Coping With Loss: Supporting School-Aged Children

Who Are Dealing With Bereavement

by

Mandi Spiegelberg

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the

Master of Science Degree

in

Guidance and Counseling

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

_____

Dr. Helen Swanson

The Graduate School

University of Wisconsin-Stout

May, 2006

The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI

Author:       Spiegelberg, Mandi L.

Title:        *Coping With Loss: Supporting School-Aged Children Who Are*
              *Dealing With Bereavement*

Graduate Degree/ Major: MS Guidance and Counseling

Research Adviser:   Helen Swanson, Ph.D.

Month/Year:        May, 2006

Number of Pages:   32

Style Manual Used:  American Psychological Association, 5<sup>th</sup> edition

## ABSTRACT

Every day children are faced with issues of death and dying. The influential adults

in children's lives have to assist these children during the bereavement process, in order

to help the children cope successfully. In this critical analysis there are five areas that are

explored, which provide useful information to adults who are supporting school-aged

children dealing with bereavement. It is important for adults to understand that

adolescents have a different grieving process. The relationship to the deceased has a large

impact on the coping process of a school-aged child. The cultural beliefs of the bereaved

individual also have a large impact on the coping process. It is important for adults to be

aware of this fact while helping children cope with a loss. If children are unable to

successfully resolve the issues that occur during a time of bereavement, then they could

be negatively affected during the time of bereavement, and in the future as well. Several

strategies are discussed which could be used to help children communicate their thoughts

and feelings experienced during a time of bereavement. In addition, this critical analysis

identifies various resources which could be utilized by adults who are assisting children

during these critical times.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

During this time in America it is not uncommon for school-aged children to be confronted with the topic of bereavement and loss. Every day, news programs are reporting on the deployment of American soldiers and of the loss of military life caused by Operation Iraqi Freedom. In 2005 alone, over 790 American casualties occurred on Iraqi soil (Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, 2005). These deaths cause school-aged children all over America to be informed that their loved ones or acquaintances will not be returning home. Even if school-aged children are not personally related to an American solider who has lost a life or know someone who has experienced that tragedy, they may still be greatly affected by the solemn news coverage of the many American lives lost.

School-aged children were also immersed with the topics of loss and bereavement due to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita. Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita's paths of destruction took place in late August and early September of 2005, and ended with over 1,500 American lives lost (Hurricane City, 2005), and left many more homeless, displaced, and orphaned. There were thousands of school-aged children who were immediately impacted by Hurricane Katrina's force, while the entire nation was impacted by the aftermath of this devastating natural disaster.

There are approximately 3.5 million children nationwide who are struggling to make sense of their world after a loved one is lost (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). All the information that children use to understand the world around them is obtained through influential relationships with the adults in the young people's lives (James, Friedman, &

Landon-Mathews, 2001). It is extremely important that adults address the issues of bereavement with grieving children.

Many adults avoid discussing the topic of death and dying because of their own discomfort with the topic (Webb, 2002). However, adults can be a very beneficial part of the grieving process of children, if they understand how a child grieves and what can be done to help a grieving child (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Even though the grieving process of children is similar to that of adults, there is also a great deal of disparity between the two processes. The coping process is not a regular phase in a child's life, so new skills are required when a loss occurs. Emswiler and Emswiler (2000) suggested that there are eight specific ways in which the adult and child grieving processes differ. It is extremely important to note that a child's grieving process will reflect his or her current developmental stage. It is also extremely important to note that, even though researchers suggest differences in adult and child grieving, the grieving process for each person is different; the grieving process is as unique as the individual who has been distressed by the loss.

Adults in these children's lives have to assist the children as they are coping with their grief. Lenhardt and McCourt (2000) suggested that if children are unable to deal with their grief appropriately, they could be at risk for future complications and their recovery process could be hindered. Children may be unable to enjoy things that they had before the loss occurred, such as life, work, friendship, and love (Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000). Additionally, those who do not have a successful grieving process could be at greater risk for depression, physical illness, and increased risk of substance abuse (Keitel, Kopala, & Robin, cited in Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000). Due to the fact that children can

be greatly affected by their grieving process, it is extremely important that adults know how to help children grieve.

