

RUNNING HEAD: COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Childhood Grief and Loss:  
Support and Interventions Used to Promote Healthy Coping Strategies

## Abstract

This paper presents a review of interventions and strategies that can be used in order to help grieving children cope with a loss in their lives. This paper, literature review, and intervention, also focus on school and family involvement in a child's grieving process. I also present a program in which I put in place when working with grieving children. A traumatic loss in a child's life can range from the loss of a parent to the loss of a pet. These losses can also range from sudden death to a long-term illness with an inevitable death. I will focus on the loss of a child's parent or parents. Coping with grief as child can have a significant impact on how they perform and communicate socially, academically, and psychologically. This paper reviews some popular and some uncommon interventions and therapies used when working with children or groups of children.

Using the arts as an approach to therapy and interventions is very common when treating children. Scrapbooking, drawing, painting, music, and acting are very popular methods used in order to help with the healing process. Children can be very guarded or shut down after a traumatic loss. Verbally communicating can sometimes be an issue, using art-related therapies and interventions have been used as treatment methods. Some less used or uncommon methods but possible interventions that can be used are writing-prompts for storytelling and journaling. School and family involvement is very important especially when working with children. Children need a good support system in school and in their home. The following grieving support intervention was put in place within a New York City public school. The participants included two female students ages 9 and 11; fourth and fifth grade girls, from middle-class homes in a large urban elementary school. Teachers of the two female students were also active

participants, the elementary school guidance counselor, and the surviving parent or care-giver of the child (had little involvement with intervention). The expected outcomes of this intervention was for students to create a scrapbook, keep a personal journal, participate in group discussions, increase skills academically, socially, and emotionally. The intervention took place during a two month time period. The meetings were approximately 50 minutes, once per week. The results determined were as expected. The girls participated by sharing in group discussions, kept a journal, created their own scrapbooks, increased levels on an academic level, social level, and emotional level. Further detailed explanations of the results can be found in graph 2 (post-intervention), page 23 and within the written results section.

## Childhood Grief and Loss: Support and Interventions Used to Promote Healthy Coping Strategies

In the United States, approximately 1.5 million children live in single –parent homes because the other parent has died (United States Census, 2010). The death of a loved one is one of life’s most difficult experiences. The bereaved person struggles with many intense and frightening emotions, including depression, anger, and guilt. Often, they feel isolated and alone in their grief. Having someone to lean on can help them through the grieving process. For children, the death of a parent is one of the most painful losses a child can experience. For the majority of children, parents are the most significant people in their lives, so when one dies, life as the child knows it is disrupted and irrevocably changed. It’s a time of suffering and confusion, both for the child and surviving parent. When loss is sudden and unexpected, there is much less time for the child to begin adjusting. Since children have less time and fewer skills to help them adjust to these types of situations, they are more vulnerable to loss than adults. If the death of a parent comes after a long-term illness, a child may have or might experience a model coined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross called *The Five Stages of Grief*. The five stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or in a prescribed order (Kubler-Ross, 2005).

### **Group, School and Family Involvement in the Grieving Process**

There has been a longstanding discussion about whether school-age children have the capacity to grieve. In school-age children ages 5-11 years old, there is an increased understanding that

there are changes that occur with death and they may know that death is irreversible (Kirwin et al., 2005). Every child grieves loss differently. Children at different developmental levels perceive death differently. An understanding of these differences is essential if we are to effectively help children understand and cope with their grief (Morgan & Roberts, 2010). Some children prefer to isolate themselves while others may turn to their peers or surviving parent for support. Group support and interventions are ways children can express themselves. One way of assisting bereaved children and adolescents is to give them the opportunity to come together with other grieving young people and help them to learn about and share their grief (Morgan & Roberts, 2010). The basic idea of a support group is designed to provide grieving children with a safe place where they can better understand, express, and cope with their grief. Group activities can be designed to normalize the grieving process, encourage sharing with other children, and instill hope.

