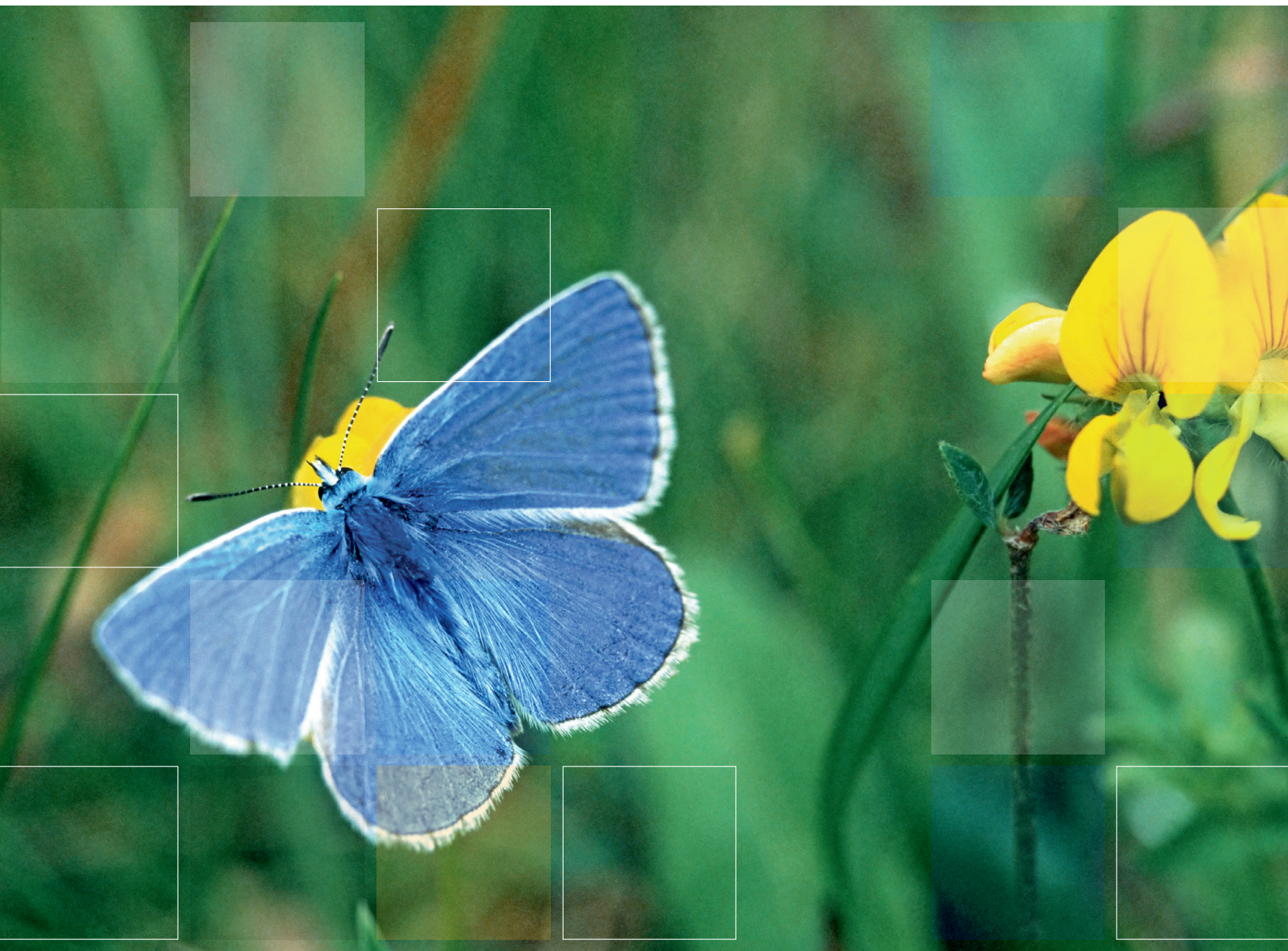


Coping With Grief When Your Child Dies





Grief reactions: yearning

The early grieving period often is accompanied by a sense of yearning for the child who died. You may feel an overwhelming desire to hold your child in your arms again, to be reunited with him or her. Your inability to fulfill this desire may make you irritable, restless, frustrated and depressed. You may struggle to keep a clear picture in your mind of your child's appearance, smell, voice and mannerisms. You may find it comforting to keep special remembrances of your child, such as a picture, a name bracelet, a blanket, a lock of hair, a special toy or cards from family and friends. Some parents attempt to fill the emptiness they feel by having another child. This decision is best postponed during the immediate period after a child's death to allow parents to mourn their loss. After some time, you can welcome a new baby for himself or herself rather than as a replacement for the child who has died.

