

2009

Childhood Grief: The Resilience of Loss

Brenda A. Haskin
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2009 Brenda A. Haskin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>

Recommended Citation

Haskin, Brenda A., "Childhood Grief: The Resilience of Loss" (2009). *Graduate Research Papers*. 3005.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/3005>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Childhood Grief: The Resilience of Loss

Find Additional Related Research in UNI ScholarWorks

To find related research in UNI ScholarWorks, go to the collection of [School Library Studies Graduate Research Papers](#) written by students in the [Division of School Library Studies](#), Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, at the University of Northern Iowa.

Abstract

Children who have lost a parent will benefit from reading a story that helps them cope with the loss of a parent and the emotions they feel during the grieving process. The focus of this research project is a child's resiliency to the loss of her father. It is during the grieving process that the book created as a part of this research project will help children understand that what they are feeling is normal and that life goes on after loss.

This research project is a realistic fiction, free-verse novel that captures the emotions, feelings, and thoughts of an 8 year old girl who lost her father. The poetry book is written in first-person, by the researcher, from her daughter's point-of-view. The focus of this book is the implementation of a strength-based approach to the grieving process which allows bereaved children the resiliency to handle death and move forward in life.

CHILDHOOD GRIEF:
THE RESILIENCY OF LOSS

A Graduate Research Project

Submitted to the

Division of School Library Studies

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Brenda A. Haskin

July 28, 2009

Brenda A. Haskin

Titled:

Childhood Grief: The Resiliency of Loss

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts.

8/28/09
Date Approved

Karla Krueger

Graduate Faculty Reader

8/28/09
Date Approved

Timothy G. Weih
Graduate Faculty Reader

9.1.09
Date Approved

Jill M. Uhlenberg
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Abstract

Children who have lost a parent will benefit from reading a story that helps them cope with the loss of a parent and the emotions they feel during the grieving process. The focus of this research project is a child's resiliency to the loss of her father. It is during the grieving process that the book created as a part of this research project will help children understand that what they are feeling is normal and that life goes on after loss.

This research project is a realistic fiction, free-verse novel that captures the emotions, feelings, and thoughts of an 8 year old girl who lost her father. The poetry book is written in first-person, by the researcher, from her daughter's point-of-view. The focus of this book is the implementation of a strength-based approach to the grieving process which allows bereaved children the resiliency to handle death and move forward in life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	6
Purpose	6
Research Questions	6
Assumptions	6
Limitations	7
Definitions	7
Significance	8
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Stages of Grief	10
Grief in Children	13
Parental Loss in Children	17
CHAPTER 3: PROJECT PLAN	20
CHAPTER 4: ACCOMPANYING FREE-VERSE NOVEL.....	22
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	23
Summary	23
Conclusions	24
Recommendations	25
REFERENCES	26

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Roller Coaster High

I will always remember the first roller coaster ride I experienced. My mom and I arrived at the amusement park shortly after it opened. Hoping to avoid heavy traffic and long lines at the gate, we luckily breezed right through the entrance and into the park. All I could think about was heading straight for the coaster rides. There were two in this park. One was called Fast-Track and the other The Dragon. I chose to ride Fast-Track first for the most obvious reason ... it was notoriously fast!

As my mom and I headed toward the ride, it was hard to control my excitement. I was finally going to experience what other people call the roller coaster high. We were assigned seats three and four in the first car of the coaster. The safety bar came down over our laps and we began the long climb up the steepest part of the ride. The sound of the gears on the track went clickity-clack as the coaster inched its way up the hill. Suddenly, there was silence. We had leveled off and within seconds we were traveling at a speed of 50mph straight down the first incline. The gravity was so intense that my body clung to the seat of the car. We continued up and over the second hill which positioned us again at the top of the coaster.

The middle part of the ride was a maze of sharp twists and turns that spiraled us down to the bottom of the track. With an unexpected jolt that almost brought the car to a complete stop, we slowly glided down the final

strip of track that returned us back to the Fast-Track Station. As the coaster stopped and the safety bar lifted, my heart was pounding. I looked over at Mom and smiled. I had truly experienced the ultimate, roller coaster high!

Making Connections

As you were reading the anecdote above, it may have taken you back to the days of your childhood when you were young and fearless and enjoyed the challenge of a fast coaster ride and all of the emotions the ride brought with it. By the end of the story, it is possible that your heart was pounding and your body filled with anxiety. I wrote *Roller Coaster High* (Haskin, 2002) as an entrance exam for acceptance into The Institute of Children's Literature. The short story was developed out of my daughter's love for roller coasters.

The Journey

It was not until three years later that the love of roller coaster riding had real meaning. Suddenly, my husband suffered a major stroke, leaving me and my daughter behind. Within minutes, we had our perfect world shattered. We would begin our ascent into a roller coaster ride of emotions. A seven year old would no longer take business trips with her daddy where she would spend the day at amusement parks with her mommy waiting for daddy to finish his work. What once was an activity for fun would now be transformed into reality: the reality that daddy was not coming home and how we would continue living without him. This research project is a poetry book written for children to read when someone close to them dies. It will help them connect with and understand that the emotions they are experiencing are normal.

