

**“Dead” Not “Gone”:
Analyzing Language About Death in Children’s Picture Books**

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Abstract

One way to foster conversations with children about serious topics such as death and dying is through the use of picture books. Grief specialists suggest that the most effective children’s picture books about death are those that include specific biological, sociocultural, and emotional components, use concrete and precise language, and provide additional resources that support further discussion and understanding. Although the death of a loved one is one of the most universal human experiences, we tend to avoid discussing it in Western society. However, conversations about death are important and vital to every child, particularly one who is struggling with grief. This project is a content analysis of children’s picture books to determine whether the author’s level of expertise on child grief plays a role in a book’s potential effectiveness. After compiling a list of 86 picture books on death and dying, I carefully analyzed 15 books by child grief experts and 15 books by non-experts in order to discover which recommended characteristics were present in each book. Findings indicate that books written by experts contain more recommended characteristics and are thus more effective in fostering productive conversations about death with children.

Keywords: children’s literature, death understanding, death, dying, child grief

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Analyzing Language About Death in Children’s Picture Books

There are a variety of reasons an adult caregiver might use picture books as a starting point to discuss the topic of death with a child. Perhaps a person or an animal companion in the child’s life has died, or the child is asking questions about death that the adult is unsure how to answer. While society attempts to protect children from the topic of death and deemphasize the grief process, death is an inescapable reality to which children are frequently exposed through personal events, but also indirectly through consumption of the news, religious stories, history education, as well as in nature, movies, and video games (Paul, 2019). The more a child understands and processes the concept of death, the less likely they will fear it (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Indeed, “uncovering death or making the reality of death more visible for children is an educational and moral obligation” (Osvath, 2021, p. 85). Books are an important tool that caregivers can use to provide a context to aid in a child’s understanding of death (Gutiérrez et al., 2014).

The most effective children’s picture books about death include a variety of biological, sociocultural, and emotional components (Poling & Hupp, 2008), avoid language that can be misunderstood by children (Schonfeld, 2019), and provide additional resources for adult readers (Danielson & Colman, 2023; Poling & Hupp, 2008). My project combines best practices from existing research while also furthering it by asking whether children’s picture books about death are more effective if they are written or informed by a subject matter specialist (i.e., a grief counselor, psychologist, child development specialist, social worker) versus an author who is not a subject matter expert. Put simply, how does the language about death and dying in children’s picture books vary between books written or informed by subject matter experts versus books written by non-experts? I hypothesize that books by experts contain more of the characteristics and are therefore potentially more effective to use with children.

To answer this inquiry, I begin by providing background on current research on what to include in a discussion about death with children and what makes an effective children’s picture book about death. Then I describe the methods and tools I used, including how I selected books and what information I gathered about each book. Then I summarize my results and discuss the implications of the findings. Finally, I will share

the action component of this project, which is a multi-image carousel of recommended picture books about death and dying which can be shared on social media. In my background as a professional librarian, it is important to me to be able to recommend exemplary books to families, particularly when they are dealing with difficult topics such as death.

Background

Children first begin to understand death and grief around three to four years of age (Willis, 2002). The more children understand about what happens to the body when death occurs, the less fear and anxiety they experience when faced with a death (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). For this reason, the main four components researchers and practitioners recommend including in conversations with children about death are biological: death is irreversible, all life functions cease at the time of death, everything alive eventually dies, and there are physical causes of death (Schonfeld, 1993; Hunter & Smith, 2008; Lee et al., 2014; Menendez et al., 2020).

Cultural and emotional dimensions of death are also important to a child's understanding (Gutiérrez et al., 2014). Mendendez et al. (2020) argue that limiting the topic of death to biological function is not inclusive of families with religious or spiritual beliefs, and ignores the many cultural rituals and practices surrounding death. This supports earlier research that highlights the importance of including sociocultural topics in discussions about death with children, for instance: mourning rituals, funerals, wakes; spiritual or religious beliefs, such as heaven, angels, phrases such as "among the stars;" or noncorporeal continuity, such as reincarnation, spirits living on, and many more (Poling & Hupp, 2008). Sharing that it is normal to experience a range of emotions beyond sadness when confronted with death supports a child's bereavement process (Wiseman, 2013).

In addition to biological understanding and the incorporation of sociocultural and emotional aspects, many child development scholars strongly recommend avoiding euphemisms when discussing death with children. For instance, saying that an animal companion was "put to sleep" or that "grandma is gone" may imply that waking or returning is a possibility (Talwar, 2011; Schonfeld, 2019; Born, 2019). While these terms may seem kinder or gentler, they could cause confusion or anxiety around sleep or

travel. Instead, language should be clear and direct: death, dying, and dead (Schonfeld, 2019).

