

Developing a Resource Guide to Support Children with Grief and Loss Using Storybooks: Insights for Caregiver Strategies Informed from Clinical Guidance and Storybooks

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Introduction

Current literature on children's grief suggests that initiating conversations and supporting conceptual understandings of death enhances children's ability to cope with bereavement (Schonfeld et al., 2024). Moreover, promoting positive parent-child relationships can support adaptive grief by increasing self-esteem, emotional identification, expression, and the use of healthy coping strategies (Haine et al., 2008). Bibliotherapy may serve as an early intervention strategy for families to introduce the topic of death, build comprehension, and facilitate open conversation while strengthening positive family relationships. This poster presents a framework for developing a resource guide to support families in navigating grief and loss using storybooks.

Methods

A sample of storybooks (n = 50) for children aged 0-12 were categorized into 5 categories (Death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, pet, and general). Storybooks were taken from the London Public Library database, Lighthouse For Grieving Children & Families library database, and other grief-counselling resources. The texts were further screened for in-person or virtual accessibility for caregivers, such as access through the London Public Library or digital access through Youtube readalongs. Storybooks were coded for evidence of coping strategies specific to bereavement (naming symptoms, communication, social support, memorializing, routines) along with evidence of education on concepts that support children's understanding and processing of death (finality, irreversibility, causality, inevitability, life cycle, culture, new beginnings, and metaphors).

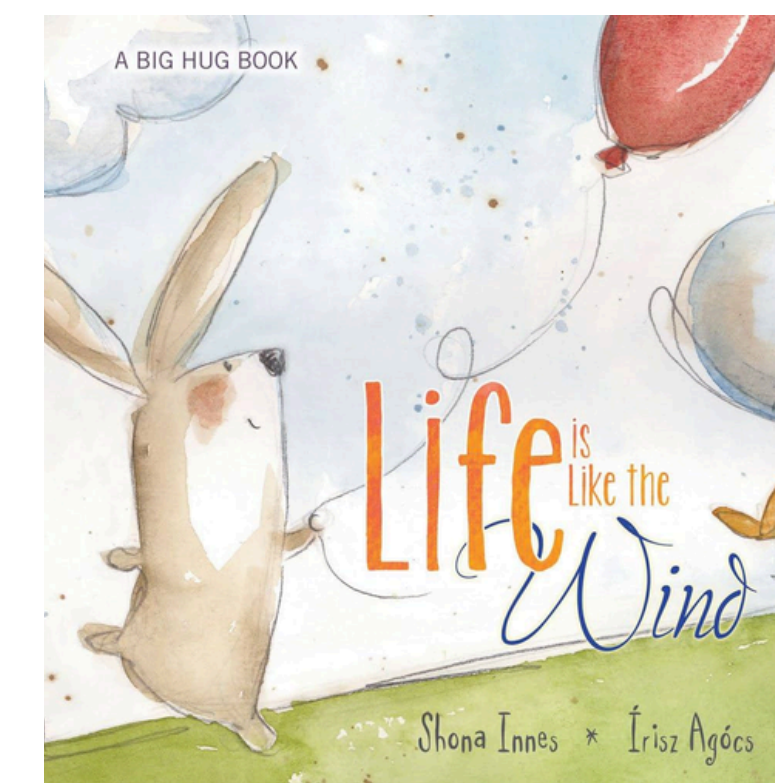
Results

Out of 50 storybooks identified, top themes were memorializing, naming emotional symptoms, social support, causality, and finality (Figure 1). 26 books were above the inclusion criteria for books on coping strategies, while 19 were above the inclusion criteria for books on conceptual understandings on death and dying. 13 were identified to be above the inclusion criteria for both. Looking at the distribution of the 5 categories identified for type of loss, the most prevalent categories were general loss, and the loss of a grandparent (Figure 2)

Implications

The classification of storybooks into bereavement relationship categories allows for individualized support, as the reading materials can be made relevant to the reader's specific loss. Including additional reading labels such as the types of coping strategies and educational concepts identified can further individualize treatment based on children's needs and understandings. There is evidence that facilitating direct communication about the nature of death, its associated emotions, and ways to cope protects against complicated grief in children (Haine et al., 2008; Schonfeld et al., 2024). Bibliotherapy is a way parents and caregivers can facilitate this direct and supportive communication about death and dying, while also strengthening positive family relationships as a possible protective factor against complicated grief.

