

Student Name: Ellie Jones

Student Number: 2203680

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Tutor Name: Delyth Lloyd-Evans

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Proposed Question for Extended Essay:

A Heavy Load: How Illustrated Guidebooks for Children open communication pathways about grief.

This proposal will explore three keywords, Grief, Guidance and Grasping. These keywords will lead me through an exploration of how guidebooks can be vital in helping children understand grief. More specifically how those with illustrations will be more helpful by offering conversation prompts, a creative outlet and laying down the foundation for healing and growth. Through this proposal, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of how images, metaphors and colours can all be beneficial in creating images appropriate for children going through a bereavement, to help inform my practice in the Third Year.

## **Grief**

Grief is a universal human experience, yet the impact of it varies greatly depending on age, personality and circumstances. Children tend to navigate grief in a way that is distinct from adults. According to the questionnaire that I developed, 86.4% of respondents believed that children understand grief differently than adults, (Jones, 2024). Unlike adults, children often lack the emotional maturity to comprehend the permanence of death. Children's understanding of death and loss evolves as they grow and by 7 years of age, the knowledge that death is permanent is usually well established (Mallon, 2011, p. 20). Their understanding of death evolves gradually as they mature, however, younger children do not understand abstract concepts like 'forever' and cannot grasp the finality of death, so they may expect the person to return, have many questions like where the person went and when will they come back. (Child Bereavement UK, 2019)

One significant difference between the way children and adults grieve is how they express and process their emotions. Children may exhibit grief through changes in behaviour, such as regression, irritability, withdrawal, or difficulty concentrating, rather than expressing their feelings verbally. They may also experience physical/somatic symptoms like stomach aches or headaches in response to emotional distress. This can sometimes be misunderstood or overlooked by adults, who may expect children to grieve in the same way as they do. (Rawle, 2020)

Due to the lack of understanding surrounding death, children will ask lots of questions and may want to know intricate details, so it is vital that children have questions answered tailored to their individual needs and details explained clearly so that they understand, (NHS England, 2023). Parents play a vital role in helping children navigate grief by providing them with honest and age-appropriate information about death and loss. According to Brown (1999, p. 6), children should be told the facts about what has happened as clearly and concisely as possible and in language which they understand. Avoiding euphemisms or vague explanations is crucial, as it can lead to confusion or misconceptions, “helping children understand grief dispels fantasies and myths that may hinder the grieving process” (Mallon, 2011, p. 20). Instead, parents should use clear and straightforward language to explain what has happened, ensuring that children understand that death is a natural part of life and that it's okay to feel any emotion whether that be sad, angry, or confused for example.

However, initiating conversations about death and grief can be challenging for parents, especially when they are dealing with their grief. Guidebooks can offer a structured framework for parents to engage with their children about grief in a supportive and constructive manner. They can serve as a starting point for conversations, offering prompts and activities that encourage children to express themselves and ask questions, “If the child asks questions, honest and age-appropriate answers will help with the grieving process.” Ferow (2019). By following the guidebook's recommendations, parents can create a safe and open environment where their children feel heard and understood. Guidebooks can also help parents address common misconceptions or fears that children may have about death, addressing these concerns proactively, parents can alleviate children's anxiety and help them develop healthier coping mechanisms. Furthermore, guidebooks can empower children by providing them with tools and strategies to cope with grief in their own time and at their own pace. Whether through journaling or drawing, children can find ways to express their emotions and commemorate their loved one's memory.

Normalising feelings, talking about or drawing specific worries and sharing bad dreams can be reassuring, giving children skills and confidence to feel more in charge of them.

(Winstons Wish, 2019)

Most importantly, guidebooks emphasise the importance of ongoing communication and support within the family. Grief is a dynamic process that unfolds over time, and children may revisit their feelings of loss at different stages of their development. By maintaining open lines of communication and encouraging children to express their emotions freely, parents can help them navigate the ups and downs of grief, “While

you can't take away their sadness, you can support them to feel good about themselves and find ways to manage any worries and uncertainties." (Child Bereavement, 2019). Hence why utilising a guidebook specifically designed for children can offer valuable guidance and resources for both parents and children as they navigate the complex journey of grief together.

