THE EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF IN CHILDHOOD:

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

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Abstract

Childhood grief is a complex and dynamic experience influenced by the child's developmental stage, the type and circumstances of the loss, the relationship with the deceased, as well as the family, school, and broader sociocultural environment. The aim of the present study is to explore the experience of grief during childhood, with particular emphasis on children's developmental understanding of death, the emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral manifestations of grief, the factors influencing children's adjustment, and the main forms of support and therapeutic intervention. A narrative literature review of Greek- and English-language literature was conducted, drawing on scientific databases and relevant sources concerning children and adolescents aged 0–18 years. The synthesis of the literature demonstrated that the understanding and expression of grief vary considerably according to age and developmental level, while adjustment is influenced by individual, familial, social, and cultural factors. Support should therefore be individualized and developmentally appropriate, incorporating family and school-based support and, where necessary, specialized therapeutic interventions. In addition, a qualitative interpretive approach to *The Lion King* is undertaken as a cultural representation of loss, guilt, avoidance, memory, and gradual adjustment. Overall, childhood grief should not be understood as a uniform or linear process, but rather as an individualized experience that requires sensitivity to the developmental needs and unique circumstances of each child.

Keywords: childhood grief, loss, death, childhood, developmental understanding, therapeutic interventions

INTRODUCTION

A. GENERAL OVERVIEW

The present article constitutes a concise version of the thesis entitled *"The Experience of Grief in Childhood: Theoretical Foundations and Therapeutic Approaches,"* which was conducted within the framework of the Postgraduate Program "Social Theology and the Sciences of Man," with a specialization in "Axiological Psychosocial Counselling," at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, under the supervision of Professor Spyridon Tsitsigos.

Loss and death are inevitable experiences of human life, while the way grief is experienced and expressed is influenced by individual, familial, social, and cultural factors. In contemporary society, the relationship with death has, to a considerable extent, become distanced from everyday life, with the result that grief is often experienced more privately and the space available for processing loss is consequently

limited (Mystakidou et al., 2005; Kaldi-Koulikidou, 2015; Χρηστίδης, 2015; Recalcati, 2024). At the same time, the development of digital media and social networking platforms has created new ways of preserving memories and expressing grief.

During childhood, the loss of a loved one may affect a child's sense of security, emotional well-being, and everyday functioning. The understanding of death and the expression of grief vary according to age and developmental level, while family, school, peers, and the broader sociocultural context play an important role.

Despite the extensive study of grief, important research issues remain regarding the definition and assessment of childhood grief, the development of developmentally appropriate assessment tools, and the understanding of differences across age groups and cultural contexts (Alvis et al., 2022). At the same time, the investigation of factors that facilitate adjustment and resilience, as well as the implementation of appropriate psychosocial and therapeutic interventions, remain important areas of research interest (Sandler et al., 2010; Balk, 2014; Hanauer et al., 2024).

Within this context, the present article examines childhood grief as a complex developmental and psychosocial process, focusing on the understanding of death, manifestations of grief, factors influencing adjustment, and possibilities for support. In addition, the story of Simba in *The Lion King* is examined as a cultural representation of loss and as an interpretive framework for issues such as guilt, avoidance, memory, and adjustment.

The selection of childhood grief as the subject of the present study is associated with the need for a deeper understanding of how children experience and make meaning of loss. Childhood presents particular research challenges, as the experience of death is closely related to developmental level, the child's ability to comprehend the concept of death, and the environment within which the child is required to adapt.

Understanding the different ways in which grief is expressed is essential for identifying children's needs and selecting appropriate forms of support. Of particular importance is the integration of theoretical knowledge with clinical and counseling practice, so that interventions can respond appropriately to each child's developmental level and individual circumstances.

Furthermore, the use of cinematic narratives may serve as a complementary means of approaching the experience of loss. Simba's story in *The Lion King*, following the death of his father, provides an opportunity to explore themes such as guilt, withdrawal, the search for meaning, and adjustment.

B. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study is to explore childhood grief as a complex and multifaceted process, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the understanding of death and the experience of loss vary according to the child's age and developmental level. In parallel, the study examines the main emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral manifestations of grief, as well as the individual, familial, school-related, and sociocultural factors that influence adjustment.