Answers

It was the same as any other day. My husband left in the morning for a business trip and called me in the afternoon to check-in as he always did. Then the unthinkable happened. At 5:15 pm, the phone call came. My husband, now a critically ill patient, was being transported to the hospital by ambulance, and the diagnosis was not good. The first thing out of my daughter's mouth was, "Mommy is Daddy going to die?"

"Of course not," I said not knowing the severity of the stroke. But it was not until talking with doctors that the moment of truth set-in. As a parent, I would have to face all of my daughter's questions when I returned home early the next morning. I would have to explain to her that Daddy was going to die and was not coming home from the hospital. Above all, I would need to be there for my daughter as she dealt with the ups and downs of emotions that came with grieving the loss of a loved one.

Professional Support

The death of a parent creates a period of stress and sadness not only for the surviving child but also for the surviving family members (Eppler, 2008). In my case, there were hospital personnel, grievance counselors, family, and Hospice Care to offer support. Everyone includes the feelings of a child involved, but the books and materials given to children may not always be appropriate for every child. Above all, children may not be interested in them.

While there is a rich body of literature regarding childhood grief, a deficit-based view of grieving children as sad, angry, anxious, and disconnected has remained predominate in the literature over the past several decades (Eppler, 2008). Such material was given to my daughter. Books titled: *When Someone Very Special Dies: Children*

Can Learn to Cope with Grief (Heegaard, 1988), *Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss* (Mundy, 1998), and *A Scrapbook of Memories: A Workbook for Grieving Children* (Grollman, 1996). All of these books, although written well and appropriate, were depressing for the daughter and had too many "D" words: death and dying. These books are written at a child's level but are really better suited to provide adults valuable resources in an organized approach to help their grieving child cope with family loss and change. There seems to be a wealth of literature on how adults think children should be feeling after the death of a parent or someone they loved, but what is lacking in literature today are books that capture children's true emotions, feelings, and thoughts, as they go through the grieving process.

Books for Children about Death, Dying, and Loss

Picture book therapy helps children identify internal and external resources that can ultimately help them develop the coping strategies necessary to deal with their grief (Mercurio, 2006). When selecting literature to read to a grieving child, adults should consider the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of the child involved. The book must present accurate information and be age appropriate. The book must indicate through its characters that the grieving child reader is not alone; that others have shared the child's experience. Lastly, the book should indicate through its characters that it is okay for the child reader to feel as he or she does.

It is these types of books, written honestly and insightfully, that can be therapeutic in helping children come to terms with their loss. Children need a vehicle in which to help them cope with all of the confusing feelings that are associated with grieving. Literature written with these types of feelings are one such vehicle: anger, guilt, fear,

hope, and hopelessness. Examples of books that allow children to read about these feelings are *A Taste of Blackberries* (Smith, 1992), *Tenth Good Thing about Barney* (Viorst, 1971), *Blackberries in the Dark* (Jukes, 1994), *Beat the Turtle Drum* (Greene, 1994), *Say Goodnight, Gracie* (Deaver, 1989), *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Coerr, 2002), and *Something to Remember Me By: A Story About Love & Legacies* (Bosak, 2003). Books like these allow the child reader to focus on unique qualities of the deceased and create images and memories of the deceased that can stay with them forever (Zingher, 1998).

Talking with children about death is difficult. Many adults feel inadequate when faced with the subject (Thomason, 1999). Young children need many opportunities to talk about their feelings, and it is through stories, books, and poems written for children that make talking about the natural process of life and death easier. The following books can be helpful in discussing death with children: *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* (Mellonie, 1983), *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* (Buscaglia, 2002), *When Someone Dies* (Greenice, 1992), *The Goodbye Boat* (Joslin, 1999), *What's Heaven?* (Shriver, 1999), and *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* (Brown, 1998).

More specifically, there are books that focus primarily on the death of a parent: *How It Feels When a Parent Dies* (Krementz, 1988), *Rachel and the Upside Down Heart* (Douglas, 1990), *Dad! Why'd You Leave Me?* (Frost, 1992), *Geranium Morning* (Powell, 1990), *I Heard Your Daddy Died* (Scrivani, 1996), *Saying Goodbye to Daddy* (Vigna, 1991) and *Flamingo Dream* (Napoli, 2002). Adults who show genuine care about young children and their feelings, even if they do not know all of the answers, open

communication and stimulate thinking. Helping children understand and cope with death gives them a greater appreciation for life (Thomason, 1999).

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this research project is that children need a story to read that helps them cope with the loss of a parent and the emotions that they themselves feel during the grieving process.

Purpose

This research project will give children a poetry book to read that helps them relate to the emotional ups and downs that come with losing a loved one. This research project will serve as a tool for parents, teachers, and school psychologists who work directly with those children who are affected by death in the family.

