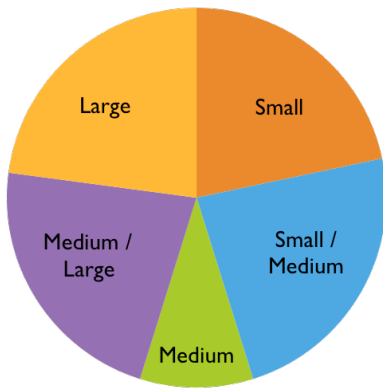# Supporting Bereaved Children: A Guide to Getting Started (Part I)

February 24, 2025

Experiencing the death of a loved one is a distressingly common reality for children. The most recent data from Judi's House (an organization dedicated to providing comprehensive support services to grieving children and their families) indicates that one in twelve children in the US will lose either a parent or a sibling by the time they turn eighteen (Judi's House, 2024). Rates of bereavement are even higher for children in racially and ethnically minoritized groups, and for those living in socioeconomically marginalized families.

Regardless of their background or circumstances, the death of a loved one is often a highly stressful event for children (Bergman et al., 2017). Compounding this stress is the fact that many children are "left to grieve alone" (Duncan, 2020), as erroneous assumptions about their responses to bereavement (for example, that children do not grieve, or that talking about the loss of a loved one only harms a child's wellbeing) produce situations in which children's grief is both unacknowledged and unsupported.

This need not be the case. Organizations such as the New York Life Foundation have invested and been actively involved in variety of programs and initiatives that help bereaved children work through the grief that follows the death of a loved one. Research indicates that interventions can improve children's bereavement outcomes, and that bereavement care may be most effective when supported by adults who meet youth where they are in their natural environments—including schools, afterschool programs, clinical facilities, and sites of recreation and informal learning (Aoun et al., 2020; Paul & Vaswani, 2020; Wray et al., 2022).

Children's museums can help facilitate bereaved children's grieving processes. In support of this goal, this Trends report presents key research findings from the literature on bereaved children. As the first in a new series focusing on childhood bereavement, this report offers a foundation for bereavement interventions by explaining key concepts, highlighting bereaved children's needs, and sharing general information on the kinds of experiences and supports that can help children overcome the grief associated with the death of a loved one.

ACM TRENDS

#8.1

ACM Trends #8.1

Key Concepts

When working with children who have lost a loved one, it can be helpful to understand what **"bereavement"** and **"grief"** mean. Bereavement is the state of having experienced the death of a loved one; it is the fact of the loss itself (Duncan, 2020). One can only be bereaved if they have experienced the death of someone close to them (Olson, 2024). Grief is how individuals respond to bereavement. Importantly, grief is not a specific emotion (such as fear or sadness). Instead, it is the collection of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors triggered by the death of a loved one (Henry, 2020). It is often experienced as waves of suffering that include feelings of longing—and as a "preoccupation with the deceased person or the circumstances of their death" (Wojtkowiak et al., 2021).

Grief is a disruptive process that can bring a "bewildering sense of meaninglessness" (Hibberd, 2013). But grief is not pathological; it is a natural and necessary experience that is critical to healing. Through grieving, bereaved individuals gain an ability to adapt to loss, and to integrate loss into their new realities. The early literature on grief presented this as a series of stages to be moved through: for example, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Today, this model is seen as overly rigid. As grief is a non-linear process, there is no particular order in which grief tasks must be accomplished (Laranjeira et al., 2022). And instead of having acceptance and closure as their end goals, contemporary research highlights how grief can lead to more positive outcomes— namely, resilience and the development of meaning systems for coping with loss (Henry, 2020).

Grieving can be challenging for children. One reason for this is that caretakers may attempt to shield children from emotional pain by withholding information from them (Wray et al., 2022). Another difficulty pertains to children's still-developing cognitive and emotional skills. Some youth may not understand what death is, while others may believe that their thoughts caused the death of a loved one (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). Childhood and adolescence are periods of profound change, and children's grieving processes also vary depending on their developmental stage (Hoppe et al., 2024).