## **Guidance**

From the previous keyword, it is easily recognisable that navigating grief in children presents unique challenges, as they grapple with complex emotions and understanding. Traditional approaches to support may fall short of addressing their specific needs. As briefly mentioned in the previous section, guidebooks tailored to children offer structured frameworks for processing emotions and engaging in meaningful, creative activities. The keyword Guidance will help me explore the impact of such guidebooks on children's grief journeys, highlighting their effectiveness in fostering healing and resilience.

"The book is simply the starting point, and the healing and processing of the loss comes through open discussions" (Elswick, 2018). Illustrated guidebooks are powerful tools that bridge the gap between understanding and expression. Unlike traditional, plain guidebooks that may feel daunting or inaccessible to children, illustrated guidebooks offer a unique blend of storytelling and visual imagery that speaks directly to the child in an age-appropriate manner, "Children engage with

materials found in storybooks and produce something in response” (Mavers, 2013, p.13).

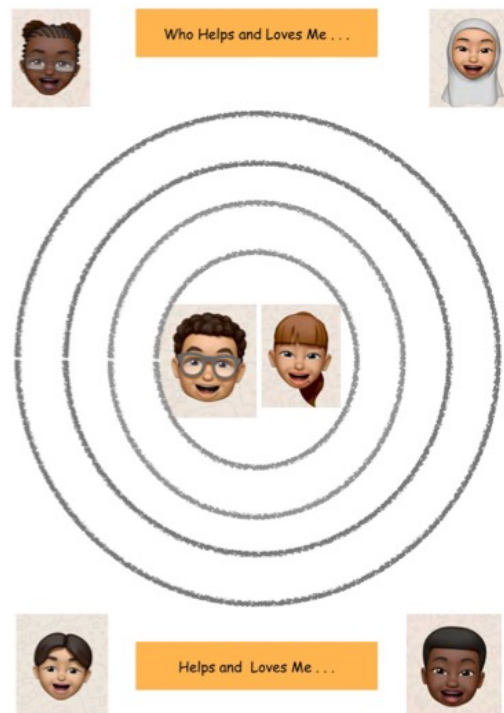


Figure 1: Therapy partners, *Time 4 Me Guidebook*, no date.



Figure 2: Therapy partners, *Time 4 Me Guidebook*, no date.

Figures 1 & 2 demonstrate my criticism with daunting pages in traditional guidebooks. One of the primary advantages of illustrated guidebooks is their ability to engage children on multiple levels. “Activities that help readers think more carefully about the characters, situations and information in what they read, deepen their understanding,” (Brenna, Dionne and Tavares, 2021, p. 129). Through vibrant illustrations and relatable characters, guidebooks can create a sense of familiarity and comfort, making complex concepts more accessible and digestible, which is what the chosen figures above try to achieve with the emoji faces. Instead of confronting children with dense text, technical language and overwhelming blank pages, illustrated guidebooks can weave narratives that resonate with their experiences, allowing them to connect with the material on an emotional level.

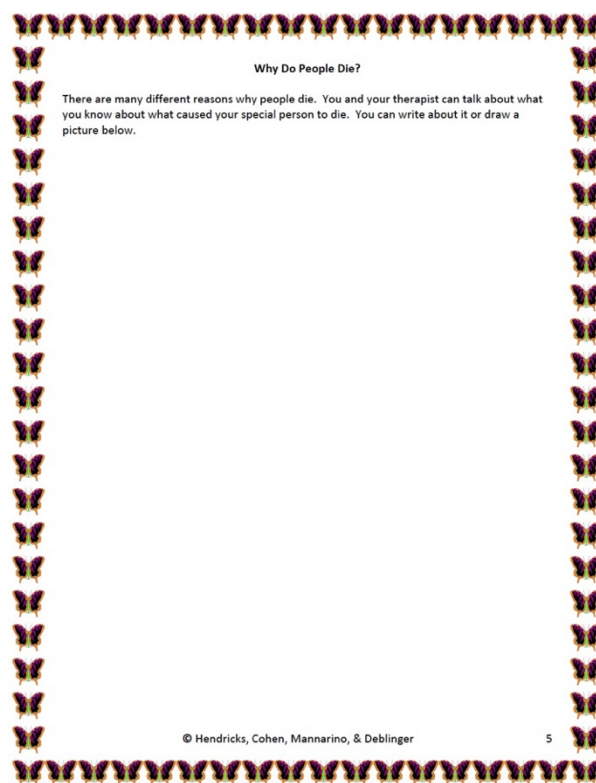


Figure 3: Hendricks et al, *Your Very Own TF-CBT Grief Workbook*, no date.