Research Questions

The research questions are: What are the stages of grief? How do different age groups grieve? What kind of emotions do children feel when dealing with loss? How are children depicted in books that are written about death, loss, and grief?

Assumptions

It is the assumption that at one point in their lives children will experience grief. One assumes that children, just like adults, go through the five stages of grief when someone close to them dies. It is also assumed that children would feel more comfortable reading a poetry book about the emotions that come with death, loss, and grief when it is written through their point of view.

Limitations

The limitations will be writing to an audience of various ages that will find the project helpful. The printed words will be limited to the English language. The content of the book needs to be convincing. The book will portray the grieving process of a young girl. The emotions that the young girl experiences may or may not be experienced by others that go through the grieving process. Everyone grieves differently. It is important to remember the Rules of Grief. As stated by Lensing (1995) the Rules for Grief are:

1. There are no rules for grief.
2. Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time.
3. Grief takes as long as it takes.
4. Whatever you are feeling and experiencing is normal for you.
5. What works for one person to cope may not work for another.
6. The worst grief is the grief you are experiencing.
7. Grief is not a disease that you 'get over' or from which you are cured. It is a journey during which you find a new 'normal'.
8. There are no magic words or logical stages to grief: it is a roller coaster of feelings and emotions.
9. While the intense feelings of grief subside as you work through this process, the memories of the person or thing that you have lost will always be in a small place inside of you. Throughout your life, at special times and places, this grief may be revisited. (p. 1)

Definitions

Poetry can be written in many different forms. Free-verse narrative is one such form. This research project will be written in a free-verse format.

Free-Verse – “Unrhymed poetry that does not follow a fixed metrical pattern, though sometimes the words within a single line will rhyme. Verses are dependent upon natural speech rhythms and the counterpoint of stressed and unstressed syllables. Distinctions of free verse can include the arrangement of words on the page and the use of line or word breaks as a kind of punctuation” (Latrobe, Brodie, & White, 2002, p. 81).

Poetry – “Literature in its most compact and imaginative form, using imagery, sound, and rhythm to create an emotional and intellectual experience. Poetry has significance, and, therefore, it is more than verse” (Latrobe, Brodie, & White, 2002, pp. 131-132).

Significance

The children's poetry book derived from this project will address the roller coaster of emotions that children go through when someone close to them dies. I analyzed a wealth of books written about death, dying, and grief. I found that most books either viewed grieving children in a deficit-based position, were better suited as resources for adults to use in counseling sessions, or focused on the death of a friend or grandparent. What is significant about this project, and different from other books, is that the focus of the book will be on a child's resiliency to the loss of her father and written in free-verse novel format.

As stated by Sanders (1998), coming to terms with the fact that someone close has died can take a long time. Along with the grief comes a mixture of strong physical and emotional reactions. How one copes with grief will depend on their own personality, the circumstances of the death, and the support they receive from others. Given time, most people come to terms with even the most difficult of feelings.

It sounds strange, but grief is good. When the death of a parent, relative or friend happens, the stages that the bereaved goes through are healthy and freeing. The process of grieving helps people release their hold on the past so they can adapt to the present. "Mourning is like driving through a rainstorm only to later find that you're shutting off the wipers and smiling at the sun" (Arenofsky, 1998, p. 25). As further stated by Arenofsky (1998) each person's pattern of mourning is unique in that of themselves. While some people may feel frightened, others feel vulnerable. Some feel they have lost their identity or that their self-esteem has been shattered. Worst of all, bereaved people may feel as though they are the only ones who have ever felt this way. Rest assured they

are not because most people pass through five distinct stages when grieving the loss of a loved one. These stages are:

1. Denial ("This is not happening to me.")
 2. Anger ("How could he leave me like that? I hate him!")
 3. Bargaining ("I'll be a better daughter/son if...")
 4. Depression ("I don't feel like doing anything or seeing anyone.")
 5. Acceptance ("I have to get on with my life.")
- (www.essortment.com/all/stagesofgri_rvkg.htm)

It is during the grieving process that this poetry book will help children understand that what they are feeling is normal and that life goes on after loss. According to Christian (1997) bereavement and child development experts seem to agree that involving children in the death and grief process is important. There are stages of grief for adults, and children may experience similar stages. Children often feel the need to maintain a connection with the deceased. This can be done through visits to the cemetery, keeping special things that belonged to the parent, and remembering the good times they had together. Letting children make decisions about writing letters, being with others who are grieving, or receiving condolences from friends is appropriate. Helpful activities include writing down feelings in journals, planting trees and flowers, and blowing away feelings with bubbles.

This research project will be a book that documents a child's feelings throughout the year after her father dies. I will write the book as a realistic fiction, free-verse novel from my daughter's point-of-view. The implementation of a strength-based approach to combine positive moments, happy times, and the resiliency of bereaved children while also attending to emotions such as sadness and fear will be the focus of this project.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem addressed in this research project is that children need a story to read that helps them cope with the loss of a parent and the emotions that they themselves feel during the grieving process. The project will give children a story to read that helps them relate to the daily emotional ups and downs that come with losing a loved one. Although it is obvious that there are many good books on the market about death, dying, and loss, there are very few written in a first-person, free-verse narrative (Zingher, 1998). The research that was found included three categories which became apparent as the focus of this literature review. These three categories are stages of grief, grief in children, and parental loss in children.