Grief reactions: loneliness

You may feel an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Even when you are surrounded by loving and caring family and friends, you may still feel isolated in your grief. Your loneliness may be accompanied by a physical aching sensation. Your heart may literally hurt and feel as if it is breaking. Your arms and legs may feel heavy, and you may lack the strength to stand. You may feel as though you are functioning on a different emotional level than others around you. You may find it

difficult to express your grief with words. Many parents describe feeling as if they have lost control of themselves and their emotions. Sometimes they fear they are losing their minds or sinking into a "deep hole."

Grief reactions: anger

You may also feel strong feelings of anger. You may feel angry toward your spouse, other family members or your child's physicians and nurses. You may even be angry with your child for leaving you. Seeing other families with children may be painful. You may feel envious of their happiness and togetherness and upset by what feels like their insensitivity to your situation. You may become angry when other parents appear to lack appreciation for treasured moments with their children. Hearing about abandoned or abused children may be especially difficult. All of these feelings are normal.

You may also direct anger toward yourself in the form of self-blame or feelings of failure. You may wonder if somehow you caused your child's death. These feelings may challenge your perception of yourself as a loving, competent and protective parent. You may question your ability to care for surviving or subsequent children. You may feel like less than a whole person. While these are natural feelings following a child's death, it is important to remember your strengths as a parent and everything you did to help your child. Positive memories of your relationship with your child can bring comfort and renewed self-esteem.

Grief reactions: sleep

You may find that you are unable to sleep or that you sleep all the time. When you do sleep, you may dream of your child. Initially, your dreams may be unsettling. Over time, however, you may find that your dreams reflect more positive experiences and become more of a source of healing.

Grief reactions: physical ailments

Physical ailments may be aggravated by the inner tension you are feeling. Physical reactions may include difficulty eating or overeating, gastrointestinal disturbances, exhaustion, heart palpitations, nervousness or shortness of breath. Also, bereaved parents commonly experience an inability to focus. If these reactions interfere with your daily responsibilities or are persistent, it is important to seek help from your doctor or counselor.

The “new normal”

One of the challenges of being a grieving parent is developing a “new normal.” Your life will never be the same and you may find yourself categorizing memories into “before and after,” marking time from the loss. Your child will always be a part of your life, but these changes are part of your new existence. You may find it helpful to talk to other bereaved parents who have found new ways to integrate the memories of their children into their lives. You may experience moments when a passing memory or a special date will trigger intense feelings of grief, but over time, you will be able to cope better with these experiences.

Relationships with family and friends

The death of a child affects immediate and extended family members, as well as parents. The ways people express their grief may vary greatly. Spouses may experience the loss differently and work through their grief in different ways. Other children may not fully understand the way a family changes after a death. It may be difficult for you to respond to the grief of others when you are struggling with your own. Family members sometimes find it hard to support and comfort each other.

Immediately after the death of your child, family and friends typically gather to offer comfort and support. You may find that there are special people you wish to have near you and with whom you can share some of your feelings. You may want some time alone. It is important to let people know what your specific needs may be.

As time goes on, you may find that family and friends are less available. Relatives and friends may be returning to their daily routines when you still need people who will listen and care. The support you felt at the time of your child’s death may seem to disappear. You may sense that people are uncomfortable hearing about your grief and loss.

Some people may suggest that you put your grief aside and return to routine activities. You may feel as though you must hide your grief, but you need someone who will listen when you want to talk. You may feel most comfortable talking to a family member or a close friend, or perhaps to a counselor or a therapist. Many parents find it helpful to talk with other parents who have lost a child.



Children's understanding of death

Parents are often concerned about how to explain their child's death to other children, such as the child's siblings, cousins, schoolmates or neighbors. Children typically do not understand death the same way that adults do. Their understanding depends on their age and level of cognitive development.

Infants/toddlers

Infants less than 6 months of age are developing trusting relationships with the one or two people who care for them most often, usually their mother, father or grandparents. By the time infants are 1 year old, they have formed strong attachments to their parents and a small number of people who spend the most time with them. Although very young children do not understand death, they do sense when other family members are upset and that something has changed. They may react with crankiness or changes in sleep or eating patterns. Young children need the reassurance of ongoing contact with their parents to feel safe and comforted. During the next several years, young children learn to cope with separation. At first, the loss of a significant person, even for a short time, may cause a young child to cry, protest and search for that person. As they develop a better understanding of time and have more experiences of people leaving and coming back, children learn to cope with separation — which is one of the basic cognitive tasks required to understand death.

