

Bibliotherapy to Help Children Cope with Grief: Group Lesson Plans

Definition of bibliotherapy—using books/literature to foster growth and emotional healing

Sharing carefully selected picture books with children is an economical and effective support for children following the death of a loved one. Though there are many resources to address grief, adults who work with children need assessable, easy-to-use resources to help children in natural settings (school classrooms and homes).

To effectively implement bibliotherapy, the following format is recommended:

- (a) Carefully select a book to meet the child's specific circumstances or needs. Prior to sharing the book, read the book and consider the appropriateness of the book for the child's needs.
- (b) Introduce the book by showing the outside book cover and asking a few questions. This helps focus the child's attention and increases interest in listening to the story.
- (c) With enthusiasm and sensitivity to the book's message, read the story and show the story's pictures to the child.
- (d) After reading the book, ask questions and encourage the child to share their perceptions.
- (e) Follow-up with an activity to enhance and preserve therapeutic effects (Berns, 2004; Heath & Cole, 2012).

The following lessons plans are offered to help those who support grieving children. These lesson plans are helpful guides to facilitate healthy grieving.

Tasks of Grief

For convenience, each of the four lesson plans addresses a basic task of children's grief (Worden, 1996):

- (a) Accept that death is a reality.
- (b) Experience emotional pain associated with death and separation from deceased loved ones.
- (c) Adjust to changes in an altered environment which no longer includes deceased loved ones.
- (d) Find ways to remember and memorialize deceased loved ones.

SEA GLASS Heath & Sheen, 2005, p. 121

Metaphor: Sea Glass

Purpose: Putting painful feelings and memories into perspective, giving hope for the future.

Suggestion: Purchase sea glass from a craft store. Tell the story to a classroom of children. After telling the story, pass a piece of the sea glass around the classroom. Leave a piece of sea glass on the teacher's desk as a reminder of this story.

Does anyone know what sea glass is? If you walk along an ocean shore, you will find sea glass. The ocean water and sand work together, gradually smoothing the sharp and jagged edges of broken glass. Over time, the glass becomes smooth and rounded on the edges. The glass is still there, but the edges no longer cut. Sometimes bad things happen. It makes our hearts sad. We hurt. We may be angry. These are strong feelings. You may wonder if they will ever go away. Broken glass is like your feelings. Right after the glass is broken, the sharp edges can cut and hurt you. Your feelings hurt. They feel sharp and jagged. Over time and with the support of others, the edges of your feelings become smooth and rounded. Even though the memory stays in your heart, it becomes softer. In the future, you will be able to think about what happened and it won't hurt as much as it does right now.

Ideas for Grief Activities

NOTE: These activities were provided by Stephanie Steele (The Sharing Place, SLC, UT) and research participants. These activities were included in Catherine Bergeson's thesis

<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ETD/id/3441>

MEMORIALIZING ACTIVITIES

- Memory blocks on the wall- w/school supplies
- Planting bulbs in honor of the deceased
- Stepping stones made with found objects with names or messages
- Rock garden in honor of the deceased
- Stained glass window made out of tissue paper/contact paper to hang in memory of the deceased
- Silly string the person's name on cement or other surface
- Prayer flags made with paper (sprayed with "bio colors") and hang outside. When it rains, the water washes the prayer to the person
- Memory boxes—filled with mementos, poems, cards, private thoughts, etc.
- Decorate and stuff pillows to help remember the deceased
- Create a paper chain of memories (can be built over months or even color coded by season)
- Pipe cleaner sculpture to memorialize the deceased
- Hearts made from colored telephone wire

ACTIVITIES TO ELICIT DISCUSSION OF MEMORIES OR FEELINGS

- Throwing yarn into webs of grief by asking questions about the deceased with each throw
- Stringing a bead necklace—talk about one memory per bead
- Distribute a box of Band-aids and have the child put a Band-aid on a spot that "hurts" because of the death
- Write "Grocery list" of the deceased, listing their favorite things they would get if they were shopping for groceries
- Starburst roulette—each color of starburst is assigned a theme or topic prompt. When the student draws a starburst, they share a corresponding thought or memory to that color's theme. (especially good as an ice breaker activity)
- "Jenga"—for each piece removed, share a memory or something about the deceased. This activity is also good to see how students cope with something they've created being destroyed and can facilitate a discussion about anger
- Simply talking about the "things I remember or things I liked best about..."