There have been numerous studies specifically about children's literature about death. For instance, Clement (2013) looked at the evolution of the way death is presented in children's books. Sipe (1998) and Wiseman (2013) examined the relationship between text and illustrations in children's understanding of picture book content. Wiseman (2013) also analyzed the types of characters who died in children's books, whether an adult, an anthropomorphized animal, a grandparent, a classmate, and so on. Lee et al. (2014) conducted a cultural comparison of children's picture books about death while Lane and Harris (2014) examined how biological understanding is (or is not) integrated with spiritual or religious beliefs about death. The present inquiry contributes to the scholarship by collating a list of characteristics recommended by various sources and using it to analyze picture books about death in order to understand whether the expertise of an author is an indication of effective content.

Methods

This project uses a qualitative content analysis model to understand the ways children's picture books aimed at ages four to eight years describe death and dying. I began by compiling a list of picture books by conducting online searches (Google, Amazon.com) using the terms "picture books on death" and "picture books on bereavement." I also searched my local St. Louis County Library catalog for subject headings "Children and death -- Juvenile literature," "Death -- Psychological aspects -- Juvenile literature," and "Bereavement in children -- Juvenile literature." After I completed the list, I excluded titles not readily available to me via the St. Louis County Library system including interlibrary loan. The goal was not to create an exhaustive list of children's picture books about death, but to identify titles readily accessible by people in my community.

After acquiring each title on my final list, I first reviewed each book to determine whether it was authored by either: an expert, that is, either written by a subject matter expert on death, psychology, grief, or child development, or an author who consulted with an expert in one of those fields; or, a non-expert, or an author who does not have formalized training in one of the above fields. For example, the book *Maybe Dying is Like Becoming a Butterfly* is written by Pimm van Hest who is not an expert, but the

book was informed by children's grief therapist Rebecca Dabekausen as noted in the end pages of the book. I would consider this a book that would be categorized as "written by an expert." The book *My Nana's Garden* is written by Dawn Casey whose author's biography does not indicate any expertise on death, child development, or grief, nor is there a mention of a consultation with an expert. I would categorize this book as one "written by a non-expert." I only used information on or in the physical book to determine expertise, for instance, on the cover, in the author biography, foreword, afterword, or other ancillary elements. I did not seek out book reviews or author websites partially due to time constraints, but also because in my experience as a librarian, pertinent information that increases the credibility of an author is usually included somewhere within a book.

I excluded several titles that did not fit the theme of this project. For instance, I excluded *A Stone for Sascha* and *Bluebird* because they are wordless picture books, and thus there was no text to analyze. I excluded *All the Dear Animals* because it fell too far above the audience age range of the other books in this study. I also excluded *Bone Dog* because it was more about missing a beloved dog than dealing with the dog's death. The result was a list of 86 books with their author type noted (Appendix A). After organizing the books into one of the two author categories, I determined that there were far fewer expert books than non-expert books. For this reason, I chose to keep all 15 titles by experts, and I used an online Random Number Generator (calculator.net) to choose 15 non-expert books from the list.

I carefully read and analyzed the content of each of the books on the two lists. Using a spreadsheet, I tallied which of the characteristics were present in each book (Appendix B). As mentioned above, these characteristics include:

- 1) Death is irreversible
- 2) All life functions cease at the time of death
- 3) Everything alive eventually dies
- 4) There are physical reasons someone dies (i.e. illness, accident, suicide, bodies wear out)
- 5) Death can result in a range of emotions
- 6) There are various sociocultural practices or beliefs surrounding death (i.e. funerals, burial, wake, reincarnation, souls end up in sky/stars/clouds/heaven)