The nature of the relationship between the grieving and the deceased has a large impact on the coping process of a child (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). For example, the death of friend may have greater impact on older children than on younger children, because of the greater importance of peer influence (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). Knowing how the different relationships may impact the grieving process is beneficial for any adult working with a bereaved school-aged child.

Cultural beliefs have a great impact on how individuals view death and dying, and the coping mechanisms that are used during times of bereavement. Beliefs on the permanence of the death, the length of the mourning process, and remembrance practices are all impacted by a person's culture (Robben, 2004). In order for adults to successfully assist children during the bereavement process they must be aware and sensitive to the children's culture.

There are many resources that can be used while helping a child cope during times of bereavement. Resources that are available include, but are not limited to, books, videos, and board games. Using these additional resources will allow adults to further assist children during times of bereavement (Kroen, 1996).

Individuals who experience loss are impacted in an immense way, and many times the impact will have an everlasting effect on those individuals (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). Loss has such a huge impact on the lives that it affects, especially the lives of children, because they may be unable to fully comprehend the facts and the finality of the loss. It is up to the influential adults in the children's lives to assist

in the coping process. The most beneficial way to assist in these processes is to understand how a child copes. Without the help of adults, children may be impacted negatively by the death, not only directly after the death, but also for years to come.

**Statement of the Problem**

Research suggests that it is extremely beneficial for adults to help school-aged children explore and cope with thoughts and feelings that arise during times of bereavement. This may be difficult for some adults who do not fully understand the differences between the coping processes of adults and children. This study will explore the topic further in order to reveal useful information that adults can utilize when helping school-aged children successfully deal with issues of bereavement.

**Purpose of this study**

The purpose of this thesis was to identify successful ways to assist school-aged children who are dealing with issues related to bereavement. The information presented was gathered from September 2005 through May 2006, through a comprehensive literature review.

**Research Objective**

The objective of this research was to gain further understanding of the coping processes of school-aged children, so more adults are able to successfully help this population deal with the issues of bereavement.

**Definition of Terms**

To insure clarity of the content of this research paper, the following key words are defined.

**Bereavement:** the state of being bereaved or deprived of someone or something that is valued. The three elements of bereavement are a valued relationship with some person or thing, a loss of that relationship, and a survivor who is deprived of the lost person or thing (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003).

**Coping:** constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003).

**Grief:** the reaction to a loss, which includes physical, psychological (affective/cognitive), and behavioral reactions (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003).

**School-aged Children:** in this study, school-aged children will refer to individuals ranging from 4 to 18 years of age.

## Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

While examining this research, it was important to bear in mind the underlying assumptions and limitations of the present study. The researcher assumed that the literature reviewed was accurate, current, and from reliable sources. One limitation of the study is the inability to generalize the study's finding to every child, because of the complexity of the cognitive developmental processes of children. A second limitation of the study is the limited amount of information about culturally diverse populations and their bereavement beliefs.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Literature Review

**Introduction**

This chapter addresses five areas that need to be considered when supporting school-aged children who are dealing with bereavement. It is important for adults to understand that adolescents have a different grieving process; adults must be aware of these differences in order to help a child successfully resolve the issues of bereavement (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). The relationship to the deceased has a large impact on the coping process of a school-aged child (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). The cultural beliefs of the bereaved individual also have a large impact on the coping process (Robben, 2004). It is important for adults to be aware of this fact while helping children cope with a loss. If children are unable to successfully resolve the issues that occur during a time of bereavement, then they could be negatively affected during the time of bereavement, and in the future as well (Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000). Several strategies will be discussed that could be used to help children communicate their thoughts and feelings experienced during a time of bereavement. In addition, various resources will be identified, which could be utilized by adults who are assisting children during these critical times.

