



# Providing Effective School-Based Grief Support to Students

Jacqueline Brown, PhD, University of Montana

Ashlyn Kincaid, BA, University of Montana

Emily Hattouni, MA, University of Montana

Jennifer Rotzal, MEd, University of Montana

**Contributor:** Samantha Russell, MA, University of Montana

NASP 2020 Convention

Thursday, February 20, 2020

# Overview of Presentation

1. Audience Reflection
2. Best Practice Considerations
3. Developmental Strategies
4. Evidence-Based Interventions
  - ✓ Bibliotherapy
  - ✓ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
  - ✓ Grief Song Writing Process
  - ✓ Group Interventions



# Reflection

- *How comfortable do you feel supporting bereaved students based on your training and experiences to date?*
- *Do you wish you had received training in grief and bereavement during your degree (if this was not provided)?*



# Best Practice Considerations to Support Bereaved Students

NASP Resource Sheet- Addressing Grief: Tips for Teachers and Administrators  
(NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2015)

- Grief is personal. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- When grieving, individuals are likely to experience and re-experience some or all of the following adjustments/responses:
  - Accepting that death is a reality
  - Experiencing the feelings and emotional pain associated with death and separation from the deceased
  - Adjusting to changes and an altered environment that no longer includes the deceased
  - Finding ways to remember and memorialize the deceased  
(Worden, 1982, 1991, 1996)

# Best Practice Considerations to Support Bereaved Students

NASP Resource Sheet- Addressing Grief: Tips for Teachers and Administrators  
(NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2015)

- How to support bereaved students:
  - Maintain normal routines as much as possible
  - Ask questions to ascertain understanding of the event and emotional state
  - Provide age and developmentally-appropriate answers
  - Connect the bereaved with trusted adults
  - Encourage students to adopt adaptive coping strategies, particularly ones that will involve interaction with other students (e.g., sports, clubs)
  - Provide students with various opportunities to express their grief

# Best Practice Considerations to Support Bereaved Students

- **School Psychologists** can take a lead role in helping schools plan in advance, and cope with a death by providing support, integrating their roles and assuming certain responsibilities
- **As a *School Psychologist*:**
  - Be knowledgeable about children's conception of death
  - Understand the grieving process (i.e. Worden's Framework)
  - Follow proper notification procedures
  - Assess the degree and range of impact
  - Prepare for the return of grieving students
  - Identify at-risk students, *teachers* and *staff*
  - Identify potential signs of distress or complicated grief

# Best Practice Considerations to Support Bereaved Students

## *As a School Community:*

- An effective response to a death in a school community requires advanced planning
  - A death can be experienced as a crisis
  - An effective response is measured by a school's *preparedness* **OR**
    - Readiness
    - Response
    - Recovery
- **Schools should take steps to**
  - Establish a multidisciplinary crisis response team
  - Delineate team member's respective roles, responsibilities
  - Provide staff training and parent education
  - Collaboration with community agencies
  - Identify Short and long-term needs of school members in aftermath of the death

# Best Practice Considerations to Support Bereaved Students

It has been found that support from teachers can increase the positive effects of parent support for grieving students.

School Psychologists are in the best position to offer support, advice, and training for the classroom educators.

## A great training resource:

- The Coalition to Support Grieving Students (<https://grievingstudents.org/>)
  - Offers modules on:
    - “What Not to Say”
    - “Impact on Learning”
    - “Providing Support Over Time”



# Multicultural Considerations

- Everyone experiences grief, but expression may be different among cultures.
- Culture influences perception of loss.
  - What is traumatic? How to express grief? What is the meaning of death?
- Students and families are experts of their own cultural beliefs, practices, and mourning processes.
- **Practitioners should:**
  - Ask the family for cultural information
  - Be ready to learn about the different cultures they may encounter
    - Ex. Latinx open expression and reliance on extended family.
    - Ex. Native American Navajo tradition of preparing the deceased for next stage of life.
    - Ex. Filipino beliefs of guardian angels

# Developmental Stages: 3-5 Years

- Vulnerable to excessive displays of caregiver grief (Christ, 2000)
- Express thoughts and feelings through play, make-believe, and drawings (Christ, 2000)



