



Grief in children's story books. A systematic integrative review

María Martínez-Caballero^a, Ángeles Melero^b, Tamara Silió-García^c,
Mar Aparicio-Sanz^d, Carmen Ortego-Maté^{e,*}

^a Servicio Cántabro de Salud, Santander. Avda. Valdecilla s/n, 39008 Santander, Spain

^b Psy Faculty of Education, Universidad de Cantabria, Avda. de los Castros, 50, 39005 Santander, Spain

^c Faculty of Nursing, Universidad de Cantabria, IDIVAL Nursing Research Group, Avda. Valdecilla s/n, 39008 Santander, Spain

^d Psy, Servicio Cántabro de Salud, Faculty of Nursing, Universidad de Cantabria, Avda. Valdecilla s/n, 39008 Santander, Spain

^e Psy Faculty of Nursing, Universidad de Cantabria, IDIVAL Nursing Research Group, Avda. Valdecilla s/n, 39008 Santander, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 September 2022

Revised 13 November 2022

Accepted 11 December 2022

Keywords:

Grief
Death
Bibliotherapy
Juvenile literature
Nursing
Child

ABSTRACT

Background: Grieving is an adaptive process in the face of the death of somebody close. Children grieve the loss of a family member or friend and need support from their caregivers and the professionals who care for them during this process. Failure to talk to children about the death of a family member or friend can lead to prolonged grief. Children's story books are one of the resources available for providing this type of support.

Objective: To provide the nursing professional with information on story books aimed at children from 7 to 11 years of age as a tool to help them understand and cope with grief.

Design: A systematic integrative review was conducted.

Methods: A search was performed in the ISBN database of the Ministry of Culture and the University Libraries Network. Data extraction was performed by two coders using a protocol registered in PROSPERO.

Results: Fifty-six books met the inclusion criteria. Twenty-five percent of the deceased characters were grandparents and 30.4% died due to illness. The most frequent emotion was sadness, (43.3%) and the most repeated coping strategy was remembering the deceased person, (28.7%). The grieving process was depicted in 32.1% of the selected stories.

Conclusion: The children's books reviewed support understanding and coping with grief. However, some limitations were detected, and therefore it is advisable to accompany the child while reading these books to discuss aspects that have not been addressed.

© 2022 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Introduction

Nursing professionals commonly deal with people who are grieving. Often, children are those affected by loss. Therefore, nurses should have a good understanding of the concept and characteristics of grief and be knowledgeable of the resources available to provide care (Nielson, 2012; Thirsk & Moules, 2013).

Grieving is a normal process of sorrow or woe in the face of loss, which is influenced by culture (Sood et al., 2006) and always requires adaptation to the new situation (Alvis et al., 2022; Currier et al., 2007). It may be reflected through a wide range of emotions (sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, anguish, envy) (Alvis et al., 2022; Chachar et al., 2021; Ferow, 2019). Among children who have lost a close family member, post-death adjustment can be a complex process (D'Alton et al., 2022) which may be associated with physical and psychological

health problems, such as aggressive behavior, sleeping and eating problems, regression, somatization, and headaches, among others (Lytje & Dyregrov, 2019; Revet et al., 2020). Consequently, these children are likely to use health services more often and make specific demands on pediatric nurses, who are expected to address the needs of the child-family unit as part of their professional duties. In the event of the death of a family member, surviving adults can become an important support for the grieving child, although they need professional guidance. Nursing care can therefore be channeled towards recommending accessible resources, such as children's stories, so that families can help their grieving children understand and express what is happening to them.

Four characteristics of death are described, which are gradually grasped throughout childhood: universality (we are all going to die), irreversibility (no one who dies comes back to life), non-functionality (vital functions and psychological processes are lost) and causality (death has a physical cause) (Chachar et al., 2021; McGuire et al., 2013). Although there is no absolute agreement in the scientific

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ortegoc@unican.es (C. Ortego-Maté).

literature, the idea of irreversibility is the first to develop (5–6 years), followed by universality and non-functionality (6–7 years), whereas causality is reported to develop later (between 8 and 10 years) (Panagiotaki et al., 2018). A mature understanding of these four characteristics of death is not typically achieved until the age of 10 (Kenyon, 2001). Regarding possible causes of death, when children aged 9 to 11 are asked about death, they most often cite acts of violence (war, terrorism) and accidents, and, less frequently, illness and aging (Vázquez-Sánchez et al., 2019).

The death of a family member (father, mother, sibling, grandparent) is not a normative event during childhood, however it is not uncommon (McGuire et al., 2013; Revet et al., 2020) and leads to the experience of grief. Grief is an adaptive and non-pathological life process as long as people have the cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional strategies and skills to cope with it (i.e., coping resources) (Alvis et al., 2022; Currier et al., 2007). Nonetheless, children's resilience is not unlimited (Lytje & Dyregrov, 2019). Indeed, grieving individuals require proper accompaniment (Currier et al., 2007; Roche et al., 2019), especially if the loss experienced leaves the person in a situation of high vulnerability. This could be the case of children who experience the death of someone very close to them, mainly their father, mother and/or siblings (D'Alton et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2019). Without this accompaniment, the likelihood of complicated grief increases (Currier et al., 2007; Roche et al., 2019). This support aims to help the person to identify, understand and express their emotions as well as to normalize them. It attempts to offer a supportive environment in which they know that all their emotions will be accepted but, at the same time, they must be helped to channel the behavioral consequences if they harm themselves or others. In addition, resolving grief involves keeping the memory of the deceased person because grieving is not about forgetting, rather, on the contrary, about remembering that person, but in a manner that does not prevent us from reorganizing our life in a healthy way after the loss (Worden, 2018).