Stages of Grief

The stage theory of grief remains widely accepted as a model of adult bereavement. A study conducted by Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson (2007) examined whether or not adults who bereaved a natural death progressed through the normal stages of disbelief, yearning, anger, depression, and acceptance. The study collected data from a sample of community-based bereaved individuals who were primarily white and an average age of 62.9. A majority of the participants, 83.8%, were spouses of the deceased. The remaining 16.2% participants were adult children, parents, or siblings of the deceased. The frequency of each grief indicator was observed during three postloss periods: 1-6 months, 6-12 months, and 12-24 months. Statistical analyses were conducted to test for the differences in the magnitude of each of the five grief indicators: disbelief, yearning, anger, depression, and acceptance. In order to capture the

stage theory of grief that predicts the sequential rise and fall of each grief indicator, the Yale Bereavement Study used a parametric functional form to represent the value of the grief indicator and the time postloss.

Maciejewski et al. (2007) found that within each postloss period, acceptance was significantly greater than disbelief, yearning, anger, and depression. Additionally, yearning was greater than disbelief, anger, and depression; and depression is greater than anger. Although the findings of this study reflect how the average person processes the normal patterns of grief when a close family member dies, it was found that in the case of a natural death, acceptance was the most often endorsed indicator in terms of absolute frequency. Contrary to the stage theory, disbelief was not the initial, dominant grief indicator. This result is consistent with findings that indicate bereavement has changed from a traditional stage-model view of grief, where the bereaved goes through a series of distinct stages, to an empirically based view of grief variability. Positive social interactions are an important resource for coping with bereavement. Therefore, examining societal expectations of grief is warranted (Costa, Hall, & Stewart, 2007).

Costa et al. (2007) conducted two studies on how societal expectations of grief impact the experience of bereavement. Study one investigated the beliefs and expectations of different individuals regarding the grief process following the death of a significant person. Over a three week period, three separate focus groups were conducted using nine participants aged 19 to 62 years of age. Participant's bereavement experience varied from no grief to a "lifetime" of grief. Data extracted from the focus groups were divided into eight categories related to grief. Consistently, grief was perceived as an individual personal experience and variables such as age, gender, and quality and length

of the prior relationship to the deceased were also considered important influences on the expression of grief. Furthermore, participants felt that in order to adjust to bereavement, an emotional expression of grief (anger, depression, sadness, despair, and denial) needed to be experienced. Additionally, the authors found that social support and being able to talk about thoughts and feelings of one's loss would facilitate resolution of grief.

Based on the findings of study one (Costa et al. 2007), the purpose of study two was to qualitatively explore how grief-related societal beliefs and expectations have an impact upon the actual experience of grief. Eleven adults, 41 to 52 years of age, were interviewed face-to-face over a three month period. All participants had experienced the death of a family member. Data extracted from the interview questions fell into four categories: grief-related beliefs before bereavement, reaction to own grief response, grief-related beliefs after bereavement, and reactions of other people to bereavement. Six participants expressed that they didn't think about grief until it happened to them personally. Once bereavement was experienced, nine participants conveyed a more flexible perception of the grief process. This view may represent the beginning of a change in societal perceptions of grief, from a traditional stage model view to a more flexible view of grief which acknowledges individual differences. Participants also reported that positive reaction from other people within their social network was helpful in coping with their own grief.

Although there seem to be no exact words that can help a person through the grieving process, a study conducted by Rack et al. (2008) looked at grief management as one type of emotional support that people turn to within their social network when grieving the death of a person. Because grief, along with its associated thoughts, feelings,

and behaviors, is one of the most powerful emotions that humans experience, it has been suggested that grief may be better conceptualized as a social process rather than a private, internal event. Replicating a study previously done on adolescents and adults, this study was aimed at young adults and the effectiveness of person-centeredness messages. Participants included 105 college students attending a Midwestern university and who had experienced a loss due to death in the previous two-year period. A questionnaire was developed with the following factors in mind: participant gender, participant need for cognition, closeness to the deceased, and disruptiveness of the deceased's death. The 16 grief management support strategies were coded for their helpfulness and person-centeredness. The results of the study found that the most helpful strategies for young adults included offering one's presence, expressing the willingness to listen, and expressing care and concern, whereas the least positive strategies included giving advice and minimizing one's feelings. Although there seem to be similar patterns of evaluation indicating that people of different ages have similar ideas about which grief management strategies are most helpful, it is important to take a closer look at age-related differences among those that grieve.

Quite often society focuses on adult grief, but children grieve as well. "It is hard to imagine a more devastating event in the life of a child than the death of one or both parents. Unfortunately, it happens to about 4% of American youth before their 15th birthday" (Samide & Stockton, 2002).