Bereaved Children's Needs

Though grieving processes vary from child to child, there are certain grieving tasks that are beneficial to all bereaved children. Of foremost importance are those tasks that normalize grief by showing children that this is a natural, normal process that can help them cope with loss and adjust to their new reality. The literature on childhood bereavement highlights three key steps to facilitating healthy grieving processes: (1) providing opportunities for children to express their emotions; (2) engaging children in open communication about their loss (especially with family members and loved ones); (3) creating opportunities for peers to support bereaved children. Taken together, interventions that focus on these objectives can help validate children's feelings in ways that help them emerge from grieving as more resilient individuals.

Emotional Expression

A review of recent interventions found that "children had better bereavement outcomes when they expressed emotions" (Hoppe et al., 2024). Giving bereaved children a safe, supportive space for expressing their emotions is associated with a reduction in anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Howell et al., 2016). The expression of grief-related feelings can be either verbal or physical (e.g., drawing) (Currier et al., 2007). To facilitate emotional expression, many interventions make use of expressive arts therapy or play therapy-–which is important given the fact that children more frequently express grief through "behaviors, bodily expressions, and play" rather than through language (Chen & Panebianco,

2018). Participation in cultural and personal grieving rituals can also provide bereaved children an opportunity to display and process their feelings (Lytje et al., 2022).

Regardless of the nature of the intervention, having a space for expressing emotions is valuable, as studies report that bereaved children often believe they have to hold back their feelings. Children need to be able to "express the emotion they wish in adaptive ways" (Akerman & Statham, 2011). As one article puts it, they "should not be made aware of expectations about how one should or should not feel" (Duncan, 2020).

Open Communication

Talking about the deceased is difficult, but by creating an environment in which children feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their thoughts and feelings, caretakers can help children find meaning and thus reduce the risk of long-term suffering (Namiki et al., 2024). "Children do not want death to be taboo," one literature review notes; "they want to discuss death and are open and curious to learn more" (Wray et al., 2022).

Community organizations can play a key role in fostering open communication. Family members sometimes struggle to talk with bereaved children in the home; as one article notes, "caretakers who are actively grieving may also have a difficult time recognizing their child's grief and may not provide the necessary support as a result" (Olson, 2024). Because one of the most significant determinants of a child's ability to successfully cope with the loss of a loved one is family relationships (Akerman & Statham, 2011), many bereavement interventions seek to strengthen parent- and caregiver-child relationships (Chen & Panebianco, 2018), and to provide support to both the bereaved child and their families. Interventions of this sort can help create safe and secure home environments, strengthen caregiver-child bonds, and increase positive family interactions—all of which facilitate grieving processes (Bergman et al., 2017).

Peer Support

Receiving support from peers can also be incredibly helpful for working through bereavement-related grief. "Bereaved families may find solace in sharing their feelings with others and gaining insights from those in similar situations," one review article finds (Namiki et al., 2024). By interacting with others who have experienced the death of a loved one, children can gain an increased sense of hope and counteract the social isolation that often comes with bereavement (Bartone et al., 2019). Particularly beneficial in this respect are peers who children knew prior to the loss of a loved one; "empathy from peers," one article reports, can help children feel "less isolated and different" (Wray et al., 2022). Yet peers are often unaware of how to react in these situations. To help children prepare for supporting a bereaved peer, Duncan (2020) advises the creation of group-based programs that help "build(s) a network of children who can reach out to others in parallel situations."

Sources of Bereavement Care

Bereavement care has typically been provided in formal or professional contexts—most notably, by mental health professionals in schools or medical settings. But just as grief is a multidimensional process that impacts individuals on an emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual level (Laranjeira et al., 2022), the most effective bereavement interventions are likely to be those that take an integrated, whole community approach. While counselors and therapists play a vital role in helping children cope with loss, they are not always provided with the institutional support or resources needed to facilitate grieving processes (Elsner et al., 2022). Moreover, the fact that peers, relatives, and other members of children's existing networks often provide the most effective support underscores the value of an approach in which responsibilities are "shared between communities and health services based on individual needs" (Wray et al. 2022). Social supports are "an important factor influencing bereavement outcomes" (Aoun et al., 2018). As one article concludes, "it is necessary to facilitate networking with local communities and professionals such as schools that support children, and to help children receive support from their surroundings" (Namiki et al., 2024).