A series of guidelines have been recommended by experts for application in cases of child bereavement. One recommendation is to allow the children to attend and actively participate in the mourning rituals, if they wish, and to inform them beforehand about what it consists of, what they will see or hear, what their meaning is (Søfting et al., 2016). Another is to talk openly to children about death (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017) and certainly answer any questions (Nielson, 2012), if possible before the death of any family members (McGuire et al., 2013; Revet et al., 2020), but also as soon as the loss occurs and throughout the entire grieving process (Chachar et al., 2021). Children usually receive less information than necessary due to the assumption that they will not understand it (Alvis et al., 2022). In these conversations, it is necessary to explain the nature of death, to pronounce the word "death" without using euphemisms, to explain what it means when the family member or friend's body disappears forever and to tell them the truth about what happened immediately. If this communication does not take place, children will experience more problems regarding asking questions and solving their doubts as well as expressing their feelings (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017).

Introducing a child-friendly mediating object, such as story books, can help children acquire a more accurate concept of death and make them more aware of the emotions linked to grieving because children tend to identify with the characters and the situations experienced (McGuire et al., 2013). Reading stories to children is an opportunity to start a sincere and honest conversation about death and bereavement (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017). An essential function of these stories is that children can identify with the characters and the situations they reflect, which serves as a trigger to start a conversation (McGuire et al., 2013). Thus, books dedicated to death and bereavement can be a tool to offer to family members as part of nursing care.

However, before recommending this tool it is important to analyze it. Therefore, the main objective of this review was to answer the following question: Do death-themed children's storybooks published in

Spanish for children ages 7 to 11 feature content that is likely to facilitate a dialogue on the characteristics of death and grief?

The requirements of the books included in the review were as follows: the books should have grieving protagonists with different characteristics in terms of gender (some with a male protagonist, others with a female protagonist) and skin color, to facilitate emotional identification. It would also be desirable to include people with different abilities. In addition, they should include the most frequent cases of death in children's lives: grandparents, father, mother, sibling, and some stories should also include the death of a friend, classmate, or pet.

Ideally, each story should also cover at least the following aspects:

- Include the conceptual characteristics of death that are being acquired in the selected age range (7 to 11 years).
- Explicitly discuss the existence of grief as a long process, as well as the variety of emotions and behaviors that accompany it, so that children can recognize these as an integral and normative part of the grieving process.
- Refer to farewell rituals, such as burial or funeral, by depicting the attendance of children.

Although there are other published studies analyzing death in children's story books (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Ortego et al., 2016), to our knowledge, there is no systematic integrative review that analyzes death and grief in books aimed at children between 7 and 11 years old published in Spanish in the last thirty years.

Method

Design

A systematic integrative review is an ideal review method that consolidates the knowledge obtained from the literature, in order to draw a conclusion on a given topic (Soares et al., 2014).

Search strategy

Between November and December 2021, a search was conducted for children's story books in the library of the Faculty of Nursing of the University of Cantabria, the ISBN database of the Ministry of Culture and Sport and the University Libraries Network (REBIUN). Also, the PubMed, Dialnet, Scopus, Web of Science and Cuiden plus databases were consulted.

The MeSH terms "Death", "Grief", "Bereavement", "Child", "Nursing" and "Juvenile Literature" were used, combined with the Boolean operator "AND".

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were as follows: a/ books with a central theme of death, b/ aimed at children between 7 and 11 years of age, c/ paper format, d/ published in Spanish and e/ first edition published between 1991 and 2021.

Data extraction

To carry out the review, a protocol was created that included a timeline, the coding sheet and a coding manual, which allowed thirty-three variables to be recorded, grouped into eight categories, including: the characteristics of the main character and the four aspects of the concept of death. The protocol was registered in PROSPERO (International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews) under number CRD4202232327477.

Two coders independently coded the books. Once coding was completed, inter-coder agreement was estimated; Cohen's Kappa

Table 1
Description of the selected books.