ACTIVITIES FOR EXTERNALIZERS

- Throw ice cubes at signs that say "I hate death!"
- Line the bottom and sides of a shoebox with paper. Place marbles and some paint inside and have the student shake the marbles around in the box. Relieves anger or pent-up emotion and is fun for kids to create
- Button box, rice box, sand box to relieve anxiety (button box creates less of a mess!)
- Shaving cream finger painting
- Throw tennis balls dipped in paint against white paper on a wall
- Throwing cotton balls

ACTIVITIES TO MAINTAIN A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DECEASED

- Painting with water on the sidewalk—writing memories or messages they want to share, which then disappear
- Origami with messages, things left unsaid, or recent news they would like to convey
- Fold a paper in half lengthwise and compare/contrast the differences/similarities between the child and the deceased
- Large metal board with magnets that can be arranged to write messages or thoughts
- Insert an imaginary letter into a helium-filled balloon and let it float away to the sky

ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS DEATH-RELATED ISSUES OR MONITOR UNEXPRESSED FEELINGS

- Charades about end-of-life issues (for older kids)
- Grief time line—from first encounter with death of just of memories
- Gluing body rock people (requires patience)
- Have them do a puzzle that has a missing piece—creates a metaphor/discussion starter to make a connection that sometimes all things seem to be going well, but you can't see that one piece is missing. Even if you make a new piece and replace it, it isn't the same as the original.
- “Sorry” and other games that correlate with other real life experiences.
- Set up a project for collaboration (i.e., drawing on each others' pictures) where they can choose when to switch
- Grow grass inside of a plastic soda bottle-This allows students to see the life/death cycle clearly

ACTIVITIES THAT VALIDATE

- Make a list of stupid things that people say
- Making a talking stick with a ribbon-each member has the opportunity to contribute
- Website or personal journal (i.e., The Sharing Place newsletters) with things they wished they said before the person died
- Role Playing to prepare the child to re-enter school

TIPS and THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Tip: For the first appointment, have them draw a picture of themselves, family, etc. to help see where they are in the grief process
- Tip: It is helpful to establish ground rules before talking about grief and loss that cover issues such as confidentiality, no put downs, etc., with a clear emphasis that all understand that there is not grief or loss bigger than another
- Tip: Don't say “Sorry.” Instead change it to “I'm sorry you had to experience that.”
- Tip: Give them something to hold in their hands or fidget with to help them relieve anxiety
- Tip: It is helpful to have students draw pictures of the deceased instead of bringing actual photographs, which might hit too close to home
- Tip: Talking square-on or face-to-face can be intimidating to kids. Talking while working on a project together or sitting more side-by-side
- Remember: It is important to keep an open dialogue so the child knows it's okay to discuss their feelings any time
- Remember: There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and the grief process never ends completely. It is important to know that something that happened a long time ago can be manifest in emotions and actions
- Remember: Most activities should promote talking, expression, and group building