Particular emphasis is placed on forms of support and on therapeutic and counselling approaches that may be utilized with children and adolescents. Finally, through a qualitative interpretive analysis of *The Lion King*, the study examines the representation

of childhood grief through Simba's story, as well as the symbolic and psychoeducational value of this particular narrative.

C. METHODOLOGY

The present study constitutes a narrative literature review of Greek- and English-language literature on childhood grief. The literature search was conducted in the EBSCOhost, APA PsycINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and SpringerLink databases, as well as in the institutional repositories of the University of Thessaly and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Pergamos).

Sources published between 1944 and 2025 were included, primarily in Greek and English, provided that they were thematically relevant to childhood grief and loss, with particular emphasis on the developmental, psychological, social, and therapeutic dimensions of the phenomenon. The review focuses on children and adolescents aged 0–18 years and includes scientific articles, books, and academic theses and dissertations.

The literature was synthesized descriptively and thematically, taking into account the heterogeneity of the sources and without conducting quantitative comparisons or a meta-analysis. In parallel, a qualitative interpretive analysis of *The Lion King* was conducted, focusing on Simba's experience following the loss of his father. The analysis of the film was used as a complementary component to the literature review.

1. DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF CHILDHOOD

Before examining how children perceive and experience loss, it is essential to define the fundamental characteristics of childhood and the developmental trajectory through which their cognitive, emotional, and social capacities gradually emerge. Understanding developmental differences is a key prerequisite for interpreting childhood grief, as the perception of death, the emotional processing of loss, and the ways in which grief is expressed vary according to age and developmental level.

Childhood constitutes a fundamental period of human development during which an individual's cognitive, emotional, and social skills progressively develop. For the purposes of the present study, the developmental course from infancy to adolescence is examined and divided into infancy (0–1 year), preschool age (2–5 years), school age (6–9 years), preadolescence (10–12 years), and adolescence (13–18 years). Each stage is characterized by a distinct level of cognitive, emotional, and social maturation, which also influences the way children perceive and cope with significant experiences, such as loss (Berk, 2022; Santrock, 2011).

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

According to Piaget, cognitive development progresses through successive stages, during which the way children perceive and interpret the world changes (Feldman, 2011). During infancy, knowledge is primarily acquired through sensorimotor experiences, whereas during the preschool years, symbolic thought, language, and imagination develop. During school age, thinking becomes increasingly logical and organized, while during adolescence it acquires an abstract and hypothetical character (Feldman, 2019). This progression is important for understanding how children perceive death and construct meaning around loss.

Emotional and Social Development

Emotional and social development involves children's ability to recognize, express, and gradually regulate their emotions, as well as to develop relationships with others. Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes the importance of relationships with caregivers, which function as a secure base and influence subsequent emotional and social adjustment (Feldman, 2011; 2019). Emotional expression changes throughout development, ranging from more direct and nonverbal forms in younger children to increasingly complex verbal processing during adolescence.

Developmental Specificities

Developmental level influences the way children understand and cope with challenging experiences. Limited cognitive maturity and difficulties in understanding abstract concepts may lead to a fragmented understanding or misinterpretation of events (Speece, 1995). In younger children, magical thinking may influence the attribution of causes to events that they are not yet able to fully comprehend (Παναγιωτοπούλου, 2016; Joy et al., 2024). The presence of stable and supportive caregivers can promote adjustment and foster the development of psychological resilience (Cohen et al., 2004).

2. GRIEF AND MOURNING IN CHILDHOOD

Understanding the experience of loss requires a distinction between the concepts of grief and mourning. Grief refers to the psychological state and process of adjustment that follows a significant loss, most commonly the death of a loved one, but also other forms of loss (Morris, 2020; Worden, 1996). Mourning refers to the emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioral responses manifested following a loss (Stroebe et al., 2001). Although the two concepts are closely related, they are not synonymous. In childhood, the expression of mourning varies considerably according to the child's age and ability to verbally articulate their experience (Attig, 2004b; Worden, 2018; Neimeyer, 2001).