No. of stories	Spanish title/English title*	Year of first edition	Publisher	Authors/illustrators	Country of original version	Support material	Characteristics of the main character	Who dies?	Uses the word death	Depicts grieving	Available in
1	Abuela de arriba, abuela de abajo/ Nana upstairs & nana downstairs	1994	El barco de vapor	Tomie de Paola	United States	0	Boy	Grandmother and great grandmother	1	0	English / Spanish
2	Al otro lado / To the other side*	2016	La fragatina	Roberto Parmeggiani/ Anna Forlati	Italy	0	Boy	Father	0	0	Spanish / Italian
3	Así era mi abuelito / That's how my grandfather was*	2003	Tris Tras	Joan de Déu Prats/ Gustavo Roldán	Spain	1	Boy	Grandfather	1	0	Spanish
4	¡Buenas noches, abuelo! / Goodnight, grandpa!*	2013	López	Roser Bausá/Carme Peris	Spain	0	Girl	Grandfather	0	0	Spanish
5	Camila y el abuelo pastelero / Camila and the baker grandpa*	1999	Alfaguara	Marisa López/Nivio López	Spain	0	Girl	Grandmother	1	0	Spanish
6	Camila, ¡regresa, abuelito! / Camila, come back, grandpa!*	2021	Babidi-bú	Romina Giugno/Rocío Koizumi	Spain	0	Girl	Grandfather	0	2	Spanish
7	Caramelos masticables / Chewy candies*	2021	Babidi-bú	Lourdes López/ Zenaida Madrid	Spain	1	Girl	Grandmother	0	0	Spanish
8	Casi, casi / Almost*	2015	Istarduk	Maísa Marbán/Pedro José de Arriba	Spain	0	Boy and Girl	Grandfather	0	0	Spanish
9	¿Cómo es posible? La historia de Elvis / How is it possible? Elvis' story*	2005	López	Peter Schössow	Germany	0	Girl	Pet	1	0	Spanish / German
10	Copito de nieve / Snowflake*	2021	Mr. momo	Maialen Mediavilla/Tamara Durán	Spain	0	Snowflake	Friend	0	0	Spanish
11	Cuando la muerte vino a nuestra casa / When death came calling	2011	López	Jürg Schubiger/Susanne Berner	Germany	0	Girl	Brother	1	0	Spanish/ German/ Chinese / French
12	Cuerpo de nube / Little cloud lamb	2010	Cuento de Luz	Ana de Eulate/Mónica Carretero	Spain	0	Lamb	Main character	0	0	English / Spanish
13	Delfín, una historia de principio a fin / Dolphin, a story from start to finish*	2021	Babidi-bú	Alma Serra/Blanca Galván	Spain	1	Dolphin	Main character	1	3	Spanish
14	¿Dónde está el abuelo? / Where's grandpa?*	2001	Triciclo	Mar Cortina/Amparo Peguero	Spain	0	Girl	Grandfather	1	0	Spanish
15	El abuelo de Tom ha muerto / Tom's granddad has died*	2000	Combel	Colette Hellings/ Marie-Aline Bawin	France	0	Squirrel	Grandfather	1	3	Spanish / French
16	El ángel del abuelo / Grandpa's angel	2001	López	Jutta Bauer	Germany	0	Boy	Grandfather	0	0	English / Spanish / German / Portuguese / Chinese /Japanese English/ Spanish
17	El árbol de los recuerdos / The memory tree	2013	Nube ocho	Britta Teckentrup/	United Kingdom	0	Fox	Friend	0	3	English/ Spanish
18	El camaleón malcarado / The ugly chameleon*	2015	Eldelvives	Xan López	Spain	0	Chameleon	Main character	0	0	Spanish
19	El jardín de mi abuelo / My granddad's garden*	2007	Bellaterra	M.Ángels Gil/Mabel Piérola	Spain	1	Boy	Grandfather	1	0	Spanish
20	El lenguaje de los árboles / The trees' language*	2015	Fineo	Pepa Horno/ Martina Vanda	Spain	1	Boy	Grandfather	1	2	Spanish
21	El niño de las estrellas / The kid from the stars*	2000	ING edicions	Patrick Somers/Katrien van der Grient	Belgium	0	Girl	Brother	1	0	Spanish/ Dutch
22	El pájaro muerto / The dead bird	2018	Corimbo	Margaret Wise Brown/ Christian Robinson	United States	0	Children	Bird	1	0	English /Spanish

Table 1 (continued)

No. of stories	Spanish title/English title*	Year of first edition	Publisher	Authors/illustrators	Country of original version	Support material	Characteristics of the main character	Who dies?	Uses the word death	Depicts grieving	Available in
23	El pato y la muerte / Duck, death and the tulip	2007	Barbara Fiore	Wolf Erlbruch	Germany	0	Duck	Main character	1	0	English / Spanish / German / Turkish / Japanese
24	En todas partes y en cualquier lugar / Everywhere and all around	2017	Uranito	Pimm van Hest/ Sassafras De Bruyn	Belgium	0	Girl	Mother	1	2	English / Spanish / Dutch / Italian / Turkish / Polish / Romanian / German
25	Encender la luz / Turn on the light	2018	Babidi-bú	Raquel Castaño González/Marta López Palomo	Spain	1	Girl	Grandfather	0	0	English / Spanish
26	¡Gracias, vida! / Thanks, life!	2017	Babidi-bú	Rosa María Rodríguez Tellez/Lucía García Borrajo	Spain	0	Girl	Mother	1	2	English / Spanish
27	Háblame de ella / Tell me about her*	2021	Babidi-bú	Sílvia García/Noelia Montesinos	Spain	0	Girl	Grandmother	0	3	Spanish
28	Huesos / Bones*	2020	Fun readers	Txabi Arnal/Julio Antonio Blasco	Spain	0	0	Pet	0	0	Spanish
29	Ilana, la Girl que escuchaba al viento / Ilana, the girl who heard the wind*	2015	Bruño	Antonia Rodenas/ Carme Solé	Spain	0	Girl	Mother	0	0	Spanish
30	Inés Azul / Agnes Blue*	2009	Thule	Pablo Albo/Pablo Auladell	Spain	0	Girl	Friend	0	0	Spanish
31	Jack y la muerte / Jack and the death*	2012	Oqo	Tim Bowley/Natalia Pudalov	United Kingdom	0	Boy	Mother	1	0	Spanish / French / Italian / Portuguese
32	Julia tiene una estrella / Julia has a star*	2006	LaGalera	Eduard José/Valentí Gubianas	Spain	0	Girl	Mother	0	0	Spanish / Catalan
33	La cabina de teléfono en el jardín del señor Hirota / The phone booth in Mr. Hirota's garden	2021	A fin de cuentos	Heather Smith/Rachel Wada	Canadá	0	Boy	Father	0	3	English / Spanish
34	La caricia de la mariposa / The caress of the butterfly*	2008	Kalandraka	Christian Voltz,	France	0	Boy	Grandmother	0	0	Spanish / French
35	La estrella de Lea / Lea's star*	2008	SM	Claude K. Dubois and Patrick Gilson	Belgium	0	Boy	Friend	1	0	Spanish / Catalan / French / Japanese
36	La isla del abuelo / Grandad's island	2015	Andana	Benji Davies	United Kingdom	0	Boy	Grandfather	0	0	English / Spanish / French / Dutch / German
37	La Girl y el árbol de las grajillas / The girl and the jackdaw tree*	2004	Galimatazo	Riitta Jalonen/Kristiina Louhi (illustrator)	Finland	0	Girl	Father	1	3	Spanish / French / Polish / Finnish / Swedish
38	¡Mamá! / Mom!*	2006	Edebé	Iñaki Zubeldia	Spain	0	Girl	Mother	1	3	Spanish
39	Más allá del gran río / Beyond the great river*	2002	Juventud	Armin Beuscher/ Cornelia Haas	Germany	0	Raccoon	Friend	1	0	Spanish / German / French / Japanese
40	Mi abuelita ya no está / My grandma is gone*	2017	Siruela ilustrada	Lili La Baleine	France	0	Girl	Grandmother	1	0	Spanish / French
41	Mi amigo el sauce / Gentle willow: a story for children about dying	2008	Sana colita de rana	Joyce C. Mills/Cary Pillo	United States	1	Squirrel	Plant	0	0	English / Spanish
42	Nana vieja / Old pig	1995	Ekaré	Margaret Wild/Ron Brooks	Australia	0	Pig	Grandmother	0	0	English / Spanish
43	No es fácil, pequeña ardilla / It's not easy, little squirrel*	2003	Kalandraka	Elisa Ramón and Rosa Osuna	Spain	0	Squirrel	Mother	1	3	Spanish
44	No puedo dormir / My father's arms are a boat	2009	Barbara Fiore	Stein Erik Lunde/ Oyvins Torseter	Norway	0	Boy	Mother	0	0	English / Spanish / Norwegian
45	Osito y su abuelo / Little bear's grandad	1999	Timunmas	Nigel Gray/Vanessa Cabban	United Kingdom	0	Bear	Grandfather	0	0	English / Spanish / French
46	Para siempre / Always and forever	2003	Timun mas	Alan Durant/Debi Giori	United Kingdom	0	Animals	Friend	0	3	English / Spanish
47	Para siempre /Forever	2016	La fábrica de libros	Camino García	Spain	0	Girl	0	1	3	English / Spanish

