

## **Communication About Dying, Death, and Bereavement: A Systematic Review of Children's Literature**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Children's books have the potential to facilitate communication about death for children living with a serious illness and for children coping with the death of a loved one.

**Objective:** This study examines the content of children's literature relevant to the topic of dying and death and identifies books providers can share with children and their families.

**Design:** A search of children's literature was conducted using four electronic databases and one additional search engine using the word "Death" or "Dying." Storybooks about dying, death, and bereavement published in English, French, or Spanish between 1995 and 2015 were included.

**Measurements:** Each book underwent content analysis by at least two independent reviewers. Strict PRISMA standard was followed. Full protocol is available as PROSPERO #CRD42016042129.

**Results:** Two hundred ten books met inclusion criteria. The dying subject was primarily a grandparent ( $n = 78$ ) or pet ( $n = 44$ ). Books on the experience of a child dying were scarce ( $n = 5$ ). The word death or dying was used in 75% of the books ( $n = 158$ ), while others utilized euphemisms. The majority of books featured animals ( $n = 40$ ) or Caucasian subjects ( $n = 122$ ) and included spiritual elements such as heaven ( $n = 122$ ). Less than one-quarter of the books included tools for readers to address the topic of death.

**Conclusions:** Storybooks can be a helpful tool to introduce communication about dying and death with children. Gaps exist in current children's literature to effectively enable children to reflect on their own dying process. A general summary of available books is provided to assist those caring for children and families facing end-of-life issues.

### **STRENGTHS**

- The literature search was quite extensive and spans publications in the last 20 years.
- Books were reviewed for several elements including language, symbolism, illustrations, and resources offered in the book.
- Books reviewed by three independent reviewers

### **WEAKNESSES**

- Inclusion criteria was limited to three languages, possibly excluding certain demographics.
- Mentions how certain things were perceived by children in the paper, however a child's perception of the books was not mentioned in the methods section.

### **RELEVANCE TO PALLIATIVE MEDICINE**

- An important part of our role in palliative care is not only the care of the patient but also supporting and guiding the entire family through a healthy grieving process.
- Often, we have younger patients on the TPCU with young families that require support
- As physicians, if we do not have access to interdisciplinary team members to assist in supporting families and providing resources, this may act as a good reference for materials that could be suggested to family.