Theoretical Approaches to Grief

The scientific study of grief has evolved considerably over time. Early psychoanalytic approaches, exemplified by Freud (1917/2017), conceptualized grief as a process of psychological adjustment following loss. Lindemann (1944) and Anna Freud (1960) contributed further to the understanding of grief reactions and their characteristics during childhood.

Bowlby's attachment theory (1980) highlighted the significance of the relationship with the person who has died, while Parkes (1980) and Worden (2018) focused on the process of adjustment and the active processes involved in coping with loss. The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement proposed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) emphasized the dynamic oscillation between loss-oriented coping and adjustment to the demands of a changed reality.

These approaches contributed to a shift away from the view that grief follows a single and strictly linear trajectory. Contemporary perspectives place greater emphasis on its individualized and dynamic nature, taking into account age, personality, the relationship with the deceased, and the family and social environment (Attig, 2004a; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Normal and Complicated Grief

Grief constitutes a natural and expected process of adjustment to loss and, in itself, does not represent a pathological condition (Κουτουματσιώτη, 2020; Πολυχρονίου, 2025). In children, it may be characterized by fluctuations in both the intensity and form of grief reactions.

In contrast, abnormal or complicated grief may be characterized by intense and prolonged emotional distress, persistent guilt or self-blame, social withdrawal, and significant difficulties in everyday, school, or social functioning (Τζιντζαλή, 2025; Κυνηγάρη & Μπακάλη, 2008). Assessment should take into account the intensity and duration of the reactions, as well as the extent to which the child's functioning is affected.

Forms and Manifestations of Grief

The literature describes various forms of grief, including normal or expected grief, complicated or prolonged grief, cumulative grief, traumatic grief, disenfranchised grief, collective grief, ambiguous grief, as well as inhibited and absent grief (Χολέβα et al., 2016; Bacqué, 2007). These categories should not be regarded as absolutely distinct classifications, as the experience of grief is subject to considerable individual and developmental variation.

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSS AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH IN CHILDHOOD

The loss of a loved one constitutes a significant stressful event during childhood and may affect a child's emotional and psychosocial adjustment (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016; Κοκκίνη, 2022). Its impact varies according to the child's relationship with the deceased and the circumstances surrounding the death, particularly when the death is sudden or traumatic (Πολυχρονίου, 2025).

Children often express grief differently from adults. Grief may be expressed through play, drawing, and other creative activities, as well as through changes in behavior, sleep, eating patterns, or school and family functioning (Silverman & Worden, 1992). Alternations between intense sadness and apparently normal play do not necessarily indicate that the child has overcome the loss; rather, they may constitute part of the child's adjustment process (ΕΚΠΑ, 2025). The experience of loss may also be reactivated at different developmental stages as the child acquires new capacities for understanding and processing the experience.

Understanding the Concept of Death Across Developmental Stages

Loss is examined primarily in relation to the death of a loved one, although childhood grief may also arise from other significant losses, such as parental separation, the loss of a pet, or major changes in the family and school environment. The understanding of death is influenced by age, developmental level, family and cultural context, personal experiences, and the child's beliefs (Speece, 1995; Bacqué, 2007; Πολυχρονίου, 2025; Stavrianou & Pavlidou, 2022).

Key dimensions of the understanding of death include universality, irreversibility, cessation of vital functions, and causality, while the understanding of postmortem existence is influenced by personal and cultural beliefs (Κουτουματσιώτη, 2020).

During infancy (0–1 year), the child does not yet comprehend the concept of death and primarily experiences the absence of the caregiver. During the preschool years (2–5

years), death may be perceived as a temporary or reversible state, while an understanding of the cessation of vital functions gradually develops (Joy et al., 2024; Παναγιωτοπούλου, 2016; Πολυχρονίου, 2025). During school age (6–9 years), understanding of the irreversibility of death becomes more established, followed gradually by an understanding of its universality (Speece, 1995). During preadolescence (10–12 years), children develop a more comprehensive understanding of the permanence and consequences of death, as well as of their own mortality (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016; Rapa et al., 2020). During adolescence (13–18 years), the understanding of the universality of mortality becomes more fully developed, allowing for the processing of more complex metaphysical and symbolic dimensions of death (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016).