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

No. of stories	Spanish title/English title*	Year of first edition	Publisher	Authors/illustrators	Country of original version	Support material	Characteristics of the main character	Who dies?	Uses the word death	Depicts grieving	Available in
48	Paz. Papá se fue sin avisar / Paz. Dad left without warning*	2011	Sirpus	Paulina Vergés	Spain	1	Girl	Father	1	2	Spanish
49	¿Por qué papá ahora es una estrella? / Why is dad now a star?*	2015	Círculo rojo	Cristina Castro	Spain	0	Boy	Father	1	0	Spanish
50	¿Qué viene después del mil? / And what comes after a thousand?	2005	Takatuka	Anette Bley	Germany	0	Girl	Grandfather	1	0	English / Spanish / Japanese
51	Soy la muerte / Life and I	2017	Barbara Fiore	Elisabeth Helland and Marine Scheneier	Norway	0	Unspecified	0	1	0	English / Spanish / Swedish / Polish
52	Te encuentro en el arcoíris / I meet you at the rainbow*	2021	Mr. momo	Rocío Valderas / Francisco Jiménez Aranda	Spain	0	Girl	Grandmother	0	0	Spanish
53	Tim dice adiós a su abuelo / Tim says goodbye to his grandfather*	2019	Mr. momo	Mac Freixas/Miriam Santos	Spain	0	Boy	Grandfather	0	3	Spanish
54	Tres pececitos / Three little fishes*	2020	Mr. momo	Gema Valado Fundín; Zaida Montes (illustrator)	Spain	0	Fish	Siblings	0	2	Spanish
55	Un pellizco en la barriga / A pinch in the belly*	2017	Babidi-bú	Alma Serra; Marta López Palomo (illustrator)	Spain	1	Girl	0	0	3	Spanish
56	Yo quiero saber de verdad qué es la muerte! / I wanna know what death truly is*	2019	Takatuka	Monsieur Mouch; Maria-Paz	France	0	Children	Bird	1	0	Spanish / French

*At the time of the study there is no English version available, therefore, the title is a translation of the Spanish title translated by the authors.

0: No; 1: Yes; 2: Grief as a short process; 3: Grief as a long process.

coefficient was used for categorical variables and the Spearman-Brown correlation coefficient was used for quantitative variables. Disagreements were resolved by discussion among coders and, when necessary, the criterion of a third reviewer was used.

Results

A total of 56 books were included in this review (Table 1). The PRISMA flowchart (Page et al., 2021) (Fig. 1) depicts the selection process. Appendix 1 shows the titles of the excluded books and the reasons for their exclusion.

After coding, intercoder agreement was 0.90 (Cohen's mean Kappa was $\kappa = 0.86$ and the mean Spearman-Brown correlation was $r = 0.93$).

Characteristics of the books included

Of the selected books, 64.3% ($n = 36$) were written in the third person as opposed to 35.7% ($n = 20$) written in the first person. Spanish authors wrote 51.8% ($n = 29$) of the books (Table 1), 3.6% ($n = 2$) included a glossary of words and 16.1% ($n = 9$) provided support material to help parents or caregivers talk with children or provide information about how children experience death and bereavement (Table 2).

Characteristics of the main character

The main character included people, animals, or elements of nature such as a snowflake, although most of the characters were people (66.1%). The most frequent profile was a girl (41.1%), who was white (92.3%) and with no disability (100%) (Table 3).

Animals were the main character in 23.2% of the story books. They were usually animals living in the forest, such as squirrels, bears, raccoons, foxes, although there are also stories about lambs, pigs, fish, and ducks. In these stories, the animals are humanized (they live in houses, wear clothes, talk to their peers, express emotions) and are not shown as human.

Approach to death and grief

Grandparents were the most frequently deceased characters depicted in 37.5% ($n = 21$) of the books, followed by parents, at 25% ($n = 14$) or a friend, as shown in 8.9% ($n = 5$) of the books. The main character dies on four occasions (Table 4).