Another task is learning that out of sight does not mean absent, that something can be present without being visible. The infant game of peekaboo helps babies learn about presence and absence. Toddlers between 1 and 2 years can find hidden objects even when the hiding place is not readily apparent; yet, they often confuse reality with fantasy. They may say that their sibling is dead but then talk as if he or she was alive. Toddlers think about people from their own perspectives of living.

Because routines are important to toddlers, changes in the home after a death may be very upsetting to them. Toddlers often do not want the dead person's belongings disturbed. For example, they may want a place set at the table for their sibling who died. It may be important for you to allow this request so the toddler knows that you, too, continue to remember the child who died.

Eventually, toddlers adjust to the idea that their siblings are not coming back. You may have to explain this to the toddler and young child repeatedly until they see and integrate the new reality. As toddlers grow older, they will be able to relinquish some of their fantasies.



Preschoolers

Preschoolers between the ages of 3 and 5 years old have difficulty understanding that death is forever and will happen to everyone at some point in time. They usually have heard the word “dead” and typically understand death as a separation. But they often think dead people still breathe and eat and will come back to life, just as they do in movies and cartoons. They might ask, “Hasn't he been dead long enough?” or “Why can't we get a new sister?” They need to learn that death is not like sleep, that when people go to sleep, they wake up again, but when people die, they are not alive anymore. Use clear language with preschoolers: “His body stopped working. He will not eat, talk or walk anymore. He will not wake up again.”

The difference between reality and fantasy is not clear to preschoolers. They have “magical thinking” and believe that words and wishes can make good and bad things happen. They need constant reminding that words and thoughts do not have this power. Most preschoolers, at some point in their young lives, wish that their moms, dads or siblings would go away. If a family member actually dies, young children may be overwhelmed with guilt. Because they believe that their wishes come true, they may believe that they caused the child to die. They need reassurance that they did not cause the person to die, other than in rare circumstances requiring special intervention. They need to know that people die when they are very old, very sick or so badly hurt that no one could make them better.

When preschoolers grieve a death, they may cling to their mothers or fear that someone else or they themselves might die. Children in this age group need close contact with a significant person who will listen when they need to talk about the person who died. They may be sad for a short time and then play as if nothing had happened. Children are able to compartmentalize their grief. They grieve when and where they need to and cannot tolerate grieving at the level and frequency that adults do. Preschoolers may regress in their behavior following a sibling's death. Common examples include wetting the bed or wanting to sleep with a parent. Maintaining routines can provide reassurance.

School and regular meal and bedtime routines are often a source of comfort. Preschoolers are also learning about how others react to death. It might be helpful to give them a simple explanation about why people cry. For example, you might say that people cry when they are sad or because they miss the person who died. You can tell them that when someone dies, it feels like a big hurt inside and people often cry when they feel hurt. Explain that crying can help the hurt feel better and that when someone dies, it often takes a long time for the hurt to feel better.

School-aged children

Children between the ages of six and 12 years old have a more realistic understanding of death. They realize that people die from accidents or illnesses. They often are curious about what happens to the body when someone dies. They may wonder what happens at autopsies, wakes, funerals and burials. School-aged children may still have magical thinking and feel guilty about “being bad,” as if their thoughts, words or behaviors caused someone's death. They may associate punishment with death and personify death as a ghost or a “boogeyman.”

Many children in this age group realize that death is irreversible. They begin to worry that someone in their family may die. The death of a loved one may cause them to be quite anxious and aware of safety issues. It may help them to know that when someone dies, they will not actually see him or her again, but that the person can be alive in their memories.

By the time children are 10-12 years of age, they are able to understand that death is inevitable, irreversible and universal. How they view death is greatly influenced by the reactions of others, especially their parents. Culture and



Parents' grief

The death of your child is unlike any other loss you are likely to experience. Your child's innocence and vulnerability and your perceived inability to protect him or her from death may leave you feeling powerless and helpless. The loss of your child is the loss of a part of you. The grief a parent experiences lasts a lifetime, but the intensity of your feelings will vary over time and eventually happy memories of your child may be a source of comfort to you.

Initial shock

When your child has died, you are likely to experience shock. You may have trouble believing that your child's life has ended and cling to the hope that somehow your child remains alive. Life may seem unreal and you may feel an overwhelming numbness or an inability to respond to people and events around you. Conversations may seem distant and hard to recall, as if you are in a "fog."