By facilitating direct and supportive communication about the nature of death and its associated emotions, bibliotherapy can protect against complicated grief that can arise from misunderstandings about death and dying.



Life Is Like the Wind (Written by Shona Ines, illustrated by Irisz Agocs)

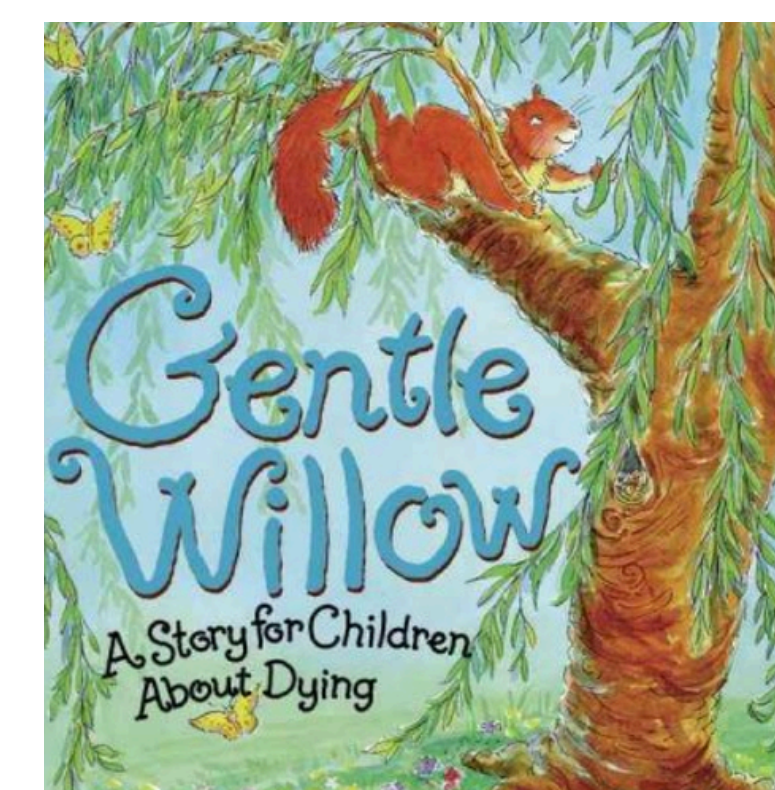
Category: General Loss

Coping Strategies: Memorializing, naming emotional symptoms, social support, routines

Concepts: Finality, inevitability, culture

Age Range: 4-7

Depictions: The book speaks on a metaphor on how life comes and goes like the wind. Wind eventually stops, or we don't know where it goes when it leaves. The storybook shows what we can do to cope and take care of ourselves.



Something Very Sad Happened (Written by Bonnie Zucker)