# Developmental Stages: 6-12 Years

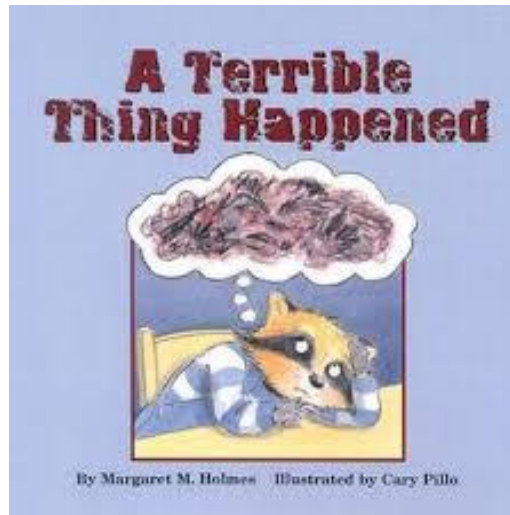
- 9-12 year olds may feel less comfortable showing feelings and seeing expressions of grief (Christ, 2000)
- Death happens to other people but not to themselves/family (NASP, 2003)
- Engage in “Magical Thinking” (< 8 years of age; Christ, 2000)



# Developmental Stages: 13-18 Years

- Involvement with friends and separation from difficult emotions (early adolescents; Christ, 2000)
- Middle adolescents are more comfortable expressing their emotions and empathizing with their parents' emotions

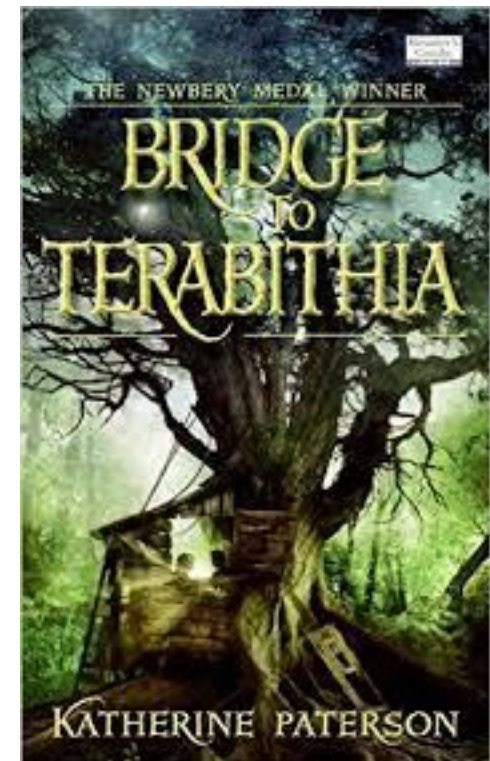
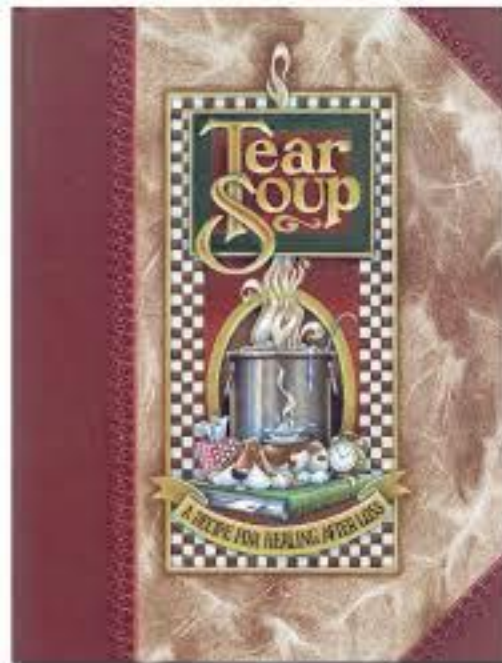
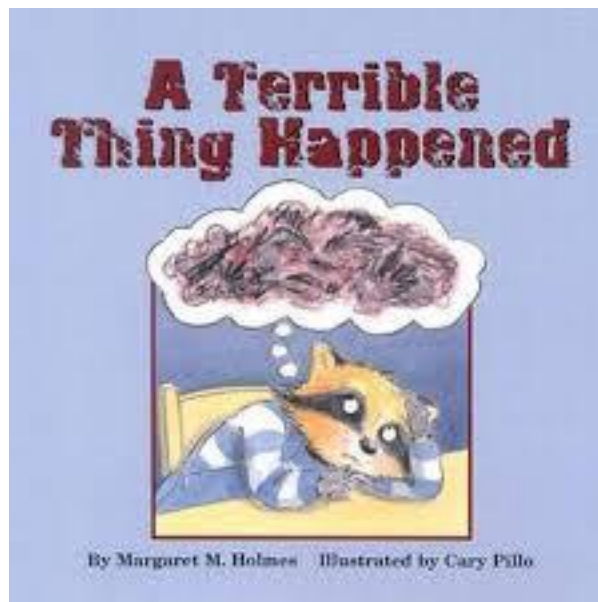