4. MANIFESTATIONS AND FORMS OF CHILDHOOD GRIEF

Childhood grief may manifest at emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral levels. Grief reactions do not necessarily follow a linear course, and their assessment should take into consideration the child's age, developmental level, intensity and duration of the reactions, as well as their impact on everyday functioning.

Emotional reactions may include sadness, crying, anger, anxiety, loneliness, insecurity, guilt, and fear of further loss (Παναγιωτοπούλου, 2016; Κυνηγάρη & Μπακάλη, 2008; Rapa et al., 2020). Younger children are more likely to display intense attachment to caregivers and separation anxiety, whereas school-aged children may exhibit searching for the deceased, idealization, denial, or alternations between sadness and play (Silverman & Worden, 1992; ΕΚΠΑ, 2025). During preadolescence and adolescence, children may experience loss of interest, feelings of emptiness, low self-esteem, difficulties with concentration, fatigue, sleep disturbances, and changes in appetite. Some adolescents may limit their expression of grief or assume increased caregiving responsibilities within the family (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Ζουρίδη, 2024).

Physical manifestations may include headaches, gastrointestinal symptoms, fatigue, muscle tension, and tachycardia, as well as changes in sleep and eating patterns or nightmares (Παναγιωτοπούλου, 2016; Silverman & Worden, 1992). At the behavioral level, children may display aggression, social withdrawal, regressive behaviors, increased dependence on adults, and difficulties in school functioning. During adolescence, particularly in cases of significant adjustment difficulties, social isolation, reduced academic performance, risk-taking behaviors, or substance use have been reported (Brent et al., 2012; Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016). Parental loss has also been associated with poorer academic performance, particularly when the loss occurs at a younger age (Liu et al., 2022).

The reactions described above do not, in themselves, indicate pathological grief. Their significance should be evaluated in relation to the child's developmental stage, the context of the loss, and the extent to which they affect the child's functioning and adjustment.

Forms of Childhood Grief

Grief may manifest in different ways depending on the circumstances of the loss, the child's relationship with the deceased, and individual and environmental characteristics. Manifestations may include emotional reactions, behavioral changes, sleep or eating disturbances, difficulties in school and social functioning, as well as

physical symptoms (Παναγιωτοπούλου, 2016; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016).

Commonly described forms include uncomplicated or normal grief, complicated or prolonged grief, traumatic grief, anticipatory grief, and disenfranchised grief. These forms should not be regarded as absolutely distinct categories, but rather as descriptions of different circumstances or ways in which the experience of loss may manifest.

Uncomplicated or normal grief involves expected emotional, behavioral, and physical reactions through which the child gradually adapts to the loss (Mosher, 2018). Its course may fluctuate and does not necessarily follow a linear progression.

Complicated or prolonged grief is characterized by more intense or persistent reactions and significant difficulties in adapting to the loss. In children, it may manifest through chronic or delayed reactions, while symptoms of anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress, as well as physical manifestations, may also occur (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2013; Sanghvi, 2020). The need for professional intervention is primarily associated with the intensity and duration of the reactions and the extent to which the child's everyday functioning is affected (Chandran, Raman, & Shiva, 2025).

Traumatic grief in childhood may occur following sudden, violent, or otherwise highly traumatic deaths and is characterized by the coexistence of grief reactions and symptoms of traumatic stress, such as post-traumatic stress and depressive manifestations (Cohen et al., 2002; Chandran, Raman, & Shiva, 2025).

Anticipatory grief refers to the emotional response to an impending death, such as in cases involving a parent with a serious or terminal illness. It may involve the processing of previous, present, and anticipated losses and may provide the child with an opportunity to gradually adjust to the impending loss (Cohen et al., 2002; Mosher, 2018).

Disenfranchised grief refers to losses that are not adequately recognized or validated by the social and cultural environment. In children, it may be associated with different forms of separation or loss and may significantly affect their emotional well-being (Crowe, 2017).

