bereaved
that if only they had true faith they would be spared their deep sadness, anger, and loneliness. Instead, Grandy honored her grief, continued to trust God, and “kept reminding herself to be grateful for ALL the emotions that God had given her” (p. 29).

_Tear Soup_ also notes that people in our society are often not very helpful to the bereaved. They are eager to fix things, and feel helpless when they cannot do that. So, they want to know when this will all be over. Sometimes those whom one might have thought were one’s friends just drop out of sight and stay away. Even worse are individuals who take it upon themselves to show the bereaved person how to make tear soup the “correct” way! Grandy teaches us that real help only comes from those special people who can be present and just listen. Their caring presence does not require the bereaved person to be careful about what is said, and does not try to talk that person out of whatever he or she is feeling. In the end, _Tear Soup_ holds out hope of a day when one can eventually find it okay to eat something other than tear soup all the time. This does not mean that Grandy is completely finished with her tear soup, but that the hard work of making it is done and she knows that she will survive—even as she keeps a portion of the soup in the freezer to taste from time to time.

Another type of memorial activity is illustrated in a charming way in _The Tenth Good Thing about Barney_ (Viorst, 1971), a story about reflecting on the life of a dead cat. The mother of the book’s unnamed young narrator suggests it might help them all to have a ceremony when they bury the cat, one in which he could try to think of ten good things to say about Barney. At first, the boy can only think of nine things to mention: Barney was brave and smart and funny and clean; he was cuddly and handsome and he only once ate a bird; it was sweet to hear him purr in my ear; and sometimes he slept on my belly and kept it warm. A bit later, when he is out in the garden, the boy realizes the tenth good thing is that “Barney is in the ground and he’s helping grow flowers” (p. 24).

A unique example of children and memorial activities is found in _Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes_ (Coerr, 1977). First, this book is based on a true story about a Japanese girl named Sadako who died of leukemia in 1955 as one of the long-term results of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (which occurred when Sadako was two years old). Second, in a sense the story begins in the hospital when a friend reminds Sadako of the legend that the crane is a bird that is supposed to live for a thousand years and that good health will be granted to a person who folds 1,000 origami paper cranes. Sadako and her family members and friends begin folding. In fact, Sadako died before the project was finished but her classmates completed the work, and children all over Japan have since contributed money to erect a statue in her memory. Even though the tradition of folding paper cranes is foreign to them, my experiences are that American children who read this book can and do appreciate the compassion and care that it represents.
Coping through Memories and Legacies

The importance of memories and legacies has already been noted, but we can now identify several books in which these are central themes. For example, in *My Grandpa Died Today* (Fassler, 1971) David’s grandpa told him one day, “I am not afraid to die . . . because I know that you are not afraid to live.” After Grandpa’s death, David finds comfort in the good memories from his relationship with his grandfather and his confidence that Grandpa wants him to live and enjoy life. Similarly, in *Badger’s Parting Gifts* (Varley, 1992), old Badger is aware that he will soon die and is concerned about his friends. But he knows they will find consolation in the special memories he left with each of them, and in sharing those memories with others.

*Ode to Humpty Dumpty* (Zeifert, 2001) approaches these topics in a humorous way. This book uses rhyming text and large (7” × 11”) images to pick up the story after Humpty Dumpty’s great fall. When all the king’s horses and men cannot put Humpty back together again, other citizens try to help, without success. Then the king’s faithful servant, Norma Jean Foote, encourages the community to create monuments, engage in activities, and sing an ode to help them cope with their grief, cheer the king up, and memorialize the fallen Humpty.

There are two central issues in *Finding Grandpa Everywhere* (Hodge, 1999). First, as he drives to Grandma’s house a young boy is convinced that their job is to help find Grandpa, who is lost. Only gradually does the boy realize that Grandpa is dead, not “lost” as the adults keep saying. Second, the boy consoles himself and his grandma with something Grandpa always said: “To do something for someone you have to put a little of yourself into it.” So Grandpa is a part of everything he did, and memories of Grandpa and his love live on everywhere the boy looks.