# Evidence-Based Interventions



# Bibliotherapy



# Bibliotherapy

- Effective with other methods (Heath et al., 2005)
- Stories help increase understanding of death, why it occurs, and how to cope with difficult emotions (Heath et al., 2008)
- **Guidelines for Choosing Books** (Heath et al., 2008):
  - Appropriate language, plot, and content
  - Sensitive to cultural background and religion
  - Individual personality and interests
  - Accurate explanation of death
  - May include the death of an animal
  - Model effective coping skills, realistic feelings, and hopes for the future

# Bibliotherapy

## Bibliotherapy

- Answer questions in a simple way, reassure children, and encourage them to share their own stories through words or pictures (NASP, 2013)

## Resources

- **NASP (2013):** “Recommended books for children coping with loss or trauma”
  - [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/Books\\_for\\_Children\\_Dealing\\_With\\_Loss\\_or\\_Trauma.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/Books_for_Children_Dealing_With_Loss_or_Trauma.pdf)
- Sesame Street via PBS
  - [http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/topics/grief\\_bridge](http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/topics/grief_bridge)



# A Terrible Thing Happened (Holmes, 2000): Sample Script

“Sherman Smith saw the most terrible thing. He was very upset. It really scared Sherman to see such a terrible thing.”

“Sherman did not like feeling so afraid. He did not want to remember what happened. So Sherman decided not to think about the terrible thing he saw.”

“Everything seemed all right for a while. But something inside of Sherman was starting to bother him.”

“Sometimes his stomach hurt or his head hurt.”

# Tear Soup (Schwiebert & DeKLYEN): Sample Script

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USN8GGbC4Ck>

# Tear Soup (Schwiebert & DeKLYEN): Sample Script

“It seems that grief is never clean. People feel misunderstood, feelings get hurt and wrong assumptions are made all over the place. To make matters worse, grief always takes longer to cook than anyone wants it to.”

“Grandy’s arms ached and she felt stone cold and empty. There were no words that could describe the pain was was feeling.”

“What’s more, when she looked out the window it surprised her to see how the rest of the world was going on as usual while her world had stopped.”

# Bibliotherapy: Other Books Ages 4-8

- **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death (Laura Krasny Brown & Marc Tolon Brown, 1996)**
  - Explains the feelings of dinosaurs following the death of a loved one and the process they go through from immediate shock to remembering their special person.
- **Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs (Tomie de Paola, 1973)**
  - Helps children learn about the death of a grandparent and how people may get sick and die.

(Heath et al., 2008)