Prolonged Grief Disorder

Grief is generally considered a natural process of adjustment to loss. In some cases, however, intense and persistent distress may exceed the expected framework and be associated with significant functional impairment. The *DSM-5-TR* recognizes Prolonged Grief Disorder as a clinical disorder characterized by persistent and intense yearning for the deceased or persistent preoccupation with the death, accompanied by difficulties in adjustment and significant distress or functional impairment (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

In children and adolescents, its manifestation may vary according to age. In addition to sadness and intense preoccupation with the loss, irritability, emotional outbursts, aggression, social withdrawal, or persistent difficulties in returning to everyday activities may occur (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Kaplow et al., 2012b). According to the *DSM-5-TR*, diagnosis in children and adolescents requires the persistence of symptoms for at least six months, in contrast to the twelve-month period required for adults, as well as significant distress or functional impairment (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

The distinction between normal and prolonged grief cannot be based solely on the presence of specific symptoms. It requires consideration of the duration and intensity of the reactions, the child's developmental stage, the relationship with the deceased, and the broader family and social context. Recognition of the disorder in children presents additional challenges, as the expression of grief varies considerably with age, while available research evidence remains limited for certain age groups and cultural populations (Kentor & Kaplow, 2020; Layne et al., 2020; Alvis et al., 2022).

Traumatic Grief

Traumatic grief represents a distinct form of bereavement in which the loss is associated with sudden, violent, or otherwise highly traumatic circumstances of death and is accompanied by both grief- and trauma-related reactions (Neria & Litz, 2004). It may involve intense preoccupation with the circumstances of the death, intrusive thoughts, fears concerning safety, anger, avoidance, emotional numbing, and difficulties in everyday functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Melhem et al., 2004).

In younger children, these reactions may be expressed primarily through play and behavior. Although traumatic grief overlaps with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, it retains a distinct dimension, as the child may simultaneously experience traumatic distress while seeking to maintain an emotional connection with the deceased (McClatchey et al., 2014).

The severity of the reaction is influenced by the significance of the relationship with the deceased, the degree of attachment, the child's developmental level, and the availability of a supportive environment. Particular difficulties may arise following suicide, as the loss may be accompanied by anger, guilt, shame, or social stigma. Sudden or violent death may also intensify the child's sense of threat, as the child has not had the opportunity to prepare for the loss (Mughal et al., 2018; Fidan, 2024). The responses of parents and caregivers constitute an additional important factor, as difficulties in regulating their own emotional reactions may increase the child's distress (Brown et al., 2008; De Young et al., 2016).

5. FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN'S ADAPTATION TO LOSS

Children's adjustment to loss is influenced by a combination of individual, family, social, and cultural factors. The relationship with the deceased, the circumstances surrounding the death, developmental age, previous experiences, family functioning, and the available support network may significantly influence the course of the grieving process (Μελισόβα, 2017; Kaplow et al., 2010b).

Particular importance should be attributed to the loss of a primary attachment figure, such as a parent, as this entails not only emotional loss but also changes in caregiving, daily routines, and the child's sense of security (Kaplow et al., 2010b).

Family Environment and Supportive Relationships

The family constitutes a fundamental context for adjustment following loss. Caregivers' emotional availability, stability in daily routines, and the possibility of open communication can strengthen the child's sense of security and psychological resilience (Stavrianou & Pavlidou, 2022; Πολυχρονίου, 2025). Conversely, intense family conflict, limited support, and socioeconomic difficulties may hinder adjustment.

The ability of adults to acknowledge and express their own emotions without excluding the child from the reality of the loss may have a supportive effect. In contrast, avoidance of discussion, excessive protectiveness, or emotional unavailability may increase confusion and insecurity. Maintaining stable relationships with relatives, friends, and other caregivers also constitutes an important protective factor.

Cultural and Religious Influences

The experience of childhood grief is shaped by the cultural, social, and religious context (Alahakoon, 2018; Πολυχρονίου, 2025). Cultural beliefs influence the way death is understood and given meaning, grief is expressed, and rituals surrounding loss are organized (Ψεύτη, 2022).

A child's participation in memorial or farewell rituals may contribute to understanding and processing the loss when such participation is developmentally appropriate and not imposed on the child (Crompton, 2017; Παπαδάτου & Καμπέρη, 2013). Religious beliefs may also provide a framework for meaning-making and ways of maintaining a sense of connection with the deceased (McGraw, 2004; Harris-Hendriks et al., 2019).