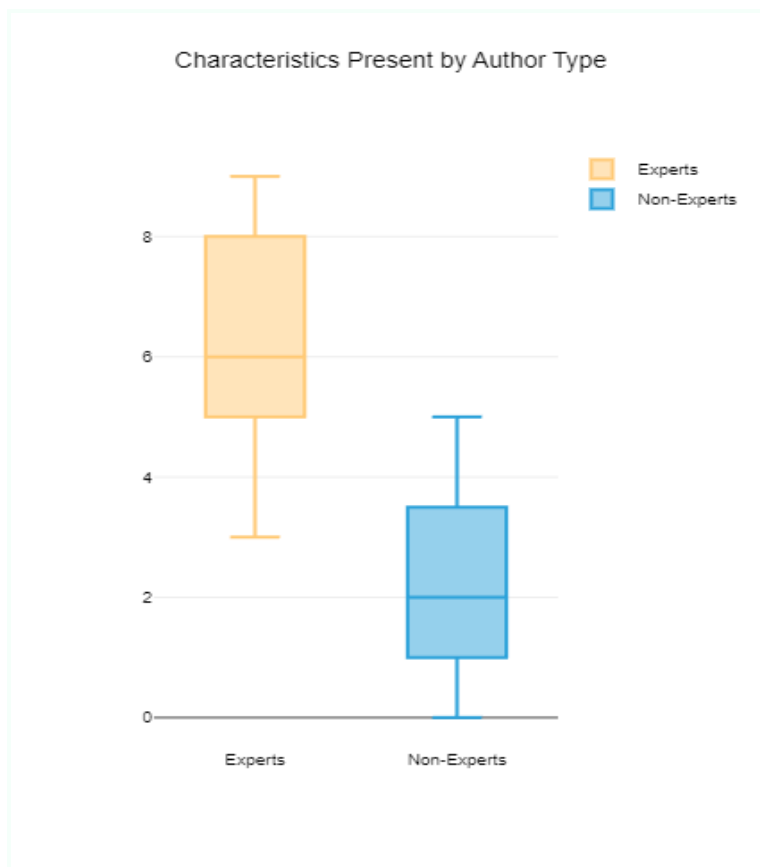
- 7) Additional resources that are included to promote conversation and understanding (i.e. glossary, resources, discussion questions, activities)
- 8) The use of direct language to describe death: "dead," "dying," "death"
- 9) The avoidance of unclear language to describe death: "passed away," "gone," "eternal sleep," and others

Results

A Chi-Square Test of Independence was performed to assess the relationship between expertise and the number of recommended characteristics present in picture books about death. Results demonstrate a significant association found ($\chi^2=15.659$, $p=0.047$), therefore there is enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis that expertise plays no role in effectiveness. A visualization of the spread of data is presented in Figure 1. Books by experts have a range of six characteristics with a median value of six while books by non-experts have a range of five characteristics with a median of two.

Figure 1

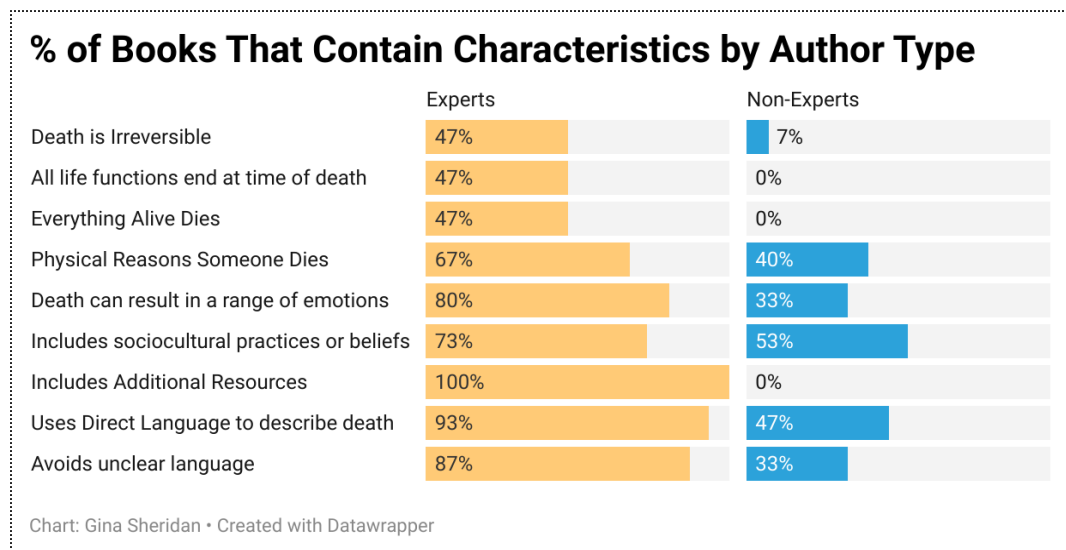
Characteristics present by author type



Overall, books by subject matter experts feature more of the nine characteristics. However, to understand the frequency of individual characteristics, it is helpful to look at percentages. The breakdown of characteristics is presented in Figure 2. One hundred percent of the books authored by experts feature additional resources compared to 0% of books by non-experts.

Figure 2

Percent of books that contain distinct characteristics.



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn what picture books on death and dying are readily available to readers in my community, determine whether or not each title was written or informed by an expert in child grief or development, and then understand if author expertise is an indication of content. After gathering 86 titles and then analyzing 15 of each author type, the results are enlightening. Perhaps most notable is that 100% of the books by experts featured additional resources compared to 0% of books by non-experts. This could indicate that simply flipping to the back of a picture book about death may be a good way to quickly determine its effectiveness. The inclusion of additional resources is a way of acknowledging that learning about and processing concepts surrounding death will go on beyond the pages of a book. They give parents additional tools and language to use with children in subsequent conversations.