Most often there was no mention of who communicates the death to the main character, but when this was depicted it was usually the mother 19.6% ($n = 11$). Also, no mention was usually made of where the death occurs, however when it was shown it was either in nature (21.4%), at the hospital (16.1%) or at home (14.3%). Funeral rituals were also infrequent.

The cause of death was not usually mentioned; when cited, the most frequent cause was illness (32.1%), followed by old age (10.7%). Other reasons, such as accidents or suicide, were found in 8.9% and 1.8% of the books, respectively.

Regarding the characteristics of death (universality, irreversibility, non-functioning, and causality), all four are projected in four books, although most frequently two of these characteristics are shown, with irreversibility being the most present characteristic (44.7%), followed by causality (29.1%).

The word "grief" fails to appear in 100% of the story books ($n = 56$). Although implicitly, the grieving process is shown in 33.9% ($n = 19$).

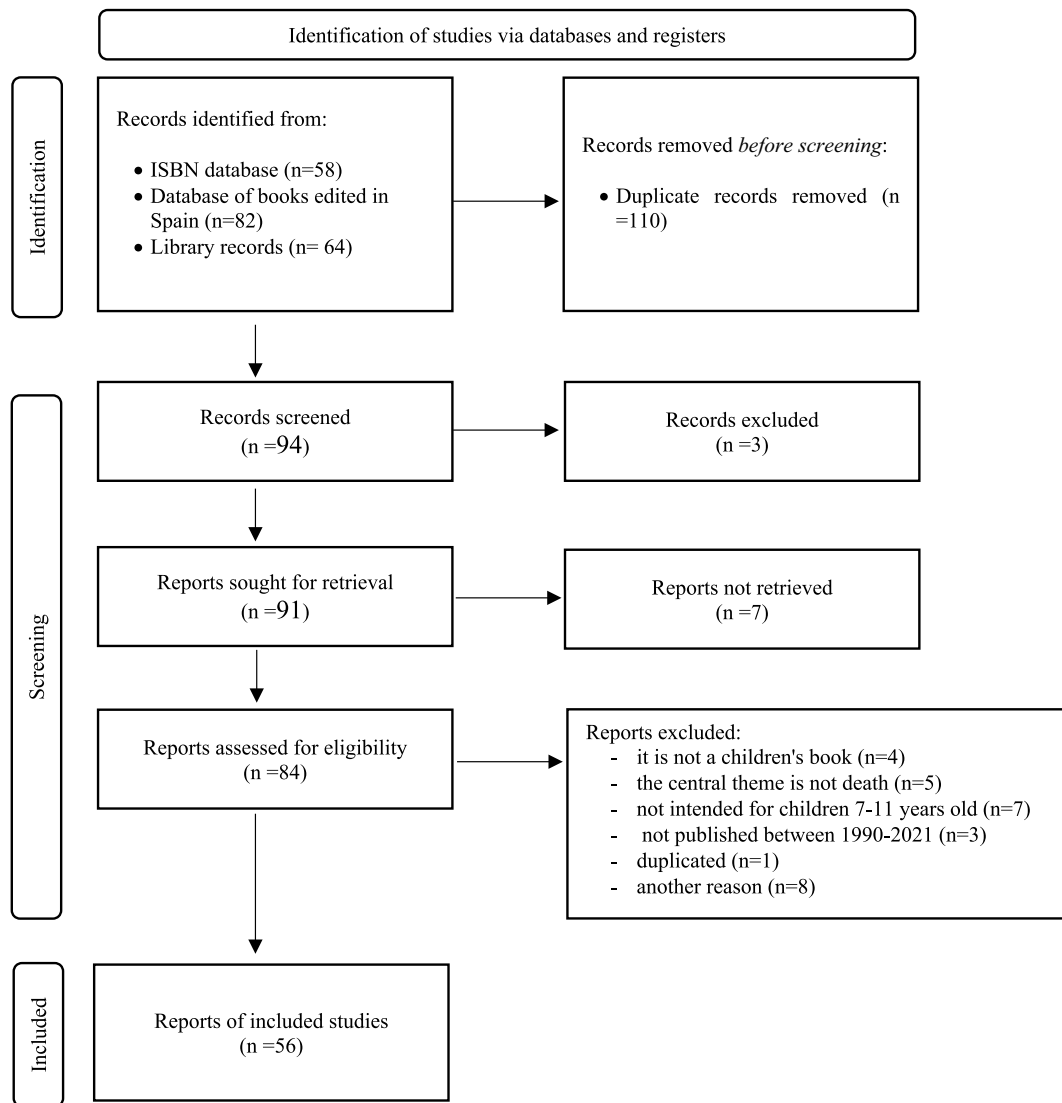


Fig. 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

Of the stories that show grieving, in 63.2% ($n = 12$) it is represented as a long process versus 36.8 ($n = 7$) where it appears as a short process.

Emotions and coping

The impact of death is shown for both the main character and other characters in 66.1% of the books ($n = 37$) and only concerning the main character in 12.5% ($n = 5$).

Emotions are expressed both with words and drawings in 87.5% of the books ($n = 49$), only with words in 5.4% ($n = 3$) and not shown in 7.1% ($n = 4$). The most depicted emotion, shown both by the main character and by the other characters, was sadness, in 47.4% ($n = 45$) of the books, and a manifestation of it, crying, in 24.2% ($n = 23$).

Regarding the most used coping strategies, these were remembering the deceased, 28.7% ($n = 39$), sharing memories, 17% ($n = 23$) and receiving support, 18.4% ($n = 25$). Conversely, in 3.7% of the books ($n = 5$) no coping strategy was shown (Table 5).