An example of the creation of an object that binds together memories for a little girl is found in *The Rag Coat* (Mills, 1991). After Papa got sick and died, one reason why eight-year-old Minna didn’t want to start school was because her family was poor and she didn’t have a winter coat to wear when the weather got cold. Then the “Quilting Mothers” volunteered to piece together a coat for her out of scraps of their old materials. At first, when she wore her new coat on Sharing Day, the children laughed at her and teased her about her rag coat, but not after she explained the stories behind each scrap that she had selected.

*The Butterfly Bush: A Story about Love* (Evarts, 1998) is a story about Grandma, who gave her granddaughter Lindsay a pot of sticks for her birthday. The sticks turned out to be a butterfly bush that they planted in a clearing by the woods. Nothing happened, and Lindsay soon forgot the butterfly bush. Each year after that, Grandma would give Lindsay beautiful, expensive gifts for her birthday. Lindsay would always thank Grandma for these gifts, but then she would run off to open other presents or be with her friends while Grandma went out to visit the butterfly bush. One year, Grandma died before Lindsay’s birthday, but not before mailing her a small package. It contained a lovely locket with two pictures inside;
one of Grandma holding Lindsay as a small child, the other of a mass of beautiful purple flowers. Lindsay ran out to the woods where she found that the butterfly bush was now over 15 feet tall and covered all over with beautiful flowers and butterflies. Years later, Grandma Lindsay gave her own granddaughter a pot of sticks on her birthday.

A legacy can also be established through organ and tissue donation from the body of a loved one who has died. Such a legacy can help save the lives of others or improve their quality of life. This subject is carefully explored in Precious Gifts: Katie Coolican’s Story (Carney, 1999), Book 7 in the Barklay and Eve Activity and Coloring Book Series. This book shows how sensitive subjects like organ and tissue donation can be addressed in ways that are clearly appropriate for young readers. It also reminds us that children may not always understand clearly what adults are saying, since at first the young narrators in this story thought that “organ transplant” had to do with large, piano-like musical instruments, and “tissue transplant” had to do with facial wipes or Kleenex.

Winter Holding Spring (Dragonwagon, 1990) illustrates how the lives of those we love always have an impact on us and leave a legacy that we carry within us. At first, when her mother dies, nothing is the same for 11-year-old Sarah and her father. Each is in great pain, but gradually they begin to share their experiences and their memories of Sarah’s mother. Eventually, they realize together that “nothing just ends without beginning the next thing at the same time” (p. 11). Each season somehow contains its successor; life and love and grief can continue together, for winter always holds spring. And Sarah knows that “love is alive in me and always will be” (p. 31).

One way of validating and reinforcing memories and legacies is to create a tangible record of the person who died and of what that person meant to the child left behind. Thus, when Someone Special Died (Prestine, 1993), a young girl discusses death with her mother, explains how she feels, and plans a scrapbook to remember good times shared with the person who died. A similar plan and a more detailed story line appear in Anna’s Scrapbook: Journal of a Sister’s Love (Aiken, 2001). The story in this book concerns the accidental death of 11-year-old Anna’s young sister, Amelia, and the deep grief Anna then experiences. Anna is helped when her grandma gives her a journal to record her thoughts and feelings. Much of the remainder of the book reproduces Anna’s fictional diary, in which she writes about her grief and describes a scrapbook containing her memories and photos of Amelia. Blank pages at the end of the book allow the reader to make his or her own similar scrapbook. Sweet Memories (Stillwell, 1998) pursues such coping projects by telling adults and children how to create a dozen different, hands-on, craft activities such as scrapbooks, memory boxes, and other ways to preserve a record of loved ones who have died.