Grief in Children

Some question whether or not children really grieve. Despite common misconceptions, children do grieve and require support and validation to mourn and

move on. School aged children who are victims of grief often times have difficulty in school. Bereavement groups for children in the school setting may be an effective means of helping them deal with their grief. An article written by Samide & Stockton (2002), presents a framework for such groups and interventions found to be helpful to the needs of grieving children. A primary factor complicating the grief in children is their level of emotional and cognitive development. Older children, for example, (ages 6 to 11) can understand the concept of death but they lack the skills to express how they are feeling. School counselors are equipped at providing a caring and supportive environment for bereavement groups at school where children can talk and interact with others who have experienced similar losses. It is suggested that children begin to feel better as they move through the process of mourning by participating in theme-based grief sessions. Samide and Stockton developed a model for conducting a grief group which included the following seven sessions and themes.

Session one focused on participants' feelings. For younger children who were unable to express their feelings through vocabulary, posters with facial expressions, art, and play therapy were all powerful means for getting children to express their feelings. Session two focused on death education. Explanations were given in concrete language for children to understand. Finding out that others shared the same concerns or confusion helped alleviate anxiety in the participants. Session three focused on making memories. Participants were encouraged to take a photo of the deceased parent and make a collage of all the things that reminded them of their mother or father. Session four focused on the changes that come about when there is a death of a parent. By using puppets or drawing a picture, participants were able to process painful feelings and to have their feelings

validated and normalized. Session five and six focused on grief education. Age appropriate discussions about coping skills, such as talking to a friend about their feelings or writing their thoughts in a journal, gave participants ideas on how to handle their own grief. Session seven focused on letting go. Activities like letting helium balloons go in the backyard and planting flowers were meaningful ways to say good-bye to the deceased parent (Samide & Stockton, 2002).

Whatever specific techniques are used, it seems that children benefit by sharing their grief with peers and having a safe place to ask frightening questions about death and dying. Furthermore, there is great variability in children's grief reactions due to their developmental capacities, so looking at adolescent grief through a child's perspective is important.

One such study by Christ et al. (2002) focuses on a boy named Robert who by the age of 14 had been confronted with death numerous times. When Robert was only 5, a newborn sister died, just after birth. When he was 7, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. During the course of his mother's illness, Robert's paternal grandmother died of colon cancer. He was 11 years old when his mother died. Although he was kept unusually well informed about his mother's condition throughout her illness, he was nonetheless surprised when she actually died. Research supports the value of keeping children informed about a parent's illness and preparing them for death. When communication is unrealistic or avoided, it compromises a child's chances for a favorable outcome. What Robert found to be most helpful after the death of his mother was the opportunity to share his feelings with others.

I think that the golden rule of this entire experience is to get your feelings out there safely and find a person who[m] you feel comfortable talking with. The

worst thing that one can do is just keep it bottled up inside. I've written a lot of poetry that has helped me get through some of the grief and enabled me to express some of my feelings (Christ et al. 2002, p. 1275).

In order to deal with the numbness, depression, and loneliness that set in from his mother's absence, Robert turned to writing poetry. Young adolescents fear public displays of emotion, and their greatest fear is being perceived as "different" from their peers at a time when they are striving to fit in. Robert wanted to get back into the normal groove of things but found that it was difficult for other teenagers to know how to deal with the loss of somebody's parent. Some would act as if nothing had happened, and this non-direct communication led Robert to further engage himself in poetry. Due to the quality of his relationship with his surviving parent and the quality of his care before and after the death of his mother, Robert demonstrated an unusual capacity for self reflection. He described the importance of retaining a positive emotional tie to his mother and capturing memories of her that will stay with him forever (Christ et al. 2002).

In correlation to the need for connectedness to the deceased, a study was conducted by Sasaki (2006) that explored the question of how children grieve the loss of a loved one with an emphasis on the importance of an ongoing connection with the deceased. Early theories of grief emphasized emotional detachment from the deceased to be critical in successful grieving. However, in the past two decades, this view has been revised to recognize the continued and internalized connection with the deceased as being a characteristic of successful mourning. The study consisted of 10 participants who were psychotherapists with varying levels of experiences with bereaved children ages 5 -16. The interview responses emphasized the importance of helping children retain a connection to the person who has died. The therapists also perceived the grieving process

for children as a life-long process of gradually accepting and integrating the loss into one's life. This connection provided children with a sense of continuity.

Parental Loss in Children

When focusing on bereaved children who have lost a parent, it is equally important to look at the connection the child has with the remaining caregiver. The research up to this point has been fairly conclusive that the emotional adjustment of the remaining caregiver is an important factor in the overall adjustment of the child. Positive behavior by the caregiver relates to positive adjustment by the child. Emphasis is also placed on an emotionally stable home environment. Open communication among the surviving parent and child results in significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression in the bereaved child.