Challenges	Strategies to address challenges
Feeling isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure: <i>We are here for you. You are not alone.</i> • Encourage a sense of community by including classroom and small group activities. Activities should encourage student expression, foster friendships, and create sense of belonging. • Classroom memorials provide students the opportunity to offer compassionate responses (cards, drawings, posters, flowers, poems, etc.). • Encourage conversations and strengthen connection with the deceased. Reassure children that deceased loved ones live on in our memories.
Expressing loss of hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with surviving parent or guardian about family spiritual beliefs and their approach to grieving and memorializing/remembering the deceased. Incorporate these beliefs into conversation and activity. • Share the “sea glass” analogy (Heath & Sheen, 2005, p. 121). • Share and display positive quotes and pictures. • Plant paperwhite bulbs (a type of Narcissus bulb). Explain that although these bulbs are brown and shriveled, these bulbs will grow into flowers. Paperwhites “force bloom” indoors (no chilling or direct sunlight required). Flowers mature in 4-6 weeks.
Blaming self or others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure children that self-blame is a common feeling. Assure and reiterate: <i>It is not your fault.</i> • Blame holds children in an unproductive victim’s role. Empower those who grieve by offering supportive classroom activities that encourage emotional expression, steering energy into positive productive avenues. • Practice reframing negative comments into positive self-talk.
Avoiding conversations about death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caution: Although opportunities for discussion should be offered, never coerce a child to talk about death or to express their feelings associated with death. • Select a children’s book that models coping strategies for working through grief. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For young children (ages 4-8), <i>Chester Raccoon and the Acorn Full of Memories</i> (Penn, 2009) models how to memorialize a loved one’s death. ○ For older children and adolescents (ages 8 and older), <i>Tear Soup</i> (Schwiebert & DeKlyen, 2005) describes working through one’s grief.
Asking tough questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When young children (ages 4-8) ask questions about death, sensitively and honestly respond to their questions. <i>When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death</i> (Brown, 1998) addresses a wide variety of children’s questions in a non-emotional straightforward manner. • For children ages 9-12, <i>Sad Isn’t Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss</i> (Mundy, 1998) offers sensitive, supportive responses.
Acting out and/or regressing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show extra patience, take time to listen. • Teach and encourage relaxation skills. Practice relaxation with entire class: Slowly inhale a deep breath, then counting to 10, slowly exhale. • As needed, reduce academic demands and provide flexibility in regular routines. • Discuss behavioral concerns with school psychologist.

"What should I tell the children?"

A question often asked after the suicide of a loved one. The answer - the truth.

Many people still believe it is best to shield children from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. More often than not, the opposite is true. Misleading children, evading the truth, or telling falsehoods to them about how someone died can do much more harm than good; if they happen to hear the truth from someone else, their trust in you can be difficult to regain. Not knowing can be terrifying and hurtful. We've always been told that "honesty is the best policy" and just because the subject is suicide, that doesn't mean this time is any different.

What children might be feeling after losing someone they love to suicide:

1. Abandoned- that the person who died didn't love them.
2. Feel the death is their fault- if they would have loved the person more or behaved differently.
3. Afraid that they will die too.
4. Worried that someone else they love will die or worry about who will take care of them.
5. Guilt-because they wished or thought of the person's death.
6. Sad.
7. Embarrassed-to see other people or to go back to school.
8. Confused.
9. Angry-at the person who died, at God, at everyone.
10. Lonely.
11. Denial-pretend like nothing happened.
12. Numb-can't feel anything.
13. Wish it would all just go away.

Children and adolescents may have a multitude of feelings happening at the same time or simply may not feel anything at all. Whatever they are feeling, the important thing to remember is that they understand it is okay to feel. And that whatever those feelings are, they have permission to let them out. If they want to keep them to themselves for awhile, that's okay too.

How do we explain suicide to children or young people? It may seem impossible and too complex to even try, but that's exactly what we must do-try! Their age will be a factor in how much they can understand and how much information you give them. Some children will be content with an answer consisting of one or two sentences; others might have continuous questions, which they should be allowed to ask, and to have answered.

After children learn that the death was by suicide, one of their first questions might be, "What is suicide?" Explain that people die in different ways-some die from cancer, from heart attacks, some car accidents and that suicide means that a person did it to him or herself. If they ask how, once again it will be difficult, but be honest.

Some examples of explaining why suicide happens might be: "He had an illness in his brain (or mind) and he chose to make his own body stop working." "His brain got very sick and he chose to die." "The brain is an organ of the

body just like the heart, liver and kidneys. Sometimes it can get sick, just like other organs." "She had an illness called depression and it caused her to make the choice to die." (If someone the child knows, or the child herself, is being treated for depression, it's critical to stress that only some people die from depression, not everyone who has depression. There are many options for getting help, e.g. medication, psychotherapy or a combination or both.)

A more detailed explanation might be: "Our thoughts and feelings come from our brain, and sometimes a person's brain can get very sick- the sickness can cause a person to feel very badly inside. It also makes a person's thoughts get all jumbled and mixed up, so he can't think clearly. Some people can't think of any other way of stopping the hurt they feel inside. They don't understand that they don't have to feel that way, that they can get help."