Finally, two children who have had a parent die are forced to cope with their discomfort in only having a single parent when they are asked to draw pictures or talk about their families at school. The Brightest Star (Hemery, 1998) explains
that before Mommy died, Molly and her parents used to go to the beach, wait until it was very dark, and look at the stars. After Mommy died, Daddy helped by taking Molly to the beach and pointing out the brightest star, which helped to remind her of her mother’s love. Jonathan in The Best Gift for Mom (Klein, 1995) has an even more difficult problem because he doesn’t even remember his dad, who died as a result of cancer when Jonathan was a baby. However, Mom tells him many stories about his Dad. She also shares the only two songs Dad knew how to sing when he would put Jonathan to bed (“Taps” and “Silent Night”). Somewhat later, Jonathan joins a glee club at school and plans a special gift for Mom. At the Christmas concert, Jonathan sings a solo rendition of “Silent Night” as a surprise present for Mom, and then writes a letter to his father.

MOVING ON WITH LIVING AND LOVING

In order to move on with living and loving, one prerequisite is the ability to restructure the bond with the person who died. Doing so is the subject of Thank You, Grandpa (Plourde, 2003), a story about a girl and her grandfather who enjoy walking in the woods. As they walk together over a period of many years, they share many discoveries including encounters with a bird, a bee sipping nectar, a sneaky snake, a squirrel waving his tail at them, a spider web, a butterfly, a mouse, and some fireflies. One day when they find a dead grasshopper, the girl asks, “What can we do?” Grandpa says: “We can say thank you and good-bye.” In time, Grandpa becomes too old to walk by himself, and one day the girl finds herself walking alone. When she comes across a dandelion, she says to herself:

Thank you, Grandpa, for our walks. You kept me steady when I wasn’t so steady. You let me run ahead when I was ready to run ahead. Thank you for sharing spiderweb tears and firefly flashes. But most of all, thank you for teaching me the words I need to say. . . . Grandpa, I love you and I’ll miss you. But I will never forget you. Thank you and good-bye.

The Healing Tree (Hemery, 2001) addresses both the impact of death and its implications for those who are left behind by describing a story his grandmother told to a girl named Samantha. There was an old oak tree in Baba Marta’s backyard with a long bare strip on its trunk where there was no bark. Baba said that when she was a little girl, her mamma became very sick and died. Young Marta just wanted to be alone, so she went to the swing under the tree where she had shared so many good times with her mother. Even though a storm came up, Marta still didn’t want to leave that special place. Her papa rushed out, grabbed Marta, and ran to the porch with her just before lightning struck the tree and tore off one of its massive branches. The next day, Papa explained that they were all just like the tree: in pain from losing a big part of their family. Like the tree, he said, we will heal and go on living, but life will be different and forever changed. After telling her story, Baba
explained to Sammy that her papa was right; she did go on to enjoy love, laughter, and a good life.

The ability to move on is indicated, if not fully explained, in Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977). In this story, Jess and Leslie have a special, secret meeting place in the woods called Terabithia. But when Leslie is killed one day in an accidental fall, the magic of their play and friendship is disrupted. Jess mourns the loss of this special relationship, is supported by his family, and is ultimately able to initiate new relationships that allow him to share his friendship with others as he had done with Leslie.

Reorganizing one’s life and moving on are central issues in Getting Used to Candy (Landalf, 2000). Although it has been over a year since her mother died, a girl is resentful when her father buys a new car (which they call Candy because it is as red and shiny as the candy apples you get on Halloween) and begins to date a new girlfriend. With time and tears and laughter and hugs, however, they share their sadness and loneliness, and the girl begins to get used to Candy.

SOME SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HELPING BEREAVED YOUNGSTERS

Many of the books that we have examined in this survey offer useful lessons for helping bereaved youngsters. Among these, the following are especially prominent:

1. **Be present and listen.** Think of the constructive interventions accomplished in this way by Mrs. Mullins in A Taste of Blackberries (Smith, 1973), Ralphy Rabbit in Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope (O’Toole, 1998), and Ms. Maple in A Terrible Thing Happened (Holmes, 2000).