You may be unable to hear details or ask questions regarding your child's death. Because decisions are difficult during periods of profound grief, consider asking relatives or friends to assist you with the burial and funeral arrangements. Family and friends can be tremendously supportive during this time. Their willingness to listen when you need to talk openly and express your grief can be comforting.

Response of family and friends

Family and friends are sometimes unsure about what to say or how to help. You may find that some people avoid you or seem uncomfortable around you, which can make you feel like an "outsider." Some people may be at a loss for words, while others may say things that sound hurtful to you. You might even feel angry with them. How you respond will depend on the circumstances and your level of emotional energy at the time. You may choose to ignore comments or actions that seem hurtful; you also may say, "That is not helpful to me."

Delayed impact

You probably will not experience the full impact of your loss for weeks, months or even a year later. Over time, as the emotional and physical pain of your grief enters your awareness, some of the numbness you felt initially will diminish. That is why the one-year anniversary of your child's death is likely to be a painful milestone. Many parents are filled with intense feelings of sorrow, despair, anger, fear and emptiness. They may replay and question the circumstances of their child's death over and over, experiencing feelings of guilt and frustration. These reactions are normal.

Grief is personal

The intensity of sorrow and grief that people experience is broad and unique. Each person, even within the same family, grieves in his or her own way, depending on past experiences, cultural patterns, relationship with the child who died, circumstances surrounding the death and current life stressors.

There is no right way to grieve other than what feels right to you. Sometimes grief must be placed on the "back burner" when there are logistical concerns. You can always revisit your grief, but you cannot avoid experiencing it. Grief is a natural part of the healing process and will help you cope with your loss.

Find comfort in knowing that this period of intense grieving will end. The pain will diminish and you will find ways to live with your grief and loss. Many parents reflect that this will not happen overnight and that you may frequently feel as though you are moving backward in your grief. However, the intensity of your grief will eventually decrease.





religion also play a role in their understanding of death at this age. School-aged children need honest, realistic answers to their questions. Adults may find their questions upsetting, especially if they are struggling with their own grief, but avoiding questions or not responding to them will cause the children to be more anxious and fearful, and they might not trust you in the future. These discussions can begin a very healthy pattern of expressing thoughts and feelings that are important to process in life.

Parents often wonder whether children should attend funeral or burial services. Sharing times of special significance like this can actually help children understand the experience and deal with their own feelings of sadness and loss. It also will help them to express their feelings as many around them will be sharing similar feelings. This “normalizes” their grief and accompanying feelings, yet in a supportive environment. Often the fear of the unknown is more upsetting than the reality of the situation. For this reason, children this age need to know what to expect. They need to know how the room will look and how the dead person might appear, especially if the casket is open. It is helpful to bring children to a wake or funeral service before many visitors arrive to provide a quiet and private time to say goodbye. Many adults who at a young age experienced the death of a family member tell us that they wished they had been allowed to attend their sibling’s or parent’s funeral to say goodbye. They regret not having the chance or choice to say that important goodbye. It is recommended to allow children to stay at the funeral service as long or as little as they wish and respect their need to leave when they desire. This helps to give them the control they need in this situation. It can be helpful to have a friend or family member ready to take them outside if needed.

Teenagers

Teens understand death much like adults, but they have fewer coping skills. Because teens are already struggling to find their own identities, the death of a friend or loved one may leave them bewildered or confused. Teens express grief differently depending on their age and emotional maturity.

Early teens between the ages of 12 and 14 tend to be concerned about fitting in and may feel uncomfortable expressing grief. They may have difficulty understanding someone else’s response to loss if it is different from their own experience.

Middle teens between the ages of 14 and 16 often feel indestructible. They cannot imagine their own deaths and may express grief by taking unhealthy risks such as driving too fast, drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

Late teens between the ages of 16 and 18 are better able to understand complex relationships and are more interested in other people’s points of view. Older teens grieve much as adults do.

To help teenagers grieving the loss of a loved one, ask them how they are feeling, but do not press them to talk before they are ready. Be attentive and listen when they do wish to talk. Teens of all ages respond better when adults ask more questions and provide fewer answers.

Thoughts to remember

Regardless of our age, we all grieve when someone we love dies. Most, if not all, parents say that the death of a child is one of the most devastating experiences of their lives. Grieving is painful but necessary. It is a very personal process, and each person grieves in his or her own way. In time, however, most parents find that their pain lessens and they learn to have a “different kind of relationship” with the child who died. Their sadness changes from a bitter sadness to a sweet one. They remember their child with a deep love and appreciate the gift of his or her life.