Children's academic performance may decline and they may also show regressive behavior. The behaviors may not be so apparent at first, such as the child being withdrawn and being along the continuum towards depression. Conversely, more overt behaviors may appear, such as temper tantrum, "acting out" or attention seeking, resulting from feelings of an otherwise unexpressed or expressed anger in relation to their perceptions of the unfairness of the parental death (Holland, 2008). School staff needs to be aware of the potential impact that death may have on children so that they can understand the impact and respond to the needs of their students. A problem some schools are faced with is that teachers may be wary of causing an upset to the students, although they want to support the grieving child they may be unsure of how to help.

A child's family involvement and commitment to helping the bereaved child is necessary to achieve healthy reconciliation to the death. The child's family generally has the greatest influence on the grieving process and interventions that can be used to assist the child. Without family assistance, working effectively with the bereaved child may be impossible (Wolfelt, 1995). The family has the potential to either support or undermine the counselor's relationship with the bereaved child. The child needs the surviving parent or caregivers support and encouragement. The model of the interventions and strategies used by the counselor or support systems can be determined by the amount of support by the child's family. Surviving Parent or caregiver should be given information on the child or adolescent bereavement and overview of the program (Wolfelt, 1995).

### **Interventions and Programs used in the Grieving Process**

Art-related interventions and strategies have been proven to be an effective form of support and expression for children to cope with the grieving process. The use of art through painting, drawing, scrapbooking, and creative collages can be beneficial to the child. One in particular intervention I would like to explore is scrapbooking. Scrapbooking is a phenomenon used around the world. Throughout the world, the craft has achieved increased popularity amongst adults and children (Lent & Williams, 2008). The incorporation of photos, creative writings, journal entries, news clippings, poems, song lyrics, and other mementoes gives voice and story to the authors, allowing the expression of feelings associated with lost loved ones. A scrapbook also provides a way to honor and memorialize the loved one or provides a space to express words that were left unspoken. The use of memorial activities helps children to relocate the individual within the child's life by acknowledging the death, honoring the deceased, and obtaining comfort and

support. Scrapbooking can be used as a therapeutic intervention with individual children or with groups.

Other forms of interventions that can be used include writing-prompts, story-telling, and journaling. These approaches can be used with children who are reluctant to verbally express their feelings. Using creative interventions can facilitate a sense of control by allowing children to have choices in how the grief support is approached, regardless of the intervention chosen the child is able to garner a sense of control by choosing the words, colors, and artistic mediums used and the topics to be explored (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). Listening to a story and having children write about it can deepen the reprocessing of the events. Writing-prompts assist children who need help expressing their thoughts. Writing-prompts are intended to be open-ended and provide direction to the child's story while allowing the child to be the driving force in the story's construction.

### **The Intervention (Methods)**

According to the research I have reviewed, creative art-related therapies have been known to support and help the grieving process for children. Group support has also been proven effective for children to be able to relate to their peers and share their feelings. I developed a program in which school-age children can participate in order to help alleviate some of the stresses that come along with the death of a parent; such as emotional changes, changes in behavior, academic downfall, and or social incompetence. Every child grieves differently, so not every part of the interventions will work for them. This is why I have implemented different forms of programs, interventions, and support. The methods are as follows:

*Objectives:*

- The child/children will be able to express his/her feelings or thoughts about their loss.
- The child/children will be able to communicate through art-related therapies (scrapbooking, drawings, and paintings) verbal communication (sharing of their loss), story-telling (a type of story in the form of a memoir of the event or events of the death/deaths), or through journal entries.
- The child/children will be able to work with a counselor (myself) and group support, in order to help with the grieving process.
- The child/children will work on improving their academic, social, and or behavior performance (applies to those with a significant change in these areas due to the grieving process).