A study conducted by Hope and Hodge (2006) investigated observations made by social workers on how important the connection to the remaining caregiver is to a child after the loss of the other parent. Data was collected from interviews with five social workers who had experience working with children who were grieving the death of a parent. All five participants agreed that if the caregiver made a positive adjustment to the death, it helped the child adjust as well. If the caregiver is able to grieve, it gives the child permission to grieve. Participants also stressed that children like a sense of security and a feeling that their caregiver is in control and can be relied on. The underlying theme in all participants was the relationship between the child's adjustment and the coping style and cohesiveness of the family.

Similar to the findings of Hope and Hodge (2006), Haine, Ayers, Sandler, & Wolchik (2008) stressed the importance of two key recommendations for the surviving

caregiver: providing positive parenting and the creation of a safe environment for the bereaved child to mourn. Because the death of a parent during childhood is a traumatic event that places children at risk for several negative outcomes, an article by Haine et al. (2008) provides clinicians working with bereaved families a summary of empirically supported risk and protective factors designed to help promote healthy adaptation. The transitional events model is widely used in the study of child risk and resilience and has been useful for developing intervention to improve outcomes for children under extreme stress. The model proposed an interaction between the proximal stressful events a child experiences following the death and their protective resources. Protective resources such as increasing a child's self-esteem, improving coping skills, and fostering a positive parent-child relationship, enables adjustment to take place. Similar to the findings of Hope and Hodge (2006), Haine et al. (2008) stresses the importance of two key recommendations for the surviving caregiver: providing positive parenting and the creation of a safe environment for the bereaved child to mourn.

A recent study conducted by Eppler (2008) also focused on how incredibly resilient children are, and given a caring and supportive environment, are able to heal and move on after experiencing the death of a parent. The study explored grieving children's resilient traits from their own perspective. Participants were between 9 and 12 years old and had lost one parent in the past 36 months. The 12 bereaved children were interviewed and wrote stories about their mourning experiences. The study revealed dominant themes throughout the participants' stories. A common thread in the participants' narratives was that they were sad when their parent died. In addition to feeling sad, there was a theme of anger. Another trend in the stories was that the children felt anxiety and a fear of being

alone. Yet, in addition to times of sadness, anger, and fear, there was a theme of happiness. Participants show themselves coping and moving on after the death of the parent. The bereaved children saw themselves as able to survive and thrive during grief, and they requested that others see their resilience, strength, and normalcy. Their strengths included the ability to mourn, cope, and develop in the midst of adversity. They were able to recount happy times before and after their parents died.

Much like an earlier study about a boy named Robert (Christ et al. 2002) and the findings of this study by Eppler (2008), it is important to listen to the voices of grieving children and to see their complete pictures by observing their positive moments, happy times, and resilience while simultaneously attending to their emotions of sadness and fear. It is through age appropriate literature that we do this, and that is why this project is so important. Although it is obvious that there are many good books on the market about death, dying, and loss, there are very few written in a first-person, free-verse narrative (Zingher, 1998).

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT PLAN

Most of the literature regarding childhood grief portrays grieving children as sad, angry, anxious, and disconnected. This research project will focus on a combination of positive moments, happy times, and the resiliency of bereaved children while also attending to emotions such as sadness and fear. The purpose of the research project is to give children a story to read that helps them relate to the emotional ups and downs that come with losing a loved one.

Although there is a perceived set of stages that most people go through when grieving, more recent literature suggests that grief is unique to each individual. There are commonalities among past literature findings that support the need for this project. Many factors have been cited as possibly contributing to children's adjustment to the loss of a parent. These factors include the bereaved child's age, mode or circumstance of death, relationship to the deceased and connection with the surviving parent, intervention to include social support that is age appropriate, and providing a safe environment for children to communicate their feelings (Christ et al., 2002; Costa et al., 2007; Eppler, 2008; Haine et al., 2008; Hope & Hodge, 2006; Samide & Stockton, 2002; Sasaki, 2006). Surviving parents who are aware of these factors and provide as much stability as possible to their grieving child increase the bereaved child's resiliency to loss.

The design of this research project is a free-verse novel that captures the true emotions, feelings, and thoughts of an 8 year old girl who loses her father. There is a wealth of literature written for children on death, dying, grief, and loss, but very few are written in poetry form through a child's point-of-view. The poetry book written in first-

person, by me, from my daughter's perspective is similar in format to such books as *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1999), *Reaching for Sun* (Zimmer, 2007), and *Summerhouse Time* (Spinelli, 2007).

The physical format of this research project is a free-verse novel approximately 100 pages long. The content of the novel was written using Microsoft Word, and the black line illustrations signify activities and favorite things that were done among the family members before, during, and after the father's death.

In order to better understand the grieving process that children go through and the emotions they feel when dealing with loss, I attended a workshop through Iowa City Hospice titled: *How Children Grieve (And How Adults Can Help)*. I used journal notes and observations made from the past three years of my own daughter's grief. Although the book is written about the grieving process that my own daughter went through when losing her father, it is considered a realistic fiction, free-verse novel.