Discussion

Storytelling for bereaved children, a form of bibliotherapy, can provide an opportunity to talk about death and grief, answer children's

questions, clarify their doubts, and normalize their emotions. Reading stories to children can help them to express and release their emotions in a safe environment (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017). In this review, we analyzed 56 children's books for children between 7 and 11 years of age, which, overall, deserve a positive evaluation, although they have some limitations.

To favor the projection of their feelings and emotions, children need to be able to identify with the story's main character, therefore, it is important to include characters of different sexes and with different characteristics. However, we have found that none of the books had characters with some type of disability and all the characters tended to be white, which may constitute a limitation as some children may fail to identify with them. This is in line with findings by Arruda-Colli et al. (2017) who mention the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in these stories.

Regarding the characteristics of the deceased, most of the deceased were grandparents, followed by fathers, mothers and siblings, which seems understandable and realistic given the higher probability of death of grandparents (Patterson et al., 2020), an experience that has been more frequent with COVID19 (Livings et al., 2022). Only two of the books dealt with the death of a friend, and these characters were animals instead of people.

Table 2
Books with support materials for parents.

Story No.	Spanish title	Synopsis	Support materials included with the book
3	Así era mi abuelito	This story is about the memory that the main character has of his grandfather. Before he died, he made him a cake and gave him a recipe book.	A parent's guide to dealing with the subject of death with children
7	Caramelos masticables	The father of the girl who is the main character in this story tells her that her grandmother is now a star, and she hopes to see her every night.	Activities for remembrance
13	Delfín, una historia de principio a fin	Through the dolphin as the main character, this story tries to explain the difficulties of life and suicide.	Guide to explain suicide to children and key ideas for reading and working with the story.
19	El jardín de mi abuelo	Through nature, the grandfather tries to explain to the main character what the stages of life mean, including death.	Key ideas for reading and working with the story
20	El lenguaje de los árboles	The main character's grandfather teaches him to listen to the sounds of nature, but he doesn't understand it until his grandfather is gone.	A guide for dealing with the subject of death with children
25	Encender la luz	Naiara doesn't understand why her mother's father is no longer around, her mother explains that her grandfather now lives in a star.	A guide for dealing with the subject of death with children
41	Mi amigo el sauce	The squirrel featured in this story learns to understand death through illness as he cares for his friend.	A guide for parents to discuss death with their children and exercises for children
48	Paz. Papá se fue sin avisar	Through her happiest memories with her father, the main character tries to assimilate the sudden loss of her father.	Information for children on What happens when you die, a guide to addressing the subject of death with children and recommendations for reading the story.
55	Un pelizco en la barriga	The main character shows different emotions at the loss of a family member. What no one knows is that she keeps a secret.	Information on how children experience death and grief and key ideas for reading and working with stories

Regarding the emotions shown, the most frequently depicted emotion is sadness (and crying as a reflection of it). However, the wealth of emotions that is usually generated by grief does not appear (Alvis et al., 2022; Chachar et al., 2021; Ferow, 2019). In addition, during the school stage, children may somatize their feelings (Revet et al., 2020). However, the representation of somatization of their emotions is minimal in the set of coded stories.

In relation to the causes of death, accidents, which are the element most cited by children as a cause of death (Melvin & Lukeman, 2000) are barely represented. In the media, at least prior to the COVID19 pandemic, accidents are mentioned more often as a cause of death, compared to disease. This is probably why accidents are the most cited element by children, however they are hardly represented in the stories. It is known that children are most exposed to the death of their grandparents, and grandparents generally die from illness. However, road traffic accidents are the most frequent cause of death in people between five and 29 years of age (World Health Organization, 2022) therefore, this can affect siblings and friends of children aged seven to 11 years, as well as young parents. Consequently, death-themed storybooks have to be adjusted to these experiences of bereaved children.

A major limitation is that not all books use the word “death”. Rather, they use circumlocutions or euphemisms such as “he is gone”, “now lives in a star” or similar. Also, regarding the characteristics of death, universality and non-functionality are shown in a minimal percentage of the stories. It would be key for these characteristics to appear, since

children understand these concepts between the age of seven and ten (Kenyon, 2001).

The death of a family member inevitably implies a grieving process. For this reason, children's books that deal with death should also help the child understand this stage. None of the books analyzed mention the word *grief*, and when this process is depicted, it is generally shown as a short process that is resolved almost immediately after the death. However, it is known that grief is a process, not a state, and therefore it is long (Zisook & Shear, 2009). Nevertheless, grief is addressed, as most of the stories include coping strategies. Overall, the most important ones are mentioned in the stories, among these, perhaps the most counterintuitive is that of remembering the deceased, since, as we have indicated, coping with grief in a healthy manner is not about forgetting but about finding a lasting and healthy way to feel connected with the deceased person (Worden, 2018).

Conclusion

The nursing professional is in constant contact with families affected by death. Therefore, in addition to performing active listening and showing support, nurses can carry out two tasks for which we believe this study is useful: a) integrating children's story books to work on death and grief; and b) recommending children's story books to families as part of nursing interventions in children's bereavement.

Because of its symbolic power, children's literature serves as a tool to promote dialogue with children about death and to help them understand the grieving process, since it contains elements that facilitate understanding and coping. However, we have detected highlights, but also some limitations, and therefore it is important to provide recommendations to parents and/or caregivers so that children's literature can be used as a tool to provide more comprehensive support.

Practice implications

This study can serve as a reference for health professionals to integrate children's story books in their work as an intervention to address death and bereavement. In addition, it can guide the nursing staff in recommending death-focused books suited to the needs of each user. This information can be further expanded with recommendations on how to read these stories (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Suvilehto et al., 2019). Such recommendations include reading the story carefully

Table 3
Characteristics of the main character.