*Outcomes:*

- The child/children will perform better academically, socially, and physically because of help and support with the grieving process. The teacher/teachers of these children will be able to produce solid proof of changes in these areas. The teacher will keep a log of behavior. They will also report proof of positive social interactions, and show proof of any academic increase (only if there was a decrease).
- The child/children will create a scrapbook by collecting photos, mementoes, and other items of importance or value. The process and creative power of scrapbooking brings healing in that the author is able to revisit the experience and the feelings captured within the photos.
- The child/children who complete drawings/paintings will express their feelings through these drawings/paintings. It may consist of anything they would like at first, and then



more elaborate drawings/depictions. Based on their drawings/paintings I will give them a few prompts to help them express deeper feelings. Such as: Can you draw/paint me a picture of mommy or daddy? Your family? A picture of you with mommy and daddy? A picture of something you like to do with mommy or daddy? A picture of your favorite activity? Etc. The idea is to have them discuss what is happening in the drawings/paintings.

- The child/children who keep a journal will discuss their thoughts and express any guilt, remorse, anger, pain, and suffering through their writing. The child will be able to share their journal (I will be overseeing what they have written at some point in time). It is a space just for them, but they can share what they have written with the group if they would like.
- The child/children who take to the story-telling approach will support their writings with fact, opinions, details, and feeling. These children will write a story in the form of a memoir. They will focus on the experience of the death and all the aspects it has affected in their lives. The writing will help them to communicate their experience and help them to reprocess the events. The story will be verbally discussed with me or the group if they would like.

*Participants:*

The participants that will take part in these programs and interventions are as follows:

- Children ages 9-11; fourth and fifth grade students from middle-class homes, in a large urban elementary school (two female students).
- Teachers of children participating in program.

- Elementary school guidance counselor (he/she will provide me with help finding students who fit the profile of intended child participants).
- Surviving parent or care-giver of child participating in the program (will have little involvement, only support of the child's program choices, the parent or care-giver will not be present during program and interventions).

*Assessments:*

- The participants were assessed before and after intervention.
- Before intervention, the participants were given a number grade from 0-10. 0 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. They were rated on their participation and grades for their academics. They were also rated on their behavior and social interactions. After introducing the program, they were rated on their level of interest in scrapbooking, journal writing, and group discussions.
- After intervention. The participants were given a number grade from 0-10. 0 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. They were once again rated on their participation and grades for their academics. They were also rated on their behavior and social interactions. After the program was complete, the participants were rated on their level of completion and participation during group discussions, scrapbooking, and journal writing.
- Ratings were compared after intervention, to note any significant increases or decreases.

*Procedure:*

To start these programs and interventions off, I had a visit with the guidance counselor of the school. I shared with her what I was planning to do with the children. I informed her that the child needs to have a loss of a parent, or parents, the age of death is not relevant. She chose

children who she thought fit the profile I have given her. After, she gave me the information I needed; I went to the children's classrooms. I had an informal meeting with each of the child's teachers to discuss my program. The teacher also produced information on the child, which helped me to decide how I should approach the child. Next, I will produce a letter explaining to the child's parents about the program and interventions I would like their child to participate in. Getting parental and school administration permission is very important. After I received permission, I met with the children. First, I had a one-on-one discussion with each child. It was a very general conversation, very little mention about their loss, just more of a pitch about the program to get them interested. I told each child that the program will consist of once or twice a week meetings, during their lunch time. We can eat lunch together if they would like, or after they eat lunch we can meet for 30 minutes (we opted for 50 minute meetings where we ate lunch together). We will also have cookies or snacks during these meeting (which I will provide). I also shared with each of them that the group will consist of no more than four children (only two children were chosen).

#### **Steps to take After Permission and Interest (pre-intervention)**

- After they decide whether they would like to take part in this program, I will meet with them again.
- I will share a little about myself with the child, and explain to them why working with them is very significant to me. (I lost my father when I was a child, and can relate to them).