Expressions of grief are therefore not universal. Support should take into account the family's beliefs and practices, avoiding the assumption that there is a single way of experiencing or expressing grief.

School and Peers

The school provides continuity, daily routine, and social interaction following a loss. Maintaining school routines may strengthen the child's sense of security, while teachers can observe changes in behavior or school functioning (Τζιντζαλή, 2025; Stavrianou & Pavlidou, 2022).

Friendships may reduce feelings of loneliness and facilitate the continuation of social activities, particularly during preadolescence and adolescence (Ludik & Greeff, 2020). Conversely, social isolation or discomfort among peers may intensify feelings of being different. Collaboration among teachers, family members, and mental health professionals may facilitate the early identification of difficulties and the adaptation of support to the child's needs.

6. SUPPORT AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS IN CHILDHOOD GRIEF

Support should be individualized and developmentally appropriate. Many children are able to adapt to loss through support from their family, school, and broader social environment, whereas cases involving intense, persistent, or traumatic distress require assessment by an appropriately trained mental health professional. Research evidence regarding the effectiveness of all interventions remains limited in some areas (Revet et al., 2020).

6.1 Basic Principles of Support

A fundamental prerequisite is honest and developmentally appropriate communication about death. The use of clear terms, such as "died" and "death," helps avoid the confusion that may arise from vague expressions and allows the child to gradually develop a realistic understanding of the loss.

At the same time, children should be provided with space for different forms of expression, including verbal communication, play, drawing, storytelling, creative activities, or silence. Maintaining daily routines and the presence of consistent caregivers can strengthen the child's sense of security, while preserving memories, photographs, or personal rituals may support a continuing sense of connection with the deceased.

Particular attention should be paid to feelings of guilt. The child needs to understand that their thoughts, wishes, or behaviors did not cause the death when this is not consistent with reality. The aim of support is not to eliminate sadness, but to create a safe context in which the child can experience and process the loss.

6.2 Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is based on the interaction between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and may be utilized when grief is accompanied by significant difficulties in adjustment. The process may include cognitive restructuring, anxiety-management techniques, reinforcement of adaptive behaviors, and gradual processing of the loss (Malkinson, 2001; Τσιλιγγίρη, 2019).

In cases of traumatic loss, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) has been used with children and adolescents experiencing symptoms of traumatic grief, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, or behavioral difficulties. Cohen et al. (2004) reported positive effects of TF-CBT among children and parents, while also highlighting the importance of family involvement.

CBT should be adapted to the child's age, developmental level, type of loss, and severity of symptoms (Revet et al., 2020).

6.3 Interpersonal Psychotherapy

Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) is a brief and structured approach that focuses on interpersonal relationships and the changes that occur following significant losses (Lavigne et al., 2016). Within the context of grief, it may focus on processing the loss, expressing related emotions, adapting to new roles, and strengthening social relationships.

It may be particularly useful for adolescents when loss is associated with social withdrawal, emotional distress, or depressive symptomatology, while taking into account age, developmental level, and cultural context (Morris, 2012; Lavigne et al., 2016).

6.4 Grief Counseling and Family Support

Grief counseling aims to facilitate emotional expression, promote understanding of the loss, and support gradual adjustment to the new reality (Ασπρούδη & Μπουλγκούρα, 2009; Γκοτσούλια, 2022). In childhood, it does not concern the child exclusively but often also involves the family environment, as loss may alter relationships, roles, and everyday family functioning.

Creating a safe context allows the child to express sadness, anger, fear, or guilt without feeling that their reactions are inappropriate. At the same time, psychoeducation for parents and caregivers may contribute to a better understanding of the diverse manifestations of childhood grief and to the creation of a stable and supportive environment.

Grief counseling does not replace specialized psychotherapeutic or psychiatric intervention when there are indications of severe or prolonged dysfunction. In such cases, appropriate assessment and, when necessary, referral are required.