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Type of main character		
Girl	23	41.1
Boy	14	25.0
Animal	13	23.2
Undefined	3	5.4
Others	3	5.4
Ethnicity of main character		
White	36	92.3
Black	1	2.6
Asian	1	2.6
Roma	1	2.6
Disability of main character		
No	56	100

Table 4
Approach to death.

	Frequency	%
Who dies?		
Grandfather	13	23.2
Grandmother	8	14.3
Mother	8	14.3
Father	6	10.7
Friend	5	8.9
Plant/tree/animal	4	7.1
Main character	4	7.1
Brother/a	3	5.4
Pet	2	3.6
Others	3	5.4
Who communicates death to the protagonist?		
Not specified	35	62.5
Mother	11	19.6
Parents	4	7.1
Father	3	5.4
Grandmother	1	1.8
Grandfather	1	1.8
Family	1	1.8
Where does he/she die?		
Not specified	27	48.2
In nature (field, river, sea...)	12	21.4
At the hospital	9	16.1
At home	8	14.3
What is the cause of death?		
Not specified	26	46.4
Disease	18	32.1
Old age	6	10.7
Accident	5	8.9
Suicide	1	1.8
Are funerary rituals shown?		
No	38	67.9
Yes	18	32.1
What is death associated with?		
Not specified	24.0	42.9
Travel	11.0	19.6
Star	9.0	16.1
Sleep	4.0	7.1
Transforming into an animal	3.0	5.4
Go to heaven	3.0	5.4
Others	2.0	3.6
How many characteristics of death are shown?		
One	15	26.8
Two	27	48.2
Three	4	7.1
Four	4	7.1
None	6	10.7
What characteristics of death are shown?		
Irreversibility	46	44.7
Causality	30	29.1
Universality	18	17.5
Non-functionality	9	8.7

before reading it to the child so that the adult can reflect on the comments and possible questions to be asked during and after reading; reading in a quiet environment, without interruptions; and reading without rushing, leaving time for a long conversation so that the children can ask questions and express their feelings while the story is being read.

Finally, this study can also be useful for other professionals who are in close contact with children, such as kindergarten and primary education teachers since children spend most of their time in the school environment.

Table 5
Strategies for coping with death shown in the stories.

Story No	Spanish title	Coping strategy ^a
1	Abuela de arriba, abuela de abajo	1,3
2	Al otro lado	0
3	Así era mi abuelito	1
4	¡Buenas noches, abuelo!	1,2,3
5	Camila y el abuelo pastelero	1,2,4
6	Camila, ¡regresa, abuelito!	0
7	Caramelos masticables	1,2,3,5,7
8	Casi, casi	7
9	¿Cómo es posible? La historia de Elvis	2,3,5
10	Copito de nieve	0
11	Cuando la muerte vino a nuestra casa	3,5,7
12	Cuerpo de nube	1
13	Delfín, una historia de principio a fin	1,2,5
14	¿Dónde está el abuelo?	3,5
15	El abuelo de Tom ha muerto	1,2,3,5
16	El ángel del abuelo	0
17	El árbol de los recuerdos	1,2,3,7
18	El camaleón malcarado	1
19	El jardín de mi abuelo	1,4,5
20	El lenguaje de los árboles	1,2,3,7
21	El niño de las estrellas	1,2,4,5,7
22	El pájaro muerto	1,5
23	El pato y la muerte	4
24	En todas partes y en cualquier lugar	1,2,3,4,7
25	Encender la luz	1,2
26	¡Gracias, vida!	3,4
27	Háblame de ella	1,2,3,7
28	Huesos	1,2,3,7
29	Ilana, la niña que escuchaba al viento	1,2
30	Inés Azul	0
31	Jack y la muerte	5
32	Julia tiene una estrella	1
33	La cabina de teléfono en el jardín del señor Hirota	12
34	La caricia de la mariposa	1
35	La estrella de Lea	1
36	La isla del abuelo	1,5
37	La niña y el árbol de las grullas	1,2,3
38	¡Mamá!	1,2,3,5,6,7
39	Más allá del gran río	1,2,3,5,7
40	Mi abuelita ya no está	1
41	Mi amigo el sauce	1,3,6
42	Nana vieja	5,6
43	No es fácil, pequeña ardilla	1,2,3
44	No puedo dormir	3
45	Osito y su abuelo	3
46	Para siempre	1,2,3,7
47	Para siempre	1,4
48	Paz. Papá se fue sin avisar	1,2,3
49	¿Por qué papá ahora es una estrella?	1
50	¿Qué viene después del mil?	1,3
51	Soy la muerte	8
52	Te encuentro en el arcoíris	1
53	Tim dice adiós a su abuelo	1,3
54	Tres pececitos	3,7
55	Un pellizco en la barriga	1,2,5,7
56	Yo quiero saber de verdad qué es la muerte!	1,2,4,5

^a1: Remembrance, 2: Sharing memories, 3: Receiving support from others, 4: Talking about death, 5: Saying goodbye, 6: Caring for the dying person, 7: Offering support to others, 8 Other.

Contributions of this study

Nursing professionals are in contact with children and families and can provide tools to help with the grieving process. This study lists and analyzes the approach to death and grief in 56 children's story books published in Spanish with a central theme of death that can facilitate understanding and coping with grief in children from 7 to 11 years of age.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Author contributions

Conceptualization; M-C M., M A, S-G T, A-S M and O-M C.
Data curation; M-C M and S-G T.
Formal analysis; M-C M. and O-M C.
Methodology; M A, A-S M and O-M C.
Project administration; O-M C.
Supervision; M A and O-M C.
Validation; S-G T and A-S M.
Visualization; M-C M., M A, S-G T, A-S M and O-M C.
Writing - original draft; M-C M. and O-M C.
Writing - review & editing; M-C M., M A, S-G T, A-S M and O-M C.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Diego García-Valtuille Pérez and Álar Tapia Ruiz for their help in the search for books.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2022.12.012>.