Key Takeaways

Children's museums are well positioned to provide bereavement care to youth grieving the loss of a loved

one. Because they offer families a safe place for conversation, emotional expression, and embodied learning, much of the work children's museums are already doing speaks to the needs of bereaved children—whether acknowledged as such or not. By reaching out to local organizations that work with bereaved children and families, children's museums can build community awareness of how their own programs facilitate children's grieving processes. In the process of communicating all of the different ways their work speaks to the needs of bereaved children; children's museums can position themselves as a key part of the social support systems dedicated to helping children adjust to the loss of a loved one.

About This Research

Data from this report was collected through a search of available literature. The research was supported by funding from the New York Life Foundation.

References

Akerman, R., & Statham, J. (2011). *Childhood bereavement: A rapid literature review*. Child Wellbeing Research Centre, pp. 100-20.

Aoun, S. M., Breen, L. J., White, I., Rumbold, B., & Kellehear, A. (2018). What sources of bereavement support are perceived helpful by bereaved people and why? Empirical evidence for the compassionate communities approach. *Palliative medicine*, 32(8), 1378-1388.

Bartone, P. T., Bartone, J. V., Violanti, J. M., & Gileno, Z. M. (2019). Peer support services for bereaved survivors: a systematic review. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 80(1), 137-166.

Bergman, A. S., Axberg, U., & Hanson, E. (2017). When a parent dies—a systematic review of the effects of support programs for parentally bereaved children and their caregivers. *BMC palliative care*, 16, 1-15.

Chen, C. Y. C., & Panebianco, A. (2018, April). Interventions for young bereaved children: A systematic review and implications for school mental health providers. In Child & Youth Care Forum (Vol. 47, pp. 151-171).

Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2007). The effectiveness of bereavement interventions with children: A meta-analytic review of controlled outcome research. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 36(2), 253-259.

Duncan, D. A. (2020). Death and dying: A systematic review into approaches used to support bereaved children. *Review of Education*, 8(2), 452-479.

Elsner, T. L., Krysinska, K., & Andriessen, K. (2022). Bereavement and educational outcomes in children and young people: A systematic review. *School psychology international*, 43(1), 55-70.

Henry, A. (2020). Creating meaning from loss: A museum-based group art therapy program design for adolescents who have lost a caregiver. Concordia University.

Hibberd, R. (2013). Meaning reconstruction in bereavement: Sense and significance. *Death studies*, 37(7), 670-692.

Hoppe, R., Winter, M. A., Williams, C. D., & Sandler, I. (2024). When a parent dies: A scoping review of protective and risk processes for childhood bereavement. *Death Studies*, 1-11.

Howell, K. H., Barrett-Becker, E. P., Burnside, A. N., Wamser-Nanney, R., Layne, C. M., & Kaplow, J. B. (2016). Children facing parental cancer versus parental death: The buffering effects of positive parenting and emotional expression. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(1), 152–164.

Judi's House. (2024). *Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model: National Report 2024*.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. Simon & Schuster.

Laranjeira, C., Moura, D., Salci, M.A., Carreira, L., Covre, E., Jaques, A., Cuman, R.N., Marcon, S. and Querido, A., (2022). A scoping review of interventions for family bereavement care during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Behavioral Sciences*, 12(5), 155.

Lytje, M., Dyregrov, A., & Holiday, C. (2022). When young children grieve: daycare children's experiences when encountering illness and loss in parents. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31(1), 115–129.

Olson, Louise M. (2024). School-based grief interventions for childhood bereavement: A systematic review." Electronic Theses & Dissertations.

Namiki, R., Sasaki, K., Taniguchi, I., & Wakimizu, R. (2024). Literature review on support for children and families experiencing parental bereavement. *Open Journal of Nursing*, 14(4), 139-163.

New York LIfe Foundation. (2024). *State of grief report: Holistically supporting families through grief*.

Paul, S., & Vaswani, N. (2020). The prevalence of childhood bereavement in Scotland and its relationship with disadvantage. *Palliative Care and Social Practice*, 14.

Wojtkowiak, J., Lind, J., & Smid, G. E. (2021). Ritual in therapy for prolonged grief: a scoping review of ritual elements in evidence-informed grief interventions. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 11, 623835.

Wray, A., Pickwell-Smith, B., Greenley, S., Pask, S., Bamidele, O., Wright, B., Murtagh, F., & Boland, J. W. (2022). Parental death: a systematic review of support experiences and needs of children and parent survivors. *BMJ Supportive & Palliative Care*