- Next, I will ask the child what their interests are. I will share with them that they can create scrapbooks, drawings, paintings, or even write a story about themselves (the idea is to not tell the children what we are here to discuss and work on right away).
- After I will pick a day when we can meet. At the first meeting, they will be introduced to each other. I will open the conversation by having the children go around the room and tell us a little bit about themselves. I will also share with the group a little about myself.
- I will ask the children if they can relate to anyone in the group. I will share with the whole group about myself, and about my father. I will tell them my feelings, grieving process, memories, and etc.
- I will then ask the children if they can relate to anything I shared with them.
- They will then share their interests with the group (if they would like).
- I will then introduce some of the fun things we can complete together.
- First will be the scrapbook; I will introduce the scrapbook process. I will tell the students that in order to complete the scrapbook they need to gather photos, mementoes, and other items of importance or value. They can organize them by theme, events, and/or dates of importance. The child might also want to create a timeline with the photos.
- Next, will be the drawing or painting intervention. I will explain to the children that sometimes we do not or cannot express our feeling verbally. I will tell them to draw or paint anything they would like at first. I will later give them some of the prompts I mentioned earlier (see outcomes section).

- The next topic of intervention will be the story-telling (memoir). I will tell the children that expressing their feelings through writing can be a great form of communication.

These writing prompts are intended to get the child started off and may not necessarily follow this style. Some of the prompts to use with this type of intervention are as follows:

- Before my mom/dad died...
- Details leading up to my mom/dad's death...
- When I found out my mom/dad died...
- Now when I think about my mom/dad...

- Lastly will be the journal writing. Those who decide to keep a journal may write down anything they would like at first. I will also give them some prompts so they can put down their feelings on paper. These children will discuss what they have written with me.

They do not have to share with the group if they do not wish to. Some prompts are as follows:

- My basic values and beliefs are...
- The person who has had the greatest impact on my life...
- My basic personality is...
- When I lost my mom/dad I felt...
- Activities I like to do are...

- These are just a few suggested writing prompts for after the child writes what they would like at first. This is just to give them some ideas on what to write about, so they can open up and share what they are feelings.

*Materials:* (I will provide all materials for children, unless they would like to use their own.)

- Scrapbook (picture album, binder, book)
- Construction paper
- Colored pens/markers/crayons/pencils
- Page protectors
- Decorative assortments (ribbons, stickers, glitter, etc.)
- Glue, scissors and hole puncher

- Writing paper (lined loose-leaf paper)
- Journal books (black and white notebooks)
- Paint & paint brushes
- Writing prompts (which I mentioned above)
- Children's photographs (they will bring in)

### **Description of Intervention (post-intervention)**

- Time frame: 8 weeks, once per week. During lunch time (children could eat at meeting or arrive after) meet approximately for 50 minutes.
- Week 1: Michele and Rachel were introduced formally to one another. As a group we got to know one another by sharing our likes, dislikes, and about our deceased loved ones (conversation starters were used). I also introduced the scrapbook to the girls.
- Week 2: The girls and I started a discussion of our family life with and without our loved one. We discussed our home environment (conversation starters were used). I also introduced the idea of keeping a journal.
- Week 3: Michele, Rachel and I brought in pictures of our loved ones, as well as memorabilia to share with the group. We shared our feelings about our photos, and were able to start a discussion (items were kept safe at school in a box inside our meeting area).
- Week 4: We each brought in more to add to our scrapbook. The girls also brought in stickers and labels to also add to the scrapbook. As we worked I asked the girls about their classroom environment (they shared a few things they have been struggling with).

- Week 5: The girls brought in their journals. They each shared an excerpt from their journal and we discussed their thoughts and feelings. We also worked on our scrapbooks together.
- Week 6: We started by sharing about our families (things that have been going on at home). The girls also shared some details about their progress within the classroom (academics, social interactions, and behavior). We also worked on our scrapbooks.
- Week 7: We began with a discussion. We discussed the idea of moving on without our loved ones (things we will miss, cherish, and etc.) We also put the finishing touches on our scrapbooks.
- Week 8: The girls brought in their journals, and we shared some details of their writings. We also shared with one another our finished scrapbooks. The girls and I discussed hope for the future and positive reinforcements to help them to continue coping with their grief.