The results also show that books by experts more consistently include specific characteristics. For example, 80% of books by experts acknowledge that a death can cause a survivor to experience a range of emotions above and beyond sadness. And 93% use direct language such as “death,” “dying,” or “dead.” When looking at the percentages of non-expert books, there does not seem to be the same pattern of consistency. In other words, when one picks up a picture book about death by a non-expert, there is no telling what characteristics will likely be represented.

Another major takeaway is that several of the books on the original list of 86 contain components which may be confusing and unhelpful to children. For instance, *The Longest Letsgoboy*, *My Old Pal Oscar*, and *Rough Patch* are about dogs that die; at the end of each of these books, the child is gifted a new puppy. This might indicate to children that individuals who die are replaceable. And baffling to me was the absence of any language about death in a story about a death. For instance, in three books, *Grandpa’s Stories*, *Mouseboat*, and *My Nana’s Garden*, there is no language to indicate that the subject died, but instead, there is an illustration of an empty chair that is meant to imply that death took place. The messaging makes it unclear that a death occurred at all since an empty chair could mean the person is out running an errand, away on a trip, or in another room.

Talking about death prepares children to process other complex topics in life and it helps to soothe their worries (Mankiw & Strasser, 2013). Books can introduce death in a safe and familiar way outside of a loss, and they can provide children with language and ideas on how to cope with their own death loss (Sipe, 2008). But sharing books about difficult topics takes courage, openness, and patience. Choosing a book that does not include direct language or is missing other important characteristics could lead to confusion or frustration. Providing causality for a death is one important consideration because left without explanation, a child may come up with their own reasoning; for instance, the person died because of how the child behaved (Schonfeld, 2019; Cotton and Range, 1990).

This study indicates that there needs to be more books about death written or informed by experts, and there also needs to be more variety in the types of deaths. Although I did not collect data about the types of deaths featured in the stories gathered for this project, it was quite obvious that very few of the deaths were caused by acts of

violence. As I mentioned earlier, the list of 86 books in this study is not comprehensive, but the list represents titles that are readily available to people in my community. More books about deaths due to violence are needed. As Danielson & Colman point out, “we are living in a time when, unfortunately, violent deaths from police brutality, school shootings, and war permeate the news . . . it would be useful for there to be more children’s books written on violent deaths in a sensitive and supportive manner” (p. 8).

Additionally, further research into how children actually respond to books from both categories of authors is warranted. Other future avenues of research include more studies about how illustrations work with the text in a children’s book about death as well as how the inclusion of recognizable cultural rituals in books impact a child’s response to grief.

Plan of Action

The action component of this project is a multi-image social media post on using picture books to discuss death with children. In the first slides, I share background on what makes an effective picture book about death. I conclude with a recommendation of seven titles based on the results of this project (Appendix C). I chose seven to keep the list manageable for the number of slides allowed in an Instagram post. The seven recommended titles are ones with the highest number of characteristics, written by experts. The post is meant to be shared primarily on Instagram and Facebook. As of this writing, in seven days, the post has had five comments, including one from an author whose book is featured in the list of recommended titles; 44 likes; 16 shares by people with public accounts; 14 saves; and a total of 210 impressions (Sheridan, 2023).

Conclusion

In this study, I hypothesized that books written or informed by child grief experts are more effective than books written by non-experts based on the content included within the text. The data supports my hypothesis. While this result may not be very surprising, it is enlightening that most children’s picture books on death are written by non-experts so there are many more ineffective books on the market. Out of 86 books collected for this study, only 15 were written or informed by experts.

My hope is that the information provided here will be used to support children who are curious about death or have experienced a death. The book lists (Appendices A & B) can be consulted or bookmarked by parents and people who work with children

and families, for instance, librarians, hospice workers, grief specialists, medical providers, death doulas, funeral directors, counselors, teachers, and caregivers. Books are a great way to tackle difficult subjects, perhaps none are as universal and inescapable as death.

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Appendix A

Alphabetical list of books with author type

Title & Author	Authored/ Informed by Expert?
Addy's Cup of Sugar : A Stillwater Tale / Jon J. Muth	NO
Air Miles / John Burningham & Bill Salaman	NO
Always and Forever / Alan Durant	NO
Always Remember / Cece Meng	NO
Always Sisters / by Saira Mir and Shahrzad Maydani	NO
Aunt Mary's Rose / Douglas Wood	NO
Badger's Parting Gifts / Susan Varley	NO
Balloons for Tiger / Lori Orlinsky	YES
Bear Island / Matthew Cordell	NO
Ben's Flying Flowers / Inger Maier	YES
Bravo, Little Bird! / Annie Silvestro	NO
Bye, Mis' Lela / Dorothy Carter	NO
Calling the Wind / Trudy Ludwig & Kathryn Otoshi	NO
Cape / Kevin Johnson	NO
Circles in the Sky / Karl James Mountford	NO
Cry