Category: Loss of a Friend

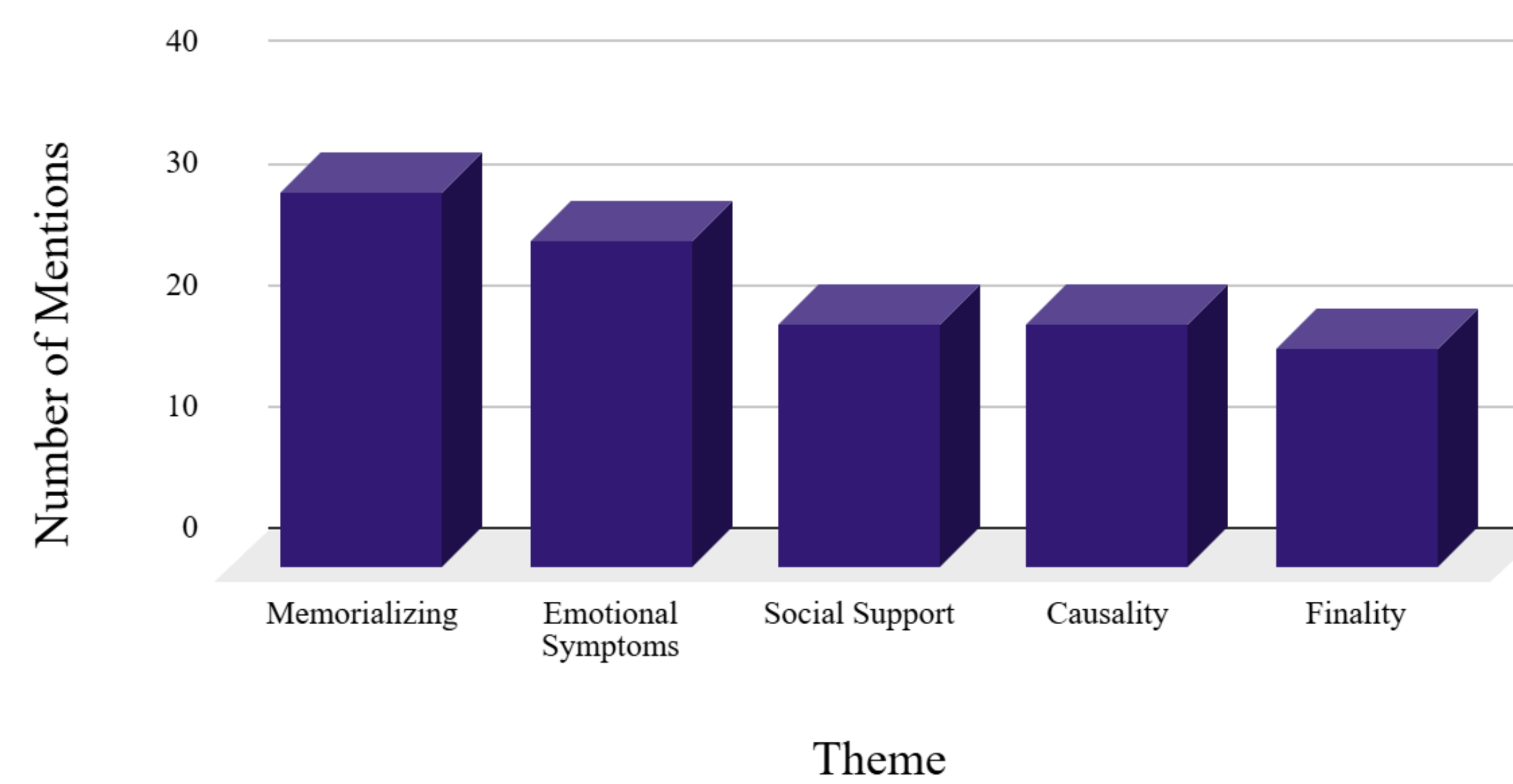
Coping Strategies: Memorializing, naming emotional symptoms, social support