### **Results**

After conducting my research and intervention, I came to the conclusion that my overall hypotheses were correct. The following results contain pseudonyms to describe the participants. After the eight week program, both Rachel and Michele had increases in the following: academics, behavior, and social interactions. Rachel, who is 11 yrs. old and in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, was struggling with her math and reading in class and at home. Her teacher reported a significant difference in her overall demeanor, and was able to produce proof of increased quiz and test grades. Her teacher and guidance counselor reported that her behavioral and emotional well being had benefited from the intervention. Rachel was able to increase her levels in all said

categories by spending more time on class-work, homework assignments, reading, writing, math, and etc. She also showed an improvement in the classroom with her behavior according to teacher, guidance counselor, and self-assessment (ex: calling out less, less back-talk, less arguing with other students and teachers).

Michele, who is 9 yrs. old and in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade) was struggling with her reading and behavior. Her reading level increased by spending more time on class-work and homework assignments. Michele's interest in reading as well as participation during reading time in class had made a significant increase. Unlike Rachel, according to Michele's teacher, guidance counselor, and self-assessment, she showed slight improvements in the classroom with behavior (ex: calling out less frequently, less back-talk, and less arguing with other students and the teacher). Michele's inappropriate behavior did not decrease as much as originally intended.

The scrapbooking, journal writing and group discussions were effective techniques. The scrapbook, which was the main intervention, fulfilled its purpose by allowing the girls to express themselves through unspoken terms. The pictures, stickers, and short descriptions were all means of sharing their emotional state. Both girls were highly interested in these activities and put time and effort into completing tasks. Each week the girls progressed toward their goal of moving forward. The girls began to understand that they can overcome their grief by sharing their feelings with one another. Both girls shared feelings (anger, resentment, sadness, hope, and etc.) and were open with myself and each other.

### **Discussion**

In summary, this paper has addressed specific, creative ways that counselors (mediators) can use to work toward helping children decrease grief and facilitate a means for healthy coping



strategies during the grieving process. Scrapbooking is a healthy form of therapy to be used with a grieving individual and is not limited to children alone. The scrapbooking process allowed the children with an opportunity to share a story of their families as well as connect with peers in school. “There are many benefits gained when creating a space to grieve through scrapbooking... Second, as children intentionally engage in the creative process by selecting photos and expressing thoughts, conversation is stimulated to assist them in understanding the grief process” (Williams & Lent, 2008). The results of this intervention have shown that the participants were provided with a space and given a creative opportunity to grieve their loss, as well as share their experiences in new events and relationships of importance. The results of the journaling have also proven to be effective. The participants were allowed reflection both in and out of the meetings. The journaling was able to highlight connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and provide an outlet for a range of emotions that the child may or may not have felt comfortable verbally expressing. The journaling was also used as a conversation starter at times during group meetings, which helped the participants to verbally express themselves when necessary.

By conducting research and implementing this type of intervention for bereaved children, it has come to my attention that schools need to be better equipped and trained in order to help with the grieving process. Loss should be included in the curriculum. Research has shown that some schools are taking action in order to assist the bereaved children. Some schools provide discussion during activities such as “circle time” these may be used more or less by teachers. Some may use them sensitively and systematically, with careful planning and preparation, but others may not be convinced of the value and appropriateness of such approaches and if they use

them at all, may do so in a desultory and uninspired way. Holland (2008) found that teachers were worried about causing an upset and although they wanted to support bereaved pupils they were unsure of how to help. The quality of provision will depend very much on the enthusiasm of individual teachers. McGovern and Barry (2000) found that death was a 'taboo' subject for both teachers and parents.