In addition, I compared and contrasted the various children's books that are currently on the market that address death, dying, grief and loss. The final project is a copulation of true emotions that my daughter experienced as she grieved the death of her father and also what other children might find themselves going through when someone close to them dies. Written by me, but from my daughter's perspective, this poetry book is a combination of all types of emotions: sadness, anger, fear, happiness, and strength.

CHAPTER FOUR

See accompanying realistic fiction free-verse novel, *Come Fly With Me*.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary

Children who have lost a parent could benefit from reading a story that helps them cope with the loss of a parent and the emotions they feel during the grieving process. While analyzing books written about death, dying, and grief, I found that most books either view grieving children in a deficit-based position or are better suited as resources for adults to use in counseling sessions. The focus of this research project was a child's resiliency to the loss of her father. It is during the grieving process that the free-verse novel created as a part of this research project could help children understand that what they are feeling is normal and that life goes on after loss.

Although there is a perceived set of stages that most people go through when grieving, more recent literature suggests that grief is unique to each individual (Costa, Hall, & Stewart, 2007). Research has shown that factors such as the bereaved child's age, mode or circumstance of death, relationship to the deceased and connection with the surviving parent, social support appropriate for the child's age, and opportunities for communication about feelings within a safe environment, can contribute to the child's adjustment to the loss of a parent (Christ et al., 2002; Costa et al., 2007; Eppler, 2008; Haine et al., 2008; Hope & Hodge, 2006; Samide & Stockton, 2002; Sasaki, 2006). The surviving parent who is aware of these factors and provides as much stability as possible to his or her grieving child increases the bereaved child's resiliency.

The resulting research project is a realistic fiction, free-verse novel that captures the emotions, feelings, and thoughts of an 8 year old girl who lost her father. The poetry

book is written in first-person, by me, from my daughter's point-of-view. As I wrote this book, I referred back to journal entries I kept over a period of three years. Overall, the research project focuses on a combination of positive moments, happy times, and the resiliency of a bereaved child along with unpleasant emotions such as sadness and fear.

Conclusions

Most of the literature regarding childhood grief portrays grieving children as sad, angry, anxious, and disconnected. Research found that there is a wealth of literature written for children on death, dying, grief, and loss, but few are written in poetry form, and few are from a child's perspective.

This research project takes the reader on a chronological journey through a year of activities and favorite things that signify what one family did before, during, and after the father's death. The content of the novel depicts all aspects of grief including emotions of sadness, anger, fear, happiness, and strength.

Before writing, I put my journal notes in sequence from earliest happenings to latest. This helped with knowing what content to use and in what order. It was clear to me that information about the death of my husband had to be at the beginning. I was careful not to focus on how he died, but rather why he died, how my daughter perceived this, and how we would move forward with our lives. All of the stories used in the book are from real experiences that happened. I chose stories that followed the same pattern of emotional ups and downs that my daughter experienced as she grieved. For example, due to my daughter's age at the time of her father's death, she was more concerned about her friends and the winter party at school than the visitation and funeral. As the seasons

change in the book, so does the mood of the story. I gradually wrote stories that would allow the reader to see the resiliency of my daughter as the year continues.

Due to the serious nature of the topic of the book, I wanted to make sure the reader was able to focus on the outcome of the story, which is the resiliency of children who experience loss. In order to accomplish this, I wrote individual poems that allow the reader to digest smaller portions of emotion at one time. Story placement was crucial. Once major events were in place, I went back and inserted memories or traditions that correlated with one another. This technique allowed me to achieve the foreshadowing and imagery that takes place throughout the book. It also allowed the stories within one year to progressively come together and achieve a full circle of events that end on a resilient tone.

Research shows that children often don't feel comfortable expressing how they feel when someone close to them dies. Some children also feel a need to retain a relationship with the deceased (Sasaki, 2006). Although the daughter's experiences in the book might be different from those of other children who grieve, it is hopeful that readers will be able to make a connection with the character that allows them in return to connect with their own emotions that come with grieving the loss of a loved one.

Recommendations

I recommend that the book *Come Fly With Me* be sent out to editors in hopes of becoming a published realistic fiction, free-verse novel. If publishers would want a lengthier novel, I would recommend expanding the book with additional stories taken from my journal entries. If this approach was taken, I would also recommend changing the seasons in the book to months.

This book would be an excellent resource for personal reading and is recommended for ages 8-12. This research project also serves as a tool for parents, teachers, and school psychologists who work directly with those children who are affected by death in the family. In addition, hospital staff, hospice care, and funeral directors would benefit from having this book on hand to give to children who have experienced a parental loss. I recommend a future book be written in picture book format using free-verse poetry for children ages 3-7.

Lastly, it is my hope that any child who has experienced the loss of a parent, will find comfort when reading the book *Come Fly With Me* and realize that even though he or she is going through a very difficult time, there is life after loss.