6.5 Play Therapy and Creative Forms of Expression

Play therapy utilizes play as a means of communication and expression, making it particularly suitable for children who have difficulty verbally describing complex emotional experiences. Through symbolic and creative play, children may represent thoughts, fears, and emotions associated with loss (Landreth, 2012; Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010).

Dolls, puppets, drawing, stories, and other symbolic media may facilitate the externalization of the child's experience and provide a safe means of processing loss (Gonzalez & Bell, 2016). Nondirective play therapy emphasizes the child's freedom to choose the form and content of play, whereas directive approaches employ specific activities based on therapeutic goals (Axline, 1969; Landreth, 2012).

6.6 Support in Early Childhood

In very young children, support relies to a considerable extent on the caregiver's emotional availability and consistent presence. Caregiving approaches such as RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) emphasize respect for the child, authentic communication, observation, and responsiveness to the child's needs (Gerber, 1998; Lansbury, 2014).

RIE does not constitute an independent therapeutic intervention for grief but may be understood as a supportive framework for caregiving and communication. Its relevance lies primarily in the consistent presence of the caregiver, acceptance of the child's emotions, and creation of a secure environment, elements that are broadly consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980).

6.7 The Role of the School and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

The school constitutes an important context of support, as it provides continuity, daily routines, and social relationships during a period in which family life may have been disrupted. Teachers are not expected to assume a therapeutic role, but rather to recognize potential changes in behavior, academic performance, or social relationships and to collaborate with the family and appropriate professionals.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is particularly important when the loss is traumatic or when persistent difficulties are observed. The selection of an appropriate intervention should take into account the child's age and developmental level, the relationship with the deceased, the circumstances surrounding the loss, the presence of traumatic symptoms, family functioning, and the available protective factors.

7. QUALITATIVE INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF *THE LION KING* AS A REPRESENTATION OF CHILDHOOD GRIEF

The qualitative interpretive analysis of *The Lion King* is utilized as a complementary interpretive framework for understanding childhood grief. The film depicts the loss of the young Simba's father and his journey from the traumatic event and subsequent guilt to withdrawal, reconnection with the memory of his father, and acceptance of his personal identity.

The analysis does not aim to empirically validate theoretical models or to equate cinematic representation with the actual experience of children. Rather, it examines how specific narrative and symbolic elements may be interpreted in light of attachment theory, contemporary approaches to grief, and the concept of continuing bonds.

7.1 The Relationship Between Simba and Mufasa as a Secure Base

Simba's relationship with his father can be interpreted through Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory. Mufasa functions as a significant attachment figure, providing security, guidance, and a framework within which the child can explore the environment.

The loss of this relationship has multiple implications, as Simba loses not only a loved one but also a fundamental point of reference for understanding himself and the world. This dimension is particularly important in childhood grief, as the loss of a parent may affect the child's sense of security, family functioning, and perception of the future (Bowlby, 1980; Kaplow et al., 2012a).

7.2 Loss, Shock, and Guilt

Mufasa's death constitutes a sudden and traumatic event for Simba. Particular significance is attached to the guilt that develops following the death, as Simba comes to believe that his own behavior contributed to the loss. This self-blame is reinforced by Scar's intervention.

This representation is consistent with the tendency of some children to attribute responsibility to themselves for events that they cannot control or fully understand. Particularly in younger children, limited understanding of causality and magical thinking may intensify feelings of guilt and fear (Joy et al., 2024; Rapa et al., 2020).

In Simba's case, guilt leads him to distance himself from his past and functions as a mechanism for avoiding emotional pain.

7.3 Withdrawal and "Hakuna Matata" as an Avoidance Mechanism

Following Mufasa's death, Simba leaves the place where he grew up and distances himself from his family, memories, and previous identity. His encounter with Timon and Pumbaa provides him with a new relational context in which he can temporarily experience a sense of safety and distance himself from the painful experience.

"Hakuna Matata" may be symbolically interpreted as an attitude of avoiding painful emotional experience. The attempt to live "without worries" does not necessarily mean that the loss has been processed. This dimension can be related to the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement, according to which individuals oscillate between engagement with the loss and temporary disengagement from it (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Schut & Stroebe, 2001).