(It's important to note that there are people who were getting help for their depression and died anyway. Just as in other illnesses, a person can receive the best medical treatment and still not survive. This can also be the case with depression. If this is what occurred in your family, children and adolescents can usually understand the analogy above when it is explained to them.)

Children need to know that the person who died loved them but that because of the illness, the person may have been unable to convey that to them or think about how the children would feel after the loved one's death. They need to know that the suicide was not their fault, and that nothing they said or did, or didn't say or do, caused the death.

Some children might ask questions related to the morals of suicide-good/bad, right/wrong. It is best to steer clear of this, if possible. Suicide is none of these-it is something that happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with that pain.

Whatever approach is taken when explaining suicide to children, they need to know they can talk about it and ask questions whenever they feel the need, to know that there are people there who will listen. They need to know that they won't always feel the way they do now, that things will get better, and that they will be loved and taken care of no matter what.

Suggested Reading:

- ✓ Child Survivors of Suicide: A Guidebook for Those Who are for Them, by Rebecca Parkin with Karen Durzne-Maxim
- ✓ When Dinosaurs Die-Guide to Understanding Death, by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown
- ✓ The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide, by Helen Fitzgerald
- ✓ Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parent & Child by Earl A. Grollmon

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PART 5: After a Parent's Suicide: Effectively Supporting Children & Youth

For a child, the death of a parent has both immediate and long-lasting implications (Worden, 1996) and brings with it intense sadness, loss of nurturing support, and multiple life changes (Pfeffer et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2014). Parent death by suicide is a particularly difficult challenge experienced by 7,000 to 12,000 children in the U.S. each year (Cerel et al., 2008). These children are especially vulnerable; child survivors of parent suicide are at risk for internalizing behaviors, lower self-esteem, higher levels of anger and shame, and depressive symptoms (Cerel et al., 1999; Pfeffer et al., 2000). Additionally, these children have an increased risk for self-harm and suicide attempts (Kuramoto et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2010).

Although the negative ramifications of a parent's suicide are significant and enduring, even extending into the third generation (Cain, 2006), few empirical studies have focused on this specific group of suicide survivors (Kuramoto et al., 2009). While there are abundant resources for children experiencing grief, minimal practical resources (printed or online) exist specifically for children who grieve their parent's suicide—despite the significant need (Andriessen, 2014).

Through semi-structured qualitative interviews using the hermeneutic approach, researchers interviewed 17 adults who, as children or adolescents, were bereaved by parent suicide. Helpful experiences and support included assistance processing the suicide and an openness in the face of stigma. Unhelpful experiences included judgment and blame, silence regarding the suicide and deceased parent, and a heightened awareness of the surviving parent's challenges. Individuals who were perceived as helpful generally had pre-existing relationships with the children and helped meet their practical and emotional needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

It is recommended that customized and varied support be offered, along with the message that it is important to talk about suicide and memorialize the deceased parent. Additional research is needed to further explore the complex experiences of children of parent suicide; this will aid in the development of evidence-based interventions to better support them.

- **Caring adults need to send the clear message: “It’s okay to talk about suicide.”** Talking helps children process the trauma.
- **Every situation is different.** Professionals must customize their support based on the individual's situation. Considerations include the child's maturity level, relationship with both parents, proximity to the death, spiritual convictions and experiences, personality and life perspective, and support network of caring adults and friends.
- **Schools are a natural support network.** A caring environment is facilitated by educators offering flexibility with attendance policies and assignments; making home visits; and providing classroom activities, such as making cards for the child/family and role playing compassionate interactions.
- **Support the surviving parent.** The family healing process is expedited by a well-functioning parent.
- **Practical support lifts family burdens.** This includes providing meals, yard work, child care, financial support, fun activities, etc.
- **Connecting with others who have been through a similar experience helps normalize the trauma.** Formal counseling may or may not be helpful. Although services should not be forced, a variety of support options should be offered, including school-based counseling, individual and/or family counseling, informal peer groups, and bereavement support groups.
- **Youth need opportunities to memorialize:** talking about memories, looking at pictures and keepsakes, visiting the cemetery, journaling, and creating memory books or boxes.