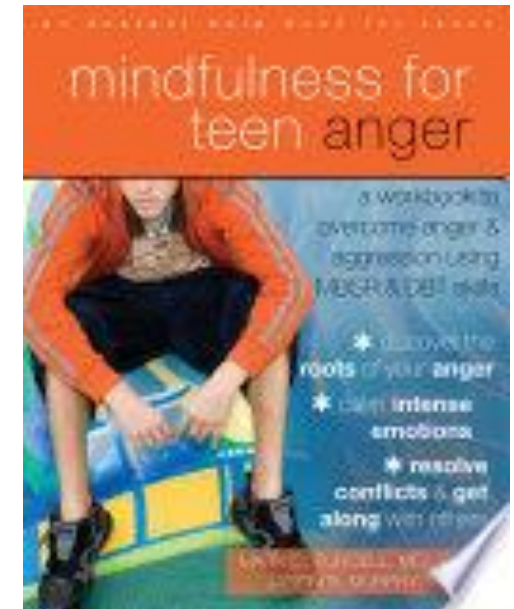
# Bibliotherapy: Other Books Ages 9-18

- **The Bridge to Terabithia (Katherine Paterson, 1977)**
  - Learning how to cope with the death of a friend
- **Out of the Dust (Karen Hesse, 1997)**
  - A family deals with financial hardship and the death of their mother.
- **Walk Two Moons (Sharon Creech, 1994)**
  - Older Elementary and Junior High
  - Deals with a 13-year-old girl whose mother left her and her need to deal with feelings of abandonment.

(Heath et al., 2008)



# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction



# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Overview

## Mindfulness Practice:

*“Being fully aware of whatever is happening in the present moment, without filters or the lens of judgment” (Stahl and Goldstein, 2010, p. 15).”*

- ✓ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is a type of Mindfulness practice.
- ✓ Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE; Jennings & Siegel, 2015)

# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Overview (Biegel et al., 2009; Burke, 2010)

- Weekly Group Sessions
- Home Practice
- Formal Exercises (e.g., body scan, breathing exercise, sitting, movement, walking meditations)
- Informal Exercises (e.g., bringing mindful awareness to daily activities such as eating).
- **Group sessions:** Psychoeducation about mindfulness, guided meditations, and discussions about these experiences
- Effective with teens



# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Strategies for Elementary Students

## ✓ **School Wide Strategies**

- ✓ 3 Minute Breathing Meditation (beginning of day)
- ✓ Mindful Check-in (after lunch or before leaving school)
  - ✓ Mindful Minute videos

## ✓ **Group Strategies**

- ✓ 20-50 minute group, 2x per week
- ✓ Enhance mindfulness skills and improve well-being
- ✓ Breathing Meditation, Body Scan, Mindful Check-In

## ✓ **Individual Strategies**

- ✓ Significant levels of emotional, social, and behavioral distress
- ✓ Breathing Meditation, Body Scan, Mindful Check-In

(Renshaw, 2012)

# Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE)

- Designed to support school staff (including School Psychologists)
- Promote self-compassion & lower effects of burnout (e.g., Alahari, 2017)
- Pro-social classroom (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009)
  - Teacher Socio-emotional competence relates to their ability to support students

Jennings & Siegel, 2015

# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Mindful Breathing Activity

## Mindful Breathing Activity



# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Mindful Body-Scan Script

“Lie down in a comfortable place like a carpeted floor, couch or bed. Although you may feel sleepy or your mind may drift while doing this exercise, the goal is to try and remain alert and aware of the present moment.”

“Gently close your eyes. Let your shoulders drop down and away from your ears. Bring your attention to your breathing. Breathe in...and out... and just allow yourself to continue to breathe naturally. “

➤ **Entire script can be retrieved at:**

➤ [http://youth.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/Body\\_Scan.pdf](http://youth.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/Body_Scan.pdf)

# Mindfulness-Based Resources

- <http://mindfulnessforteens.com/resources/resources-for-mindfulness/>
- Variety of helpful free apps (e.g., Stop, Breathe, Think)
- List of Mindfulness Books
  - Gina M. Biegel, *The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal with Stress* (Instant Help Books, 2009)
- Guided Mindfulness Meditation Recordings
- Mindfulness Books for Parents, Educators, and Health Care Providers
  - Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein, *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook* (New Harbinger Publications, 2010)



# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

Dalton & Krout, 2006



# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

## What is it?

- Research-based music therapy intervention based upon existing grief models to guide themes in song writing

## Development of the GSWP

- 123 bereaved adolescents participated in individual music therapy sessions, grief counseling
- Over 36 month period

# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

## **The GSWP allows the bereaved youth/adolescent to**

- Create lyrics and music that expressed their core concerns regarding the death of their loved one
- Allowed the expression of how the bereaved adolescent is coping since the death

## **Students are encouraged to**

- Share details about the death of their significant loved one
- Their feelings toward the death
- Memories of their loved one