Figure 3 shows another example of a Grief Guidebook which is even more overwhelming with the mass blank space. Such pages, devoid of contextual guidance, may inadvertently intensify feelings of being overwhelmed and confused among grieving children, adding to their already complex emotional state. Without appropriate scaffolding and facilitation, such open-ended prompts/questions risk imposing undue pressure on children to confront their grief without adequate support structures, potentially leading to disengagement from the healing process and heightened distress.

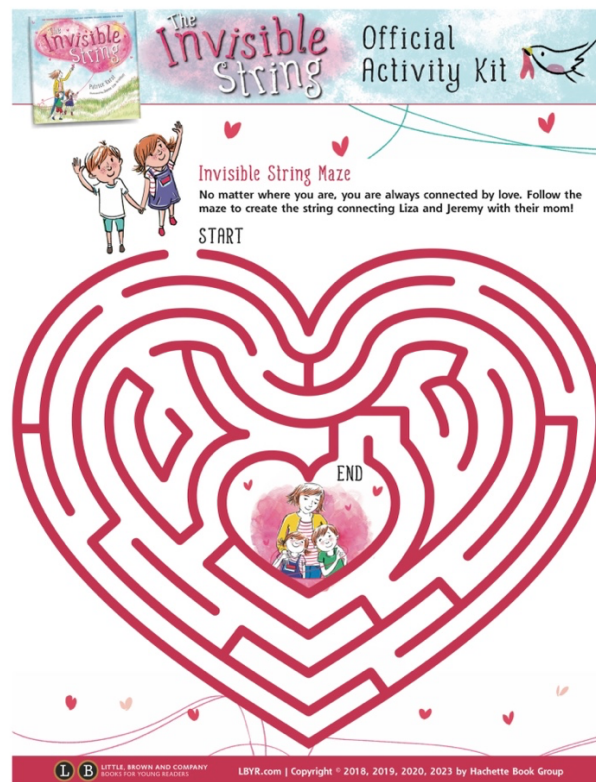


Figure 4: Patrice Karst et al, *The Invisible String Workbook*, 2019

Guidebooks such as Figure 4, *The Invisible String Workbook*, that integrate illustrations and incorporate art therapy activities offer a more efficient means of aiding children through their grief journey. The illustrations provide visual cues that help children contextualise their emotions and experiences, making abstract

concepts more tangible and accessible, “Examining illustrations develops viewing skills and builds context” (Brenna, Dionne and Tavares, 2021, p. 121). By engaging with visual imagery, children can express themselves in a non-verbal manner, bypassing language barriers and tapping into their creativity and imagination. The book is filled with engaging activities, reflection prompts, and therapeutic exercises, that provide children with practical tools to cope with their grief and strengthen their emotional resilience. From drawing pictures of happy memories to writing letters to their loved ones, children are encouraged to express themselves creatively and authentically, fostering a sense of empowerment.

Art therapy activities included in these guidebooks offer children a safe and structured outlet for exploring and processing their grief. Through drawing or painting, children can externalise their emotions, allowing them to distance themselves from overwhelming feelings and gain a new perspective on their grief, “The child draws what he knows rather than what he sees” Case & Daley (1990, p. 8). This serves as a powerful medium for self-expression, enabling children to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and memories in a non-threatening way.

Additionally, *The Invisible String* workbook serves as a starting point for meaningful conversations between children and their caregivers. Each activity prompts children to share their thoughts, feelings, and memories with trusted adults, creating opportunities for connection and support. Case and Daley (1990, p. 169) stated that “Art therapy provides the child with a therapeutic space to help express often

unconsciously particular needs or concerns.” which demonstrates how each activity can help open communication within families without being overly intimidating for the child. These guidebooks create a supportive and nurturing environment in which children can explore and process their grief, find healing, and cultivate resilience in the face of loss.