When conducting this research other implications for interventions came to mind. Death, whether it ranges from a childhood pet, to a parent is an important aspect to pay attention to when planning an intervention or program within a school. Any type of disturbance or loss in a child's life will affect their ability to perform academically, emotionally, and physically. Children need different forms of expression in order to place their grief and gain control of their feelings. Studies have shown that creating support groups for any type of loss, especially for children can be helpful for the bereaved individual. According to Zambella & DeRosa (1992) child support groups can be a useful surrogate support system for families when a death occurs, a death puts a strain on the family's existing coping systems. Research has also shown that allowing the child to confront their loss through programs that promote discussion, memory projects (scrapbooking), play therapy, painting, drawing, writing, and etc. are healthy ways to explore their feelings. Kirwin & Hamrin (2005) described these forms of therapies used to decrease the risk of complicated bereavement when conducting their research on current methods and successful interventions used within and outside of the school system.

### **Plans for the Future and Limitations**

For this program and interventions, there are some likely complications or outside factors that can interfere with this program. One must take into account the developmental level of the

child, the family context, and cultural factors that may affect the grieving process. The child's background and upbringing can affect how much or how little the child's surviving parent or caregiver is involved. There is also the complication of how much or little the child attends school. When some children are dealing with a death in their family, they become very depressed. They may not want to participate in school life. They may stay home a lot, even though they want to take part in the program. They may still not be able to follow through with coming to school.

The time of the loss in their life is also another factor to take into consideration. If their parent died before they were born they may not have much to discuss, although they can still talk about any repressed feelings they may have. There can be underlining feelings they may have due to their loss. All of the interventions I have listed and discussed are all something concrete that the child can take away from this program and kept with the child to revisit when they are going through a difficult time. The intervention provided an outlet for children that uses alternative methods instead of traditional talk therapy they would normally have with a psychologist.

It is important that we as adults consider different methods of working with children because of the differences between a child and adults grieving processes. There were several other factors to take into consideration either when planning for the future, or a limitation to this study. Both participants were female, and both had a deceased father. For future studies the gender of participants may want to be configured accordingly. The type of loss is also another factor that should be taken into account in order to provide different aspects of how to approach the intervention. One final factor I find relevant is the amount of time spend in the program. The

intervention that took place only lasted about eight weeks. For future studies/interventions I would suggest more time spent within program.

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**Appendices (letter to parents)**

November 7, 2011

Dear Parents,

As part of my thesis class, and upon completion of my graduate degree in childhood education, I must put in place and complete a final project. I would like to create a group gathering/activity for those children who have a loss in their family. For example: those with divorced parents, loss of parent/relative, or even a loss of a pet. The group, which will be called the "lunch bunch", would consist of no more than 4 to 8 children. I would like the group to meet once a week over the course of two months. I would like to have the children talk with myself and the other children for a brief part of each meeting, and then do an activity, such as painting, writing, drawing, scrap-booking, or even play a game. The idea is to allow them to express themselves freely.

The desired outcome of these meetings is to give the students an opportunity to discuss their feelings openly, whether it is with me, or the other children. I have chosen this particular project because I lost my father when I was a child in the fourth grade. Going to school and talking to others was difficult for me. I realized years later that if there had been someone else my age to open up to about experiencing a loss, or a place to go and express my feelings through activities, I might have had an easier time coping. I have previous experience working with students as I have a degree in Psychology. If you would like to your child to participate in this exciting and needed project, please sign and return this letter as soon as possible. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Thank you,

Miss Iaizzo

Yes, I would like my child to participate \_\_\_\_\_

No, I do not want my child to participate \_\_\_\_\_

## **Graphs**

*Graph 1 (pre-intervention)*

*Graph 2 (post-intervention)*

## **Table of Quotes**

*Discussion section pg.17*

“There are many benefits gained when creating a space to grieve through scrapbooking...

Second, as children intentionally engage in the creative process by selecting photos and expressing thoughts, conversation is stimulated to assist them in understanding the grief process”

(Williams & Lent, 2008).