# Five Key Areas of Grief

- Lyrical content is organized into five “key areas” of grief that are *progressive*
- Therapist and youth decide on what to include based on discussion and exploration with the client, comparing to the thematic content areas

## The five “key areas” of grief are:

- 1) Understanding
- 2) Feeling
- 3) Remembering
- 4) Integrating
- 5) Growing

# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

## **GSWP includes two main components:**

- Music creation
- Lyrics creation

## **Youth are given several options:**

- *Musical style*
  - Singing, rap or spoken word?
- *Emotional tone*
  - How does the tone represent the loved one lost or the youth's experience since the death?
- *Instrument selection*
  - Guitar, keyboard, drums, etc.
- *Order of process*
  - Write music or lyrics first?

# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

## **The logistics- What does the process look like?**

- 7 sessions, 4-6 individuals in each group session

### **Session 1**

- Develop group cohesion, clarify guidelines, explore different instruments, recording technologies
- Musical improvisation, share stories, discussion of grief myths, education of normal grief reactions

### **Session 2**

- Focus on individuals stories in more detail, clarify their understanding of the cause of their loved one's death, their own reactions
- Using the GSWP and use of "This is how it happened" from therapist pre-composed song, group members collaborate in creating melody, chorus, verse lyrics

# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

## Session 3

- Focused on the theme of “feeling”, group members identify and express emotions related to their loved one’s deaths
- Emotional support and validation were provided verbally for a full range of emotional expression (sadness anger, guilt, frustration, etc...)

## Session 4

- Focus on “remembering”, creating individual verses that discuss memories, special times, aspects of their unique relationship with their loved ones

## Session 5

- Explores the theme of “integrating”, members discuss coping strategies, ways they can continue with life while grieving
- Positive ways of coping with grief (hobbies, talking with parents and friends...)

# Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP)

## Session 6

- Focus on “growing”, identifying life changes since the death occurred, exploring ways that group members had experienced a sense of personal growth
- Group members discuss role, relationship changes in their families, new responsibilities, moving, changing schools, new friends and activities, etc.

## Session 7

- Final session is a memorial, celebration of life of the loved one's life
- Sharing of songs, lyrics and poems as a group
- Takes place in a special location (beach, park, meadow at bereavement center)
- Represents acknowledgement of the youth's work, closure

Key Area	Song Lyrics	Verbal Processing	Grief Process Content Area
Understanding	<p>“How could this happen?”</p> <p>“What am I suppose to feel now?”</p>	Concerned with how, why their loved one died	Understanding about the cause of death
Feeling	<p>“I got really mad, it wasn’t fair.”</p> <p>“I miss you so much.”</p> <p>“I feel like I’m all alone.”</p>	Concerned with how they experience emotions of anger, sadness...	Feeling a variety of different emotions about the death
Remembering	<p>“I remember the way he made me laugh”</p> <p>“I’ll never forget our trip in December”</p>	Concerned with reminiscing about good & bad shared experiences	Remembering times spent together, relationship issues and personal qualities
Integrating	<p>“I know you’re with me and sayin’ its gonna be ok.”</p> <p>“I feel lost but I’ll get through.”</p>	Concern with life changes since the death, different ways of coping, continuing on while grieving	Integration of coping strategies into new life without loved one, starting new relationship
Growing	<p>“Your death made me grow as a person; it made me stronger.”</p>	Concern with how the death had brought new insights about life and values	Personal growth experiences, new perspectives on life

# Grief Groups in Schools



CARE  
giving heart  
MEANING  
COMPASSION  
RESILIENCE  
presence  
remembrance  
kindness  
allowing  
CONNECTION  
COMMUNITY  
empathy  
support  
growth  
trust  
HOPE

# Considerations in Choosing Members

## 1. Time since the death

- More recent- May need more time to process feelings.

## 2. Type of death

- Sudden? Natural causes vs. Shooting, Car Accident

## 3. Is the student experiencing symptoms of trauma?

- May need more 1-1 support

## 4. What are the students individual characteristics and needs?

- Does the student have the appropriate skills to listen to and support other students?
- Is the student mature enough to be able to discuss a difficult and emotionally laden topic in a group setting?