**School-aged Children's Grieving Process**

**Childhood Development and Understanding of Death**

Children learn to understand their lives by processing the information that is passed on to them by the influential adults in their lives (James, Friedman, & Landon-Mathews, 2001). This is why it is so important for adults to know how school-aged

children grieve. School-aged children's ideas about death and their reactions depend greatly on their developmental stage (Muro & Kottman, 1995) and on their biological knowledge (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). Nagy (cited in Webb, 2002) suggested that it is significant to remember that development is a process that occurs gradually from immature to mature understanding of bereavement. However, it is important to note that every child is different; thus each child will react differently during times of bereavement.

Jean Piaget's theory of childhood development has been used to examine younger school-aged children's understanding of death (Webb, 2002). Piaget's preoperational stage, which occurs between the ages of two and seven, explains that at this stage a child is very egocentric and has magical, but also very concrete thinking patterns (Webb, 2002). At this stage of development, a child can not comprehend the finality of death and they may wonder when the deceased is going to wake up or return to their daily lives (Webb, 2002). Due to the egocentricity, a child may believe that he/she was the cause of the death (Kaplan & Joslin, cited in Webb, 2002). At this time, it is important to reassure the child that they were not the cause of the death and they may need repeated explanations about the death (Muro & Kottman, 1995).

During Piaget's concrete operational stage, which occurs between the ages of seven and eleven, the child experiences reduced egocentricity and improved capacity for reasoning (Webb, 2002). For this age range, death is understood as more final, but children refuse to think that death could happen to them (Muro & Kottman, 1995). Saravay (cited in Webb, 2002) suggested that due to the increased capacity for reasoning, the child is able to grasp the thought that the deceased can exist in heaven and in the

grave, all at the same time. During this stage, it is important for adults to have a set routine for a child, which will combat the feeling of a loss of control that may be present during a time of bereavement (Muro & Kottman, 1995).

Piaget's formal operational stage, which occurs between the ages of eleven and fifteen years, involves the child acquiring truly logical thinking, as well as the ability to deal with abstract thoughts (Webb, 2002). Lonetto (cited in Webb, 2002) suggested that the ability to think logically and abstractly helps children at this age to perceive death as universal and inevitable, which causes thoughts of self-mortality. Adults must aid children as they explore the thought of their own mortality.

After the age of fifteen the grieving process of school-aged children starts to resemble that of an adult. However, it is important to note that at this age peer relationships are extremely important to individuals, so it is crucial for adults not to minimize the effects that a friend's death may have on a young adult (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). It is also important to note that many teens will try to hide their feelings, but adults must be aware that they are grieving whether or not the grief is externally visible (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). Even though the grief may not be externally visible, adults still must lend their support to a grieving teen in order to help them gain better control over the bereavement process.

## Biological Knowledge and Understanding of Death

Piaget's theory of cognitive development uses developmental stages to explain children's understanding of death. However, it is also important to note the effect of biological knowledge on children's understanding of death. Bering and Bjorklund (2004) argue that increased biological knowledge allows for children to understand that certain

functions will no longer continue after death. When a death occurs children use their present biological knowledge to attribute functions from the living individual to the deceased.

Children from ages 3 to 7 years no longer attribute biological imparities to the deceased party (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004), including the need to eat and drink, brain functioning, and the thought of future life. However, children in this age range continued to attribute other functions, psychobiological and epistemic, to the deceased party (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). Psychobiological functions that children continue to attribute include hearing, seeing, thirst, and hunger. Epistemic functions that children continue to attribute include the ability to think, believe, and know. It is important to note that, by preschool, children who comprehend the irreversibility of death seem to have the capacity to fully understand that activities and physical processes that are essential to the functioning of the human body cease to exist after the death of an organism (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). Kane (cited in Bering & Bjorklund, 2004) suggests that children at this age seem to have trouble reasoning about the non-visible functions that support life.

Individuals from ages 7 to 21 years believe that biological and most psychological states cease to exist after the death of an organism (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). Even though children in this age range believe that psychobiological and perceptual states end with death, they believe that other psychological states like emotional, desire, and epistemic states still exist. As biological knowledge increases children have the increased ability to apply this knowledge to decipher their thoughts and beliefs about death and dying (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004).