2. **Speak clearly and in age-appropriate ways.** Recall the children in Finding Grandpa Everywhere (Hodge, 1999) and in Lost and Found: Remembering a Sister (Yeomans, 2000), both of whom were confused when they were told by adults or overheard adults say that someone they loved was “lost” rather than “dead.”

3. **Check to determine how children have understood what you have said to them.** Remember how Barklay and Eve in Precious Gifts: Katie Coolican’s Story (Carney, 1999) thought that “organ transplant” had to do with large, piano-like musical instruments and “tissue transplant” had to do with facial wipes or Kleenex. Keep in mind also the children in Tell Me about Death, Tell Me about Funerals (Corley, 1973) who were eager to go to a funeral because they wanted to see the “polarbears” who, as they understood it, would carry the coffin.

4. **Whenever possible, try to prepare children in advance for encounters with loss, death, and bereavement.** Think of the grandfather in So Long,
Grandpa (Donnelly, 1981) and the mother in Sky Memories (Brisson, 1999) who both tried to prepare a child for their own anticipated deaths.

5. **Offer support and be willing to share a death-related experience with a child.** It is difficult to overestimate the value of the presence of a caring person and the comfort that can be found in sharing a difficult moment. Think of the father and daughter in Winter Holding Spring (Dragonwagon, 1990) and the young girl and her mother in Someone Special Died (Prestine, 1993).

6. **In all circumstances, honor children’s grief and their need for time to work through their reactions to loss.** We have seen positive examples of stories that validate children’s grief in many books, such as Tough Boris (Fox, 1994) and After the Funeral (Winsch, 1995), as well as negative examples when children were left to cope on their own in The Mother Tree (Whitehead, 1971), Mama’s Going to Buy You a Mockingbird (Little, 1984), and Geranium Morning (Powell, 1990).

7. **Provide support to bereaved children and serve as a role model for them in how you cope with your grief and mourning.** Adults do this well in books like Thank You, Grandpa (Plourde, 2003) and The Healing Tree (Hemery, 2001), while children take the lead in sharing memories and suggesting ways to mourn in such books as Meggie’s Magic (Dean, 1992), The Best Gift for Mom (Klein, 1995), and A Little Bit of Rob (Turner, 1996). We also witnessed how Lewis and his mother finally were able to share their grief and good memories in My Grandson Lew (Zolotow, 1974).

8. **Encourage children to take part in appropriate ways in funeral and memorial rituals or to develop their own forms of memorializing someone they loved.** Children need and deserve to be part of both the happy and the sad times in the life of a family—in ways suited to their concerns and capacities. We observed how this was confirmed in The Dead Bird (Brown, 1958), When Violet Died (Kantrowitz, 1973), Nonna (Bartoli, 1975), and The Happy Funeral (Bunting, 1982).

9. **Appreciate the importance for bereaved children of memories, legacies, and continuing bonds.** This is a lesson common to many books in our survey, and to much of the best professional literature in the field of bereavement studies. Recall books like Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977), The Butterfly Bush: A Story about Love (Evarts, 1998), and Sunflowers and Rainbows for Tia: Saying Goodbye to Daddy (Greene, 1999).

10. **Above all, make an effort now to let those whom you love know that you love them.** Remember the story of The Christmas Cactus (Wrenn, 2001) when her father tells young Megan, “We never know for sure when someone will die. . . . So what we need to do is tell the people we love just how much we love them, every chance we get.”
One last point: don’t hesitate to use your own critical judgment in evaluating a death-related book for children. In this survey, I have suggested hesitations about some of the lessons in My Turtle Died Today (Stull, 1964). Readers may agree or disagree with my hesitations. That’s quite okay. My main goal is not to insist on the correctness of my own point of view, but to encourage critical thinking about this interesting body of death-related literature for children.

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