## **Grasping**

The images within picture books have the power to evoke emotions and stimulate the imagination using metaphors and colour. This leads me to the third keyword which is Grasping. After looking into some grief guidebooks, it is important for me to research the effectiveness of the illustrations through some picture books, “If pictures that are designed primarily to educate young readers can also enchant and delight, then learning becomes a pleasure” (Salisbury, 2004, p. 109). Children's literature is a powerful tool for exploring complex themes like grief in a way that is accessible and relatable to young readers. Through vivid illustrations and storytelling, books such as *The Heart in the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers and *The Circles in the Sky* by Karl James Mountford offer insights into the grieving process, using symbols and metaphors to convey its depth and complexity, which in turn, will facilitate what illustrations would be ideal for a guidebook and how they can help a child “grasp” the journey of grief.

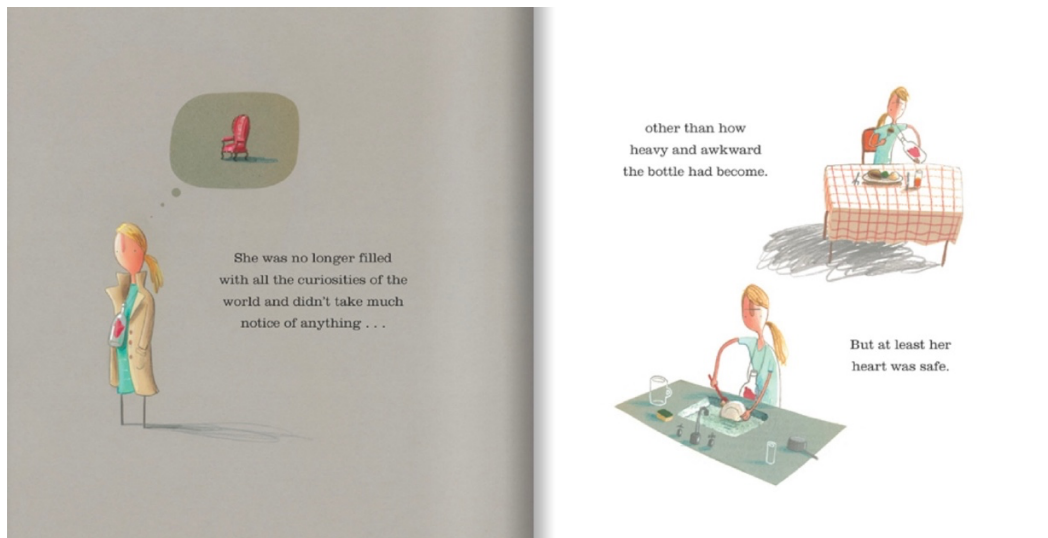


Figure 5: Oliver Jeffers, *The Heart and The Bottle*, 2011

In *The Heart in the Bottle*, the bottle is an effective metaphor for emotional detachment and protection. The girl's choice to bottle her heart portrays her fear of experiencing more loss, which makes her withdraw from the outside world and become socially isolated. The portrayed heaviness and awkwardness of the bottle shown in Figure 5 represents the burden of unresolved sadness.



Figure 6: Oliver Jeffers, *The Heart and The Bottle*, 2011

The empty chair shown in Figure 6 is another evocative metaphor for loss, absence, and the lingering presence of loved ones, “The empty chair becomes both a stark image and also the source of comfort” (Lambrecht and Wendling, 2023, p. 193). The empty chair symbolises the physical absence of a loved one who has passed away, yet it also represents the enduring impact they have on those left behind. A quote from Salisbury’s (2004, p. 114) book states a child’s view, “I always remember pictures, I sometimes forget words”, which demonstrates how the image of the bottle, or the empty chair can help a child grasp their feelings as opposed to just reading words.

One of the most striking aspects of the illustrations in "The Heart in the Bottle" is the ability to capture the girl's emotional journey visually. At the beginning of the book, the illustrations are vibrant and colourful, reflecting the girl's zest for life. However, as she experiences loss and begins to withdraw from the world, the illustrations gradually become more subdued and muted as seen in Figure 5. This visual transformation mirrors the girl's internal state, conveying her growing sense of emptiness as she retreats into herself. This emphasises how colour’s effect on us is very strong and can be stronger than that of other picture elements, (Bang, 2016, p. 74).