**Bereavement Defense Mechanisms**

Even though the adult and child grieving processes differ, a child will probably still experience many of the same emotions an adult does. However, children lack the skills for understanding, coping with, and expressing what is happening with them during times of bereavement. Due to the fact that children lack these crucial skills, they often use defense mechanisms to help them recover during times of bereavement (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000).

Denial is the first defense mechanism discussed here. Many children, unable to face the reality of the loss, will use denial as a defense mechanism (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). There are two forms of denial that are used by children when they are faced with loss. Bowlby (cited in Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000) suggested that cognitive denial occurs when a child is aware of the loss and its details, but views the loss with skepticism. Bowlby (cited in Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000) suggested that affective denial occurs when a child accepts the loss cognitively, but does not express emotions that are congruent with the loss.

Splitting is the second defense mechanism discussed here. Splitting occurs when children claim to be experiencing only feelings that they believe are accepted by others or that are manageable (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Feelings that are thought to be unacceptable or unmanageable then may be attributed to other people, toys, or pets (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Children may use this mechanism as an avoidance tactic, to avoid talking or dealing with their emotions that are being felt during the time of bereavement.

Devaluing is the last defense mechanism explored here. Devaluing occurs when children pretend not to care or have emotions about a loss that has occurred in their lives (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). When using this defense mechanism, a child is attempting to remove him/herself from the situation (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000), which allows for the child to experience less pain. Even though this defense mechanism won't work indefinitely, it does seem to help the child feel temporarily safe (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). It is important for adults to be aware of these mechanisms, so they can help children explore the feelings and thoughts that they are trying to deny or avoid. If the feelings are left unexplored, the child may be negatively affected by unresolved grief.

**Nature of Relationship and Implications**

The type of relationship that a school-aged child and the deceased had may create differences in the bereavement process. The three relationships explored here are parental bereavement, sibling bereavement, and friendship bereavement. All three relationships can impact the bereavement process in different ways.

The death of a parent is usually a devastating experience for a school-aged child. Despite the relationship between the parent and the child, the school-aged child's sense of stability and refuge are robbed when a death of a parent occurs (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). Servaty and Hayslip (cited in Cait, 2005) suggested that parental death negatively influenced the perception of interpersonal relationships of the bereaved child, which left the child with feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in their relationships to others. This is why it is so important for the surviving parent, or other adults in the bereaved child's life, to provide ample social support for the grieving school-aged child.

If the social support is not provided, the child may continue to carry the feelings of inferiority and inadequacy.

The death of a parent may also cause the child to take on responsibilities of the deceased parent (Cait, 2005). The role replacement of a deceased parent by a surviving child may create significant changes in the child's life, as well as in the entire family. Cait (2005) suggested that when a bereaved child takes on the role of the deceased parent, he/she may experience difficulties with separation from the family and he/she may sacrifice personal needs and goals in order to remain close to the family.

The death of a sibling may also create significant problems for a school-aged child. Riches (2002) suggested that the sibling relationship may be the most underestimated relationship an individual will ever experience. Hindmarch (cited in Holiday, 2002) explains that the sibling relationship often is filled with a mixture of emotions, including love and affection and jealousy and rivalry, which cause these relationships to be extremely unique.

After a sibling's death, a child may experience fear, sadness, lowered self-esteem, isolation, depression, self-blame, and guilt. Holiday (2002) suggested that older siblings may experience guilt when a younger sibling dies, because they may feel they could have prevented the death. Hindmarch (cited in Holiday, 2002) also suggested that younger siblings may experience a sense of fear and insecurity when an older sibling dies. Riches (2002) suggested that a sense of no longer being cared for is caused when parents are pre-occupied with the death of the other sibling. While the parental figures are mourning the loss of one child, the other children may feel that they are being ignored or forgotten about.