# Topics to Consider (Bradford-Garcia, 2017)

## 1. Develop Cohesion and Rapport

- Discuss expectations, confidentiality, importance of respect

## 2. Telling their Story

## 3. Normalize Grief Reactions

- Physical, Emotional (thoughts and feelings), Behavioral

## 4. Teach Healthy Coping Skills

- What do you do, others do, examine behavior since death

## 5. Memorialize Loved Ones

- Talk, photos, memories (positive and uncomfortable ones), reduce guilt

## 6. Group Termination

- Reflection upon experience, lessons learned, available support

# Other Ideas for Groups

- **Mourning Child Grief Support Group Curriculum** (Gaasch, Lehman, and Jimerson, 2001)
  - Elementary, Adolescent, and Preschool Version
  - 10 week group curriculum
  - Progress monitoring, intake questions, reproducible handouts and activities for a range of topics.
  - Topic Examples: Telling their story, exploring death, identifying changes, identifying and expressing feelings, exploring unfinished business.
  - **Example of strategies:**
    - **Story Cards:** Did you know the person was going to die? How did you feel when you found out that your special person died?

# Transitioning Back to Class

*Won't it be difficult for a student to transition back to class after talking about their grief?*

- Depends on the individual
- Frequently experience a range of emotions and it can be helpful for them to be able to share their feelings and obtain support
- Engage in a calming activity before returning to class
  - Mindful Breathing
  - Praise students, feedback on session, information on next session
  - Jar of Affirmations

# Discussion Questions

1. How can we increase the provision of long-term bereavement support in schools?
2. How can we better equip teachers to support bereaved students?



# Questions?

- Please feel free to contact Jacqueline Brown at [jacqueline.brown@mso.umt.edu](mailto:jacqueline.brown@mso.umt.edu) with additional questions.



# Resources



## ➤ National Child Traumatic Stress Network

➤ <http://www.nctsnet.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers/understanding-child-traumatic-stress#q11>

## ➤ Grief Speaks

➤ <http://www.griefspeaks.com/id69.html>

## ➤ New York Life Foundation's Resource Site for Grieving Families

➤ [www.achildgrief.com](http://www.achildgrief.com)

# Resources

## ➤ Dougy Center

➤ <http://www.dougy.org>

## ➤ Coalition to Support Grieving Students

➤ [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)

## ➤ The National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement

➤ [www.schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org)

## ➤ Suicide Prevention Resource Center

➤ [http://www.sprc.org/library\\_resources/items/after-suicide-toolkit-schools](http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/after-suicide-toolkit-schools)



# NASP Resources

## NASP Communities

- Join “**Crisis Management and Grief Support in Schools**” Interest Group

## Helpful Crisis Resources from NASP:

- [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/index.aspx/](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx/)

## NASP Podcast- Supporting Grieving Students

- <http://apps.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/podcasts/podcast.aspx?id=222>





# Other Recommended Readings & Books

- Poland, S., Samuel-Barrett, & Waguespack, A. (2014). Best practices for responding to death in the school community. In P. L. Harrison & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology VI, Systems-Level Services* (pp. 303-320). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Rossen, E., & Cowan, K. (2013). The role of schools in supporting traumatized students. *Principal's Research Review*, 8 (6), 1-8. Retrieved from <https://www.principals.org/tabid/2909/default.aspx>
- Boyd-Webb, N. (Ed.) (2010). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners (Third Edition)*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Brock, S. E., & Jimerson, S. R. (Eds.) (2012), *Best practices in school crisis prevention and intervention (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

# Other Recommended Readings & Books

- *Brown, J. A., & Jimerson, S. R. (Eds.) (2017). Supporting Bereaved Students at School. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.*
- Black, S. (2005). Research: How teachers and counselors can reach out to bereaved students. When children grieve. *American School Board Journal*, 192, 28–30. Retrieved from <http://www.asbj.com/>
- Sormanti, M., & Ballan, M. S. (2011). Strengthening grief support for children with developmental disabilities. *School Psychology International*, 32, 179-193. doi: 10.1177/0143034311400831