PART 6: Facilitating Communication in Children Affected by Parent Suicide

The following information is based on a summary of feedback from a focus group of Therapists/Counselors ($n=5$) who work with children/families affected by parent suicide.

Ranking of Children's Books

Considering books that helped to facilitate communication in children affected by the suicide of a parent, therapists/counselors chose what they considered to be the "best" and "worst" books from a selection of 15 books.

Best Choices to Facilitate Communication

The following books were ranked as the "best choices:"

1. *Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide* by Linda Goldman
2. *After A Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids* by the Dougy Center
3. *Luna's Red Hat: An Illustrated Storybook to Help Children Cope with Loss and Suicide* by Emma Smid
4. *Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping with the Loss of a Parent* by Julie Kaplow and Donna Pincus
5. *Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A story for Children Survivors and Those Who Care for Them* by Doreen Cammarata
6. *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss

Worst Choices to Facilitate Communication

When compared to a selection of options, these books most often cumulatively ranked the "worst choices:"

1. *Rabbityness* by Jo Empson
2. *A Terrible Thing Happened* by Margaret M. Holmes
3. *Water Bugs and Dragonflies* by Doris Stinckney
4. *Tear Soup* by Pat Schwiebert
5. *In My Heart* by Jo Witek
6. *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst

Books rated individually on a 1 to 5 Likert scale

When rating books individually, and not comparing them to any other options, on a Likert Scale (1 to 5), indicating how effectively the book facilitates children's communication about suicide, these books had the highest cumulative ratings:

1. *After a Suicide Death: A Workbook for Grieving Kids* by The Dougy Center
2. *Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide* by Linda Goldman
3. *Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping with the Loss of a Parent* by Julie Kaplow & Donna Pincus
4. *In My Heart* by Jo Witek
5. *Someone I Love Died By Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them* by Doreen Cammarata
6. *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss
7. *Where Are You? A Child's Book About Loss* by Laura Olivier

Important things to consider

- Carefully consider the individual child's experience and current needs
- Pay attention to the illustrations and how the child might interpret what things look like (red for blood)
- Take caution when considering stories that leave things unresolved, such as *Rabbityness* and *A Terrible Thing Happened*--When information is not direct, and unclear, this leaves children feeling unsettled
- Keep information and therapeutic activities developmentally appropriate for the child
- When ready, children need an opportunity to talk about what happened
- Activity/workbooks might fit the child's needs

FOCUS GROUP BOOKS

Amazon Stars Number of reviews	Book Title	Author
Suicide Specific		
4.8 stars 9 reviews	<i>After a Suicide Death: A Workbook for Grieving Kids</i>	Dougy Center
4.8 stars 6 reviews	<i>Luna's Red Hat: An Illustrated Storybook to Help Children Cope with Loss and Suicide</i>	Emma Smid
4.6 stars 7 reviews	<i>Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them</i>	Doreen Cammarata
4.2 stars 110 reviews	<i>When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death</i>	Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown
5 stars 3 reviews	<i>Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide</i>	Linda Goldman
Death/Grief Specific		
4.3 stars 51 reviews	<i>Where Are You? A Child's Book About Loss</i>	Laura Olivieri
4.7 stars 17 reviews	<i>Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping with the Loss of a Parent</i>	Julie Kaplow & Donna Pincus
4.7 stars 952 review	<i>Tear Soup</i>	Pat Schwiebert
4.8 stars 12 reviews	<i>Rabbityness</i>	Jo Empson
4.4 stars 185 reviews	<i>Water Bugs and Dragonflies</i>	Doris Stickney
Non-Specific (feelings/emotions/communication)		
4.7 stars 667 reviews	<i>The Invisible String</i>	Patrice Karst
4.9 stars 206 reviews	<i>A Terrible Thing Happened</i>	Margaret M. Holmes
4.7 stars 242 reviews	<i>My Many Colored Days</i>	Dr. Seuss
4.8 stars 248 reviews	<i>In My Heart</i>	Jo Witek
4.5 stars 285 reviews	<i>The Way I Feel</i>	Janan Cain