Lastly, the death of a friend may have a significant affect on a school-aged child. The effects of a friend's death seem to increase as the child gets older, because of the importance that peer relationships play in the lives of young adolescents (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). The death of a friend may have very little effect on the parent of the grieving child, because the parent may have never met the friend. However, it is extremely important for the parent not to dismiss the impact that the death may be having on their child (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002).

While coping with the loss of a friend, a child is going to experience many feelings. These may include, but are not limited to, feelings of depression, abandonment, and sadness (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). The school-aged child may also experience a change in the relationships with the surviving friends. Some friends may become even closer over the bereavement period, finding comfort in each other's company (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002). Other relationships may be negatively affected after the death of a friend, due to lack of communication, avoidance, and isolation.

**Cultural Influences to be Considered**

Cultural beliefs have a great impact on how individuals view death and dying. Cultural beliefs also have an effect on the coping mechanisms that are used during times of bereavement. Beliefs on the permanence of the death and the mourning process are both impacted by a person's culture (Robben, 2004).

Western culture holds the strong belief that death is irreversible; however there are many cultures that hold the belief that death is cyclical or stage-like (Robben, 2004). For example, the Chinese believe that the soul of the deceased family member will return

to the home seven days after the death (Chinese Customs, 2005). Family members are expected to stay in their rooms on the seventh day, awaiting the arrival of the soul. Adults who assist children who practice the Chinese culture must be aware of their traditions in order to help the children successfully cope with their losses.

Mourning practices are also influenced by culture. For the Kalabari, people of southeastern Nigeria, it is custom for the mourning dresses to be worn for 10 months (Dowling College: Cultural Differences in Mourning, 1999). The Kalabari culture also forbids the women to weep during the mourning process; if a woman does weep, she must sacrifice an animal. If an adult was unaware of these practices and was helping a female child from this culture cope, the adult may be alarmed that she was not allowing herself to weep. The adult may also advise the child to show her emotions, which would contradict her cultural beliefs, and cause even greater anguish.

Cultural beliefs can be used to help children cope during times of bereavement. However, cultural beliefs should only be included if the child is able to understand the full meaning of the belief (Kroen, 1996). Including a cultural belief that is not fully understood can create more confusion during a time that is extremely confusing to begin with (Kroen, 1996).

**Negative Affects of Bereavement**

### Immediate Effects of Grief

When a loss occurs, children are affected by many different factors and their grief reactions vary widely. Due to their inability to communicate effectively through words, their responses to these factors are carried out, more often, through actions. Adults must

be aware of children's feelings, as well as their means of expressing their feelings, in order to help them successfully deal with the bereavement issues.

There are numerous emotional reactions that bereaving children must overcome. Emswiler and Emswiler (2000) suggested that children may experience a wide variety of emotional reactions during bereavement which include, but are not limited to, sadness, fear, relief, powerlessness, guilt, shock, and anger. Emswiler and Emswiler (2000) also suggested that children may experience a wide variety of physical reactions during bereavement. The physical reactions include, but are not limited to, headaches, fatigue, muscle tension, sweating, menstrual changes, nausea, numbness, anxiety, and shortness of breath. It is important for adults to be knowledgeable of these reactions, so they can recognize them when a child is grieving.

**Long-term Effects of Grief**

Adolescents who are unable, or who refuse, to successfully engage in the bereavement process may be at risk of experiencing unresolved grief. Unresolved grief refers to the instances when a child's grief process is obstructed or delayed (Meshot & Leitner, cited in Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000). Unresolved grief may cause children to be at greater risk for depression, physical and/or mental illness, and increased risk of drug and alcohol use (Keitel, Kopala, & Robin, cited in Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000). Children may also experience a loss of interest in activities in which they once found joy, such as life, family, friendship, school, or play. Adults must use what they know about child bereavement to help the child move toward grief resolution.

**Communication and Bereavement**

**Communication Avoidance**

Many adults avoid talking with children about death and dying because of their own discomfort with the topic (Webb, 2002). There are several general reasons why many adults are uncomfortable discussing the topic of death. It is important for adults to become more aware of these reasons so they can become comfortable with the issues of bereavement.