Concepts: Inevitability, causality, irreversibility

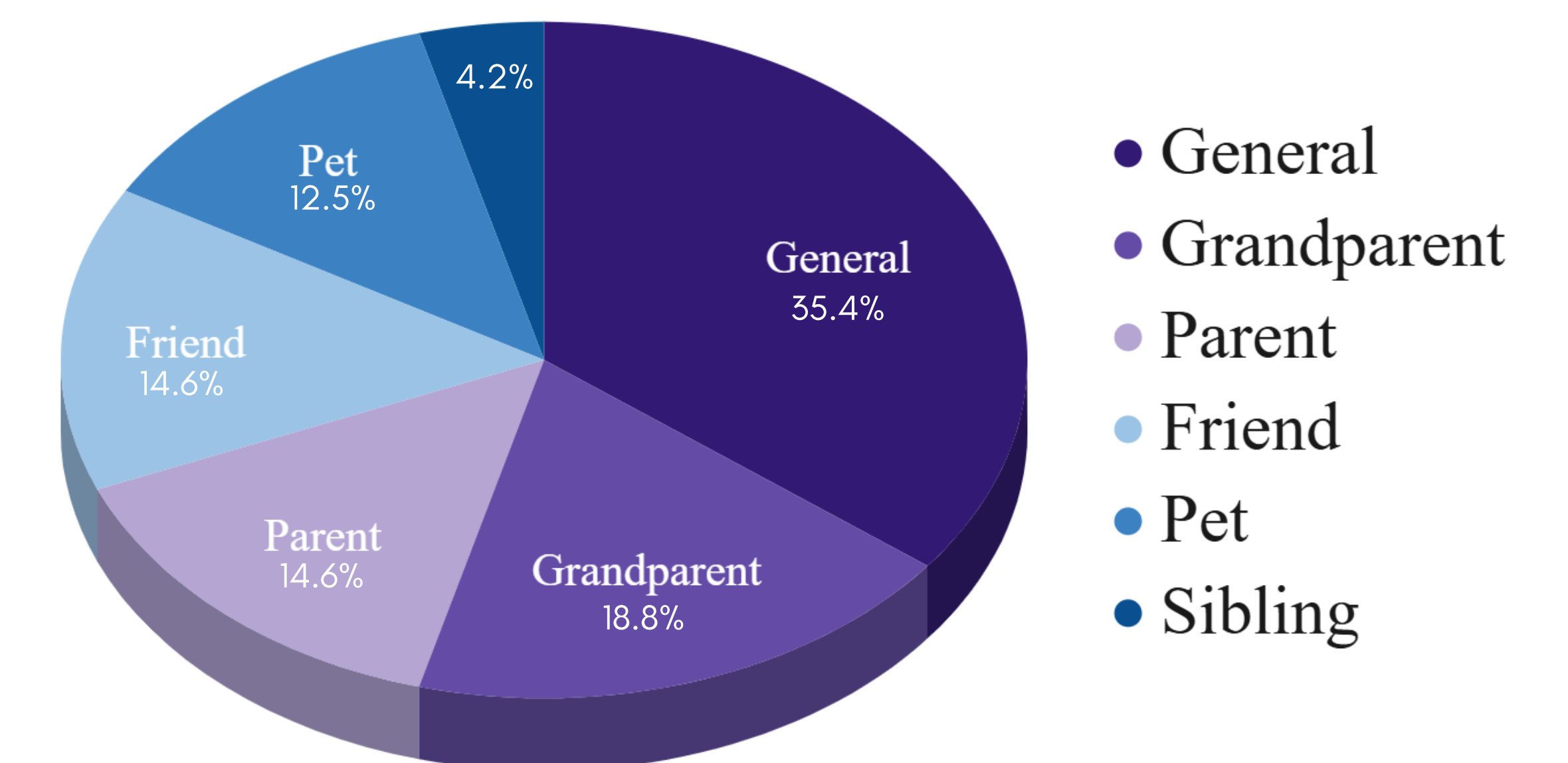
Age Range: 4-8

Depictions: The book follows the friendship of Amanda and Gentle Willow as they navigate Gentle Willow's sickness, which will eventually cause her to die. The storybook teaches how to cope with the process of dying and dealing with loss.

Top 5 Themes Across Concepts and Coping Strategies in Children's Storybooks on Death and Dying



Distribution of Loss Categories in Children's Storybooks on Death and Dying



Future Directions

A resource guide is currently under development covering key concepts on how to support children experiencing grief and loss through the use of storybooks. This resources is intended to be used as a supportive tool for parents, caregivers, and educators. Future research intends to expand on the application of the resource guide, highlighting selected storybooks that are explicitly designed to facilitate guiding questions to support conversations and relationship building with children. Further research would benefit from analyzing how conceptual understandings of death and dying correspond to developmental stages in childhood for more individualized support.