However, temporary distancing from pain should not necessarily be equated with pathological avoidance. In Simba's narrative, the issue emerges when avoidance becomes associated with distancing himself from his personal and family history.

7.4 Memory, Continuing Bonds, and the Reframing of Loss

A pivotal moment in Simba's journey is the reappearance of Mufasa's presence in his memory and consciousness. This development may be interpreted through the concept

of continuing bonds, according to which adjustment to loss does not require complete emotional detachment from the deceased.

The memory of his father gradually transforms from a source of pain into an element of the hero's identity. Simba recognizes that he is not responsible for his father's death and that their relationship can continue to constitute an important part of his personal history.

7.5 From Avoidance to Adaptation

Simba's return to his family environment marks a new phase in the processing of his loss. His return functions as a reconnection with an identity that he had previously rejected. Simba confronts his memories once again, acknowledges the reality of his father's death, and assumes a new role.

This trajectory can be related to the contemporary understanding of grief as a dynamic and nonlinear process. Adjustment does not occur through a predetermined sequence of stages, but through the individual's ability to coexist with the loss, maintain a connection with the deceased, and simultaneously reinvest in life (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Worden, 2018).

7.6 Using the Film as a Psychoeducational Tool

The cinematic representation of childhood grief may be utilized as a starting point for psychoeducational discussion with children and adolescents, taking into account their age, developmental maturity, and personal history of loss. The film provides opportunities to discuss death, guilt, fear, memory, family, emotional avoidance, and the continuation of life following loss.

Simba's story should not be regarded as a model of a normative grief trajectory applicable to all children, but rather as a symbolic representation that may function as a narrative framework for the expression and exploration of emotions. In this way, the narrative may support the discussion of complex issues surrounding loss without being equated with children's actual experiences.

8. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Conclusion

The present study highlighted childhood grief as a complex and dynamic process of adjustment that varies according to the child's developmental level, relationship with the deceased, circumstances surrounding the loss, and family and social context. The understanding of death and the expression of grief change from infancy through adolescence and cannot be assessed according to a single, uniform model.

Grief is generally a natural response to loss and may be expressed through emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral reactions. Assessment should focus not only on the presence of specific symptoms but also on their intensity, duration, and impact on the child's functioning, in order to facilitate the timely identification of cases requiring specialized support.

The family and school constitute key contexts of support, while honest and developmentally appropriate communication, continuity in daily routines, acceptance of emotions, and the maintenance of supportive relationships may facilitate adjustment.

At the same time, support should take into account cultural and family-specific characteristics.

With regard to therapeutic interventions, the literature highlights the importance of individualized and developmentally appropriate approaches. Play therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, grief counseling, and, where appropriate, Interpersonal Psychotherapy may be utilized according to the child's needs and the nature of the loss. Particular attention is required in cases of traumatic or prolonged grief, in which timely assessment and referral to appropriately trained professionals are important. Nevertheless, the available research evidence does not always allow firm conclusions regarding the effectiveness of all interventions (Revet et al., 2020).

The interpretive analysis of *The Lion King* highlighted the potential value of narrative and symbolism in approaching complex experiences of loss. Simba's journey from loss and guilt to reconnection with the memory of his father and adjustment to a new reality may function as a symbolic framework for issues encountered in childhood grief. Although cinematic narratives do not constitute models for the grief trajectory of all children, they may provide an accessible means of discussing death, loss, guilt, memory, and the continuation of life.

Overall, supporting children experiencing grief cannot be limited to a single therapeutic method or intervention setting. It requires coordination among the family, school, and mental health professionals, with the child's individual needs at the center of the process. The aim is not to eliminate sadness, but to create conditions that allow the child to understand and make meaning of the loss, express their emotions, and continue their developmental trajectory within the new reality.

Suggestions for future research

Further systematic investigation of the effectiveness of interventions aimed at strengthening psychoeducation and supporting parents and caregivers is warranted.

Of particular interest is the further examination of the role of schools and communities, as well as the development of interdisciplinary models that connect families, educational settings, and mental health services. Finally, the use of digital media for the expression of grief and the preservation of memory represents an emerging field that warrants further investigation, particularly regarding its impact on the experiences of children and adolescents.

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