Kroen (1996) suggested that many adults draw from their own experiences when they are supporting a child during times of grief and bereavement. This usually hinders the child bereavement process, because in the past adults rarely communicated with children about death and dying (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Often this was done to help protect children from the pain and fear that can be caused by loss. Children who are told about death in a simplistic or dismissive manner often grow up with misconceptions and anxiety relating to the topic of bereavement (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Openly talking with school-aged children about death will help to decrease the misconception in our society that bereavement and death are taboo topics.

Adults may avoid the topic of death and bereavement, because they believe that explaining the topic may lead to increased depression and pain. However, Emswiler and Emswiler (2000) suggested that providing a solid explanation about death, dying, and grief will actually provide comfort to the child, not increased depression or pain. To provide a solid and beneficial explanation, Emswiler and Emswiler (2000) suggested that adults be as honest and as factual as the child's age permits, patient, careful of language

use, and allow for the child to revisit the topic as much as needed. These tips will help adults explain death, dying, and grief in a more beneficial manner.

Lastly, adults may avoid explaining death and bereavement to children because they are afraid that they might have an emotional break down during the explanation (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). This is especially true in cases where the deceased was personally connected to both the adult and the child. Adults avoid showing signs of emotion in order to, once again, protect the child from additional pain (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). However, this is a misconception that needs to be corrected, because crying in front of a child will allow the child to see that crying is a natural and acceptable reaction to death and dying (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Crying allows for a release of emotion at a time when there is a great surplus of emotion.

**Strategies for Communication**

It is important for adults to listen empathetically when children come to them with issues of bereavement (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). It is crucial for adults to put themselves in the shoes of the child during serious conversations; children need to feel that they are the center of the adult's attention and that the adult genuinely cares about the child and his/her well-being (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Attention and empathy will allow the child to feel invested in, and will increase the chance that the child will feel comfortable enough to talk about this sensitive issue.

By paying attention to the child, an adult will be able to figure out what emotions the child is currently feeling. It is important for the adult to help the child name the emotions, so the child is aware that the adult acknowledges and respects the child's

feelings (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). The feeling of respect will help the child to increase his/her feelings of trust and acceptance when dealing with tough emotions.

Lastly, when communicating with children about issues of bereavement, it is extremely important to avoid analyzing the child's conversation, which could lead to interruptions (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Interruptions are more likely to occur when adults spend more time analyzing the conversation, versus listening for feelings. The communication process will be hindered, and maybe even shut down, if too many interruptions occur (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Listening is the key to helping children communicate their feelings during times of bereavement.

**Useful Resources**

There are numerous resources that can be used while helping a child cope during times of bereavement. Resources that are available include, but are not limited to, books, videos, and board games. Using these additional resources will allow adults to further assist children during times of bereavement (Kroen, 1996).

Resources for younger children are identified here. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* (Buscaglia, 1982) uses nature and the changing seasons to explain that death is a natural part of life. *I Wish I Could Hold Your Hand: A Child's Guide to Loss and Grief* (Palmer, 1994) broadly addresses the many different losses a child can experience; the practical exploration and validation of feelings is extremely extensive. *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* (Krasny-Brown & Brown, 1996) simply explains the feelings that occur during times of bereavement and ways to honor the memory of someone who has died. *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies* (Silverman, 1999) is a journal which provides readers with

suggestions for activities, services, and rituals that will help children cope with the loss of a loved one. *Saying Goodbye* (Boulden & Boulden, 1998) is an animated video that presents difficult concepts in a nurturing way and answers questions children often ask about death.

Resources for older children are identified here. *After You Lose Someone You Love* (Dennison, Dennison, & Dennison, 2005) is a real-life account of how three young children dealt with their father's death. *Sky Dancer* (Bushnell & Ormerod, 1996) tells of a close relationship that forms between a young girl and a hawk, and of the joy and tribulations of the relationship. The empty chair present during the breakfast scene symbolizes the absence of a mother, and the child uses the bond she creates with the hawk to help her cope with the loss of her mother. *The Good Mourning Game* (Western Psychological Services, 1998) is a colorful board game that allows players to explore the different thoughts and feelings that occur during a time of bereavement, and ways to handle the grief. *Surviving Death: Stories of Grief* (Murray, Darling-Kovanic, & McCrea, 1998) is a useful video that profiles seven individuals of varying ages and cultural backgrounds, as they speak about their pain and the coping strategies used during their time of bereavement. These resources will help aid adults as they assist children during the bereavement process.

**Chapter Three**

**Summary and Recommendations**

**Introduction**

This chapter includes a summary of the current literature review's findings. It also includes a critical analysis of the current literature review. Lastly, this chapter includes future recommendations derived during the current review of literature.

**Summary**

In a time when school-aged children are being continuously confronted with the topic of death and dying, it is extremely important for the adults in their lives to help these children cope with issues of bereavement. As suggested in the problem statement, adults must realize that school-aged children process issues related to bereavement differently than themselves. Jean Piaget's theory of childhood development explains how a child in each of his four different developmental stages will react to issues of bereavement (Webb, 2002). Bering and Bjorklund (2004) examine how biological knowledge can affect children's ability to understand death and dying. Also, Schuurman and Barrett-Lindholm (2002) explain useful information that could be used when helping older school-aged children examine their thoughts and feelings while facing issues of bereavement.

Differences in the bereavement process are also affected by the relationship that existed between the deceased and the bereaved school-aged child. During parental bereavement a school-aged child may experience a loss of stability and refuge (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002), and may even experience an adoption of the deceased parent's family responsibility (Cait, 2005). Due to the fact that siblings have

such unique relationships, sibling bereavement may greatly impact the surviving siblings (Holiday, 2002). A death of a friend may also have a significant impact on the lives of school-aged children. This is especially true for older school-aged children, because they tend to rely more on peer relationships (Schuurman & Barrett-Lindholm, 2002).

Difference in the bereavement processes are also affected by cultural beliefs that are practiced by the bereaved individual (Robben, 2004). Beliefs of the permanence of death and mourning practices are parts of the bereavement process that are affected by culture. To avoid causing the child even greater despair, individuals should be aware of children's cultural beliefs before they assist children during bereavement.

It is crucial that adults develop appropriate communication skills that will help them to be effective support mechanisms while helping school-aged children deal with issues of bereavement. Emswiler and Emswiler (2002) suggested that adults often avoid talking about the topic of death because they fear that it will bring the child more pain, or that the adult may have an emotional breakdown during the communication. It is extremely beneficial for adults to explain bereavement to school-aged children and to help them explore, name, and express their emotions in a healthy manner.

If school-aged children are not supported during time of bereavement, they are at risk to experience short-term, as well as long-term negative affects. Short-term negative affects may include, but are not limited to sadness, fear, relief, powerlessness, guilt, shock, and anger. Long-term negative affects may include, but are not limited to, depression, physical and/or mental illness, and increased risk of drug and alcohol use.

There are numerous resources that can be used to assist adults who are helping children cope during times of bereavement. Books, videos, and board games can all be

used to help assist children during times of bereavement. Lastly, while assisting children during times of bereavement it is extremely important for adults to remember that every school-aged child is different, and each will have a unique experience to coping with bereavement.

**Critical Analysis**

This literature review provided the reader with useful information that could be used to assist school-aged children in coping with bereavement. However, the literature reviewed focused very little on school-aged children from diverse cultures or ethnicity. Culture and ethnicity can have a huge impact on how a school-aged child copes with bereavement issues, and more information would be extremely helpful for those adults who are helping children cope. Additionally, the researcher did not include literature that analyzed the topic of school-aged children with disabilities who are coping with bereavement, which would also provide some very useful information.

**Recommendations**

Based on the review of literature, it is suggested that adults can be very useful in helping school-aged children successfully face the issues that arise in times of bereavement. However, before adults take part in this process, they should consider several things. First, adults should examine, become aware, and become comfortable with their own feelings about bereavement, which will help adults talk more comfortably about the topic. Second, it is recommended that adults become aware of the differences that occur between the processes of adults and school-aged children, but always remember that each grieving child and situation is unique. Lastly, it is recommended that further research be done on important topics that affect school-aged children and

bereavement. This would include topics regarding the impact that culture and ethnicity differences may have on bereavement, as well the effects that may arise because of cognitive disabilities individuals may have.