REFERENCES

- Arenofsky, J. (1998, March 19). When life strikes a blow. *Current Health 2, a Weekly Reader Publication*, 24(7), 25-27.
- Bosak, S. (2003). *Something to remember me by: A story about love & legacies*. Toronto: The Communications Project.
- Brown, L., & Brown, M. (1998). *When dinosaurs die: A guide to understanding death*. Boston, MA: Little Brown .
- Buscaglia, L., Ph.D. (2002). *The fall of Freddie the leaf*. Thorofare, NJ: SLACK.
- Costa, B. M., Hall, L., & Stewart, J. (2007). Qualitative exploration of the nature of grief-related beliefs and expectations. *Omega*, 55(1), 27-56.
- Christ, G., Siegel, K., & Christ, A. (2002). Adolescent grief: "It never really hit me ... Until it actually happened." *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288(10), 1269-1278.
- Christian, L. (1997). Children and death. *Young Children*, 52(4), 76-80.
- Coerr, E. (2002). *Sadako and the thousand paper cranes*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Deaver, J. (1989). *Say goodnight, Gracie*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Douglas, E. (1990). *Rachel and the upside down heart*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Eppler, C. (2008). Exploring themes of resiliency in children after the death of a parent. *Professional School Counseling*, 11(3), 189-196.
- Frazee, M. (2003). *Roller coaster*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.
- Frost, D. (1992). *Dad! Why'd you leave me?* Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Greene, C. (1994). *Beat the turtle drum*. New York, NY: Penguin Young Readers Group.
- Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers.
- Grollman, E. (1996). *A scrapbook of memories: A workbook for grieving children*. Batesville, IN: Batesville Management Services.

- Haine, R. A., Ayers, T. S., Sandler, I. N., & Wolchik, S. A. (2008). Evidence-based Practices for parentally bereaved children and their families. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(2), 113-121.
- Heegaard, M. (1988). *When someone very special dies: Children can learn to cope with grief*. Minneapolis, MN: Woodland Press.
- Hesse, K. (1999). *Out of the dust*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press.
- Hope, R. M., & Hodge, D. M. (2006). Factors affecting children's adjustment to the death of a parent: The social work professional's viewpoint. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23(1), 107-126.
- Iowa City Hospice. (2005). *The 5 stages of grief: Learn what to expect after a loss*. Retrieved December 21, 2005, from http://www.essortment.com/all/stagesfgri_rvkg.htm.
- Joslin, M. (1999). *The goodbye boat*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, William B. Publishing.
- Jukes, M. (1994). *Blackberries in the dark*. New York, NY: Random House Children's Books.
- Krementz, J. (1988). *How it feels when a parent dies*. New York, NY: Knoph.
- Latrobe, K.H., Brodie, C.S., & White, W. (2002). *The children's literature dictionary*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers.
- Lensing Funeral Home. (1995). Rules of grief. *Iowa City Hospice*.
- Maciejewski, P. K., Zhang, B., Block, S. D., & Prigerson, H. G. (2007). An empirical examination of the stage theory of grief. *JAMA*, 297(7), 716-723.
- Mellonie, B. (1983). *Lifetimes: The beautiful way to explain death to children*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Mercurio, M., & McNamee, A. (2006). Healing words, healing hearts: Using children's literature to cope with the loss of a pet. *Childhood Education*, 82(3), 153-160.
- Mogilner, A. (1992). *Children's writer's word book*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.
- Mundy, M. (1998). *Sad isn't bad: A good-grief guidebook for kids dealing with loss*. St. Meinrad, IN: One Caring Place.

- Napoli, D. (2002). *Flamingo dream*. Singapore: Greenwillow Books.
- Powell, E. Sandy. (1990). *Geranium morning*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner.
- Rack, J. J., Burleson, B. R., Bodie, G. D., Holmstrom, A.J., & Servaty-Seib, H. (2008). Bereaved adults' evaluation of grief management messages: Effects of message person centeredness, recipient individual differences, and contextual factors. *Death Studies*, 32, 399-427.
- Samide, L., & Stockton, R. (2002). Letting go of grief: Bereavement groups for children in the school setting. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 27(2), 192-204.
- Sanders, P., & Myers, S. (1998). *Death and dying*. Brookfield, CT: Copper Beech Books.
- Sasaki, C. (2006). Grounded-theory study of therapists' perceptions of grieving process in bereaved children. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 1-101. (UMI No. 3249806)
- Scrivani, M. (1996). *I heard your daddy died*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Shriver, M. (1999). *What's heaven?* New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Smith, D. (1992). *A taste of blackberries*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Spinelli, E. (2007). *Summerhouse time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Thomason, N. (1999). "Our guinea pig is dead!" Young children cope with death. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 27(2), 26-29.
- Vigna, J. (1991). *Saying goodbye to Daddy*. Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.
- Viorst, J. (1971). *Tenth good thing about Barney*. New York, NY: Atheneum.
- Zimmer, T. (2007). *Reaching for sun*. New York: Bloomsbury Children's Books.
- Zingher, G. (1998). The good-bye theme: Tributes and remembrances. *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, 14(9), 46-48.