National Support Groups for Parents and Siblings

For parents experiencing the death
of any aged child

[UCLA Children's Pain and Comfort Care Program](#)

Family Bereavement Group
10833 Le Conte Ave., #22-464 MDCC, Los Angeles, CA 90095
(310) 825-0731
gkornfeind@mednet.ucla.edu

[The Dougy Center](#)

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families
P.O. Box 86852, Portland, OR 97286
(503) 775-5683 or (866) 775-5683 (toll free)
help@dougy.org
dougy.org

[The Compassionate Friends](#)

National Headquarters
P.O. Box 3696, Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696
(877) 969-0010 to inquire about a group close to your home
compassionatefriends.org

[MISS Foundation – Parents Grief Support Group](#)

(Adults and children services for when a child dies)
(602) 279-6477 or (888) 455-MISS (6477)
missfoundation.org

[Share Pregnancy & Infant Loss Support, Inc.](#)

(800) 821-6819
nationalshare.org

Educational materials and connection
to other parents

[CLIMB, Inc. \(Center for Loss in Multiple Births\)](#)

climb-support.org

For parents experiencing the death of
a child from cancer

[American Childhood Cancer Organization](#)

National Office
10920 Connecticut Ave., Suite A, Kensington, MD 20895
(855) 858-2226 (toll free)
staff@acco.org
acco.org

On the Internet

[Bereaved Parents of the USA](#)

Bereaved Parents of the USA is a nationwide organization designed to aid and support bereaved parents and their families who are struggling to survive their grief after the death of a child.
bereavedparentsusa.org

[Griefnet.org](#)

An Internet community that provides online support for those dealing with grief and loss.
griefnet.org

[Handonline.org](#)

Helping After Neonatal Death (HAND) is a resource network of parents, professionals and volunteers that offers a variety of services to grieving parents and families in Northern California and the Central Valley.
handonline.org

[Achildingrief.com](#)

A collection of online stories and resources that will help guide children, parents and families through the death of a loved one.
achildingrief.com

Camps for grief support

[Camp Erin](#)

(For children and teens ages 6 to 17)
(206) 298-1217
moyerfoundation.org

[Comfort Zone Camp](#)

(For children and teens ages 7 to 17)
(866) 488-5679 (toll free)
comfortzonecamp.org



Helpful books

For parents

Arnold J. H. and Gemma P.B., *A Child Dies: A Portrait of Family Grief*, Charles Press Publishers, 1994.

Bramblett J., *When Goodbye Is Forever: Learning to Live Again After the Loss of a Child*, Ballantine Books, 1991.

Donnelly K. F., *Recovering From the Loss of a Child*, Macmillan Publishing, 1982.

Finkbeiner A., *After the Death of a Child: Living with Loss Through the Years*, Simon and Shuster, 1998.

Fox S., *Creating a New Normal After the Death of a Child*, iUniverse, Inc., 2010.

Sarnoff Schiff H., *The Bereaved Parent*, Crown Publishers, 1978.

For siblings/children

Alexander S., *Nadia the Willful*, Dragonfly Books, 1992.

Duckworth L., *Ragtail Remembers: A Story That Helps Children Understand Feelings of Grief*, Centering Corporation, 2002.

Grollman E.A., *Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*, Beacon Press, 1993.

Gryte M., *No New Baby: For Siblings Who Have a Brother or Sister Die Before Birth*, Centering Corporation, 1988.

Hickman M., *Last Week My Brother Anthony Died*, Abingdon, 1984.

Jackson A., *Can You Hear Me Smiling? A Child Grieves a Sister*, Child and Family Press, 2004.

Johnson M., *Where's Jess: For Children Who Have a Brother or Sister Die*, Centering Corporation, 1982.

Johnson M. and Johnson J., *Tell Me Papa: Answers to Questions Children Ask About Death and Dying*, Centering Corporation, 2005.

Kirk P. and Schwiebert P., *When Hello Means Goodbye: A Guide for Parents Whose Child Dies Before Birth, at Birth, or Shortly After Birth*, Griefwatch, 2012.

Mellonie B. and Ingpen R., *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, Bantam Books, 1983.

Penn A., *Chester Raccoon and the Acorn Full of Memories*, Tanglewood Press, 2009.

Richter E., *Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies*, Putnam's Sons, 1986.

Romain T., *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?*, Free Spirit, 1999.

Silverman J., *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies*, Fairview Press, 1999.

Sims A., *Am I Still a Sister?*, Centering Corporation, 1988.

Traisman E.S., *Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing Loss*, Centering Corporation, 1992.

Viorst J., *The 10th Good Thing About Barney*, Atheneum, 1987.

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