References

Bering, J.M., & Bjorklund, D.F. (2004). The natural emergence of reasoning about the

afterlife as a developmental regularity [Electronic Version]. *Developmental*

*Psychology, 40,* 217-233.

Boulden, J. & Boulden, J. (1998) *Saying Goodbye* [Videotape]. Weaverville, CA:

Boulden Publishing.

Buscaglia, L. (1982). *The fall of Freddie the leaf.* Thorofare, NJ: SLACK Inc.

Bushnell, J. & Ormerod, J. (1996). *Sky Dancer.* New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard

Books.

Cait, C. A. (2005). Parental death, shifting family dynamics, and female identity

development [Electronic Version]. *OMEGA, 51,* 87-105.

Chinese Customs (2005). Retrieved May 5th, 2006, from:

http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk/pages/culture/customs/funeralceremony.html

Corr, C.A. (2002). Helping adolescents cope with long-term illness and death [Electronic

Version]. *The Prevention Researcher, 9,* 6-8.

Corr, C.A., Nabe, C.M., & Corr, D.M. (2003). *Death and dying: Life and living (4th ed).*

Belmont, CA:Wadsworth.

Denison, A., Dennison, A., & Dennison, D. (2005). *After you lose someone you love.*

Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Dowling College: Cultural Differences in Mourning (1999). Retrieved May 5th, 2006,

from: http://www.angelfire.com/ms/perring/cultures.html

Emswiler, M.A., & Emswiler, J.P. (2000). *Guiding your child through grief.* New York,

NY: Bantam Books.

Holiday, J. (2002). A review of sibling bereavement-impact and interventions.

   *Barnardo's*. Retrieved February 24, 2005 from:

   http://www.barnardos.org.uk/sibling.pdf

Hurricane City (2005). Retrieved December 3rd, 2005, from:

   http://hurricanecity.com/dam/dam2005.htm

Iraq Coalition Casualty Count (2005). Retrieved December 3rd, 2005, from:

   http://icasualties.org/oif/

James, J.W., Friedman, R., & Landon-Matthews, L. (2001). *When children grieve*. New

   York, NY: HaperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Krasny-Brown, L., & Brown, M. (1996). *When dinosaurs die: A guide to understanding*

   *death*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Kroen, W.C. (1996). *Helping children cope with the loss of a loved one: A guide for*

   *grownups*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

Lenhardt, A.M.C., & McCourt, B. (2000). Adolescent unresolved grief in response to the

   death of a mother. *Professional School Counseling, 3,* 189-197.

Muro, J.J. & Kottman, T. (1995). *Guidance and counseling in the elementary and middle*

   *schools*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Communications, Inc.

Murray, E. (Writer/Director), Darling-Kovanic, G. (Producer), & McCrea, G. (Executive

   Producer) (1998). *Surviving death: Stories of grief* [Videotape]. Boston, MA:

   Fanlight Productions.

Palmer, P. (1994). *I wish I could hold you hand: A child's guide to loss and grief.*

   Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, Inc.

Riches, G. (2002). Problems of adjustment for bereaved siblings [Electronic Version].

*The Prevention Researcher, 9,* 11-13.

Robben, A.C.G.M. (2004). *Death, mourning, and burial.* Malden, MA: Blackwell

Publishing Ltd.

Schuurman, D. & Barrett-Lindholm, A. (2002). Teens and grief [Electronic Version]. *The*

*Prevention Researcher, 9,* 1-5.

Silverman, J. (1999). *Help me say goodbye: activities for helping kids cope when a*

*special person dies.* Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.

Webb, N.B. (2002). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners.* New

York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Western Psychological Services (1998). *The Good Mourning Game.* Los Angeles, CA:

author.