References

- Alvis, L., Zhang, N., Sandler, I. N., & Kaplow, J. B. (2022). Developmental manifestations of grief in children and adolescents: Caregivers as key grief facilitators. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 18(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00435-0>.
- Arruda-Colli, M. N. F., Weaver, M. S., & Wiener, L. (2017). Communication about dying, death, and bereavement: A systematic review of Children's literature. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 20(5), 548–559. <https://doi.org/10.1089/JPM.2016.0494>.
- Chachar, A. S., Younus, S., & Ali, W. (2021). Developmental understanding of death and grief among children during COVID-19 pandemic: Application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, Article 654584. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.654584>.
- Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2007). The effectiveness of bereavement interventions with children: A meta-analytic review of controlled outcome research. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology: The Official Journal for the Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, American Psychological Association, Division*, 36(2), 253–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374410701279669>.
- D'Alton, S. V., Ridings, L., Williams, C., & Phillips, S. (2022). The bereavement experiences of children following sibling death: An integrative review. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 66(1), 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2022.05.006>.
- Ferow, A. (2019). Childhood grief and loss. *European Journal of Educational Sciences Special edition*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.19044/ejes.v6a1>.
- Kenyon, B. L. (2001). Current research in Children's conceptions of death: A critical review. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 43(1), 63–91. <https://doi.org/10.2190/0x2b-b1n9-a579-dvk1>.
- Living, M., Smith-Greenaway, E., Margolis, R., & Verdery, A. M. (2022). Bereavement & mental health: The generational consequences of a grandparent's death. *SSM - Mental Health*, 2, Article 100100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.SSMH.2022.100100>.
- Lytje, M., & Dyregrov, A. (2019). The price of loss—a literature review of the psychosocial and health consequences of childhood bereavement. *Bereavement Care*, 38(1), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02682621.2019.1580854>.
- McGuire, S. L., McCarthy, L. S., Modrcin, M. A., McGuire, S. L., McCarthy, L. S., & Modrcin, M. A. (2013). An ongoing concern: Helping children comprehend death. *Open Journal of Nursing*, 3(3), 307–313. <https://doi.org/10.4236/OJN.2013.33042>.
- Melvin, D., & Lukeman, D. (2000). Bereavement: A framework for those working with children. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 5(4), 521–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104500005004007>.
- Nielson, D. (2012). Discussing death with pediatric patients: Implications for nurses. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 27(5). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2011.11.006>.
- Ortego, C., Aparicio, M., Paz, M., Torres, B., Sarabia, R., Sevilla, L., ... Agudo (2016). Tales: A tool to address death with children. *Journal of Hospice and Palliative Nursing*, 18(5), 429–435. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NJH.0000000000000268>.
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, 372. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.N71>.
- Panagiotaki, G., Hopkins, M., Nobes, G., Ward, E., & Griffiths, D. (2018). Children's and adults' understanding of death: Cognitive, parental, and experiential influences. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 166, 96–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.07.014>.
- Patterson, S. E., Verdery, A. M., & Daw, J. (2020). Linked lives and childhood experience of family death on educational attainment. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120975594>.
- Revet, A., Bui, E., Benvegnu, G., Suc, A., Mesquida, L., & Raynaud, J. P. (2020). Bereavement and reactions of grief among children and adolescents: Present data and perspectives. *L'Encephale*, 46(5), 356–363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.encep.2020.05.007>.
- Roche, R. M., Brooten, & Youngblut, J. A. M. (2019). Children's fears 2–13 months after sibling NICU/PICU/emergency department death. *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, 31(12), 723–733. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JXX.000000000000193>.
- Soares, C. B., Hoga, L. A. K., Peduzzi, M., Sangaleti, C., Yonekura, T., & Silva, D. R. D. A. (2014). Integrative review: Concepts and methods used in nursing. *Revista da Escola de Enfermagem da U.S.P.*, 48(2), 335–345. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0080-623420140002000020>.
- Søfting, G. H., Dyregrov, A., & Dyregrov, K. (2016). Because I'm also part of the family. Children's participation in rituals after the loss of a parent or sibling: A qualitative study from the children's perspective. *Omega-Journal of Death and Dying*, 73(2), 141–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815575898>.
- Sood, A. B., Razdan, A., Weller, E. B., & Weller, R. A. (2006). Children's reactions to parental and sibling death. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 8(2), 115–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11920-006-0008-0>.
- Suvilehto, P., Kerry-Moran, K. J., & Aerila, J. A. (2019). Supporting children's social and emotional growth through developmental bibliotherapy. In J. A. Kerry-Moran, & K. J. Aerila (Eds.), *Story in Children's lives: Contributions of the narrative mode to early childhood development, literacy, and learning*. Vol. 16. (pp. 299–314). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19266-2_15.
- Thirsk, L. M., & Moules, N. J. (2013). "I can just be me": Advanced practice nursing with families experiencing grief. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 19(1), 74–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1074840712471445>.
- Vázquez-Sánchez, J. M., Fernández-Alcántara, M., García-Caro, M., Cabañero-Martínez, M. J., Martí-García, C., & Montoya-Juárez, R. (2019). The concept of death in children aged from 9 to 11 years: Evidence through inductive and deductive analysis of drawings. *Death Studies*, 43(8), 467–477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1480545>.
- Worden, J. W. (2018). Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner. *Grief counseling and grief therapy* (5th ed.). Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826134752>.
- World Health Organization (2022). Road traffic injuries. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/road-traffic-injuries>.
- Zisook, S., & Shear, K. (2009). Grief and bereavement: What psychiatrists need to know. *World Psychiatry*, 8. (pp. 67–74). World Psychiatry Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2051-5545.2009.tb00217.x>.