Figure 7: Karl James Mountford, *The Circles in The Sky*, 2023

One prominent metaphor in the book, *The Circles in the Sky*, is the “circles in the sky”, described in Figure 7, which serves as a powerful symbol of continuity, connection, and hope whilst grieving. This metaphor is introduced early in the story when the moth comforts Fox after he discovers the lifeless bird. The moth explains that even after the sun sets, its light is reflected by the moon and the stars, creating circles in the sky. This metaphorical imagery suggests that while death may bring an end to one phase of existence, it also marks the beginning of a new cycle, a cycle of remembrance. Mountford also conveys that just as the sun's light continues to illuminate the night sky, the love and memories we hold for those we have lost continue to shine brightly in our hearts.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the circles in the sky encourages readers to reflect on the cyclical nature of life and death, which is reminiscent of the cycles of the natural world. Our experiences with grieving and healing change over time, just as the seasons do. The metaphor reassures and comforts young readers by portraying grief as a normal and unavoidable aspect of the human experience, letting them know they are not alone in their journey, “They may lack in experiences, but they too can take part in sharing these complexities of emotions.” (Salisbury et al, 2012, p. 124).



Figure 8: Karl James Mountford, *The Circles in The Sky*, 2023

Another point to note is throughout the story, Mountford predominantly utilises a subdued and earthy colour palette. Additionally, the narrative's recurring notion of continuity is emphasised by the limited colour palette. Mountford highlights the

cyclical nature of life and death by limiting the colour palette, implying that beauty and regeneration may be found even in times of loss. The use of colour is purposefully incorporated at pivotal points in the narrative. For instance, in Figure 8, the page has a subdued background filled with tear shapes when the Fox understands his feelings of grief, “Children will read the book and be able to identify with a specific colour, animal or feeling” (Elswick, 2018, p. 79).

Researching the keywords, Grief, Guidance and Grasping, has helped guide me to what direction my writing and practice will go in next year. Through researching grief guidebooks, I found numerous plain and uninspiring guidebooks for children that fail to engage and resonate with younger children. These resources massively lack visual appeal which is where the picture books by Mountford and Jeffers perfectly demonstrate how illustrations can address complex themes in a way that is accessible and relatable for children. I feel inspired by their work and through my own experiences with grief, I want my practice-based project to be an Illustrated Guidebook on grief for children that combines storytelling through illustrations with the practicality and guidance a traditional guidebook offers. Through looking at the lacklustre examples in Figures 1, 2 and 3 and the exemplary in Jeffers’ and Mountford’s work, I can use this to help me in creating my own book, considering the use of metaphors in both books and colour palettes.

Proposed Question: A Heavy Load: How Illustrated Guidebooks for Children open communication pathways about grief.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

Ultimately, this exploration has fuelled my passion for designing a guidebook that is relatable, accessible and speaks to the hearts of young children who are grieving. Figures 9 and 10, show some sketches that I have done of possible character design for my guidebook. Considering the use of colour in Figure 10 such as Jeffers did in Figure 5 using the muted tones to portray her sadness. By taking inspiration from

both the mundane and remarkable examples, I hope to create a resource that not only empowers and educates, but also inspires and uplifts, providing a ray of hope for those in their darkest moments.

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List of Figures:

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Figure 3: Hendricks et al (no date) *Your very own TF-CBT grief workbook*.  
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Figure 5: Jeffers, O. (2011) *The Heart and the Bottle*. London: HarperCollins.

Figure 6: Jeffers, O. (2011) *The Heart and the Bottle*. London: HarperCollins.

Figure 7: Mountford, K.J. (2023) *The Circles in the Sky*. London: Walker Books Ltd.

Figure 8: Mountford, K.J. (2023) *The Circles in the Sky*. London: Walker Books Ltd.

Figure 9: Jones, E (2024) *Girl with Backpack*

Figure 9: Jones, E (2024) *Girl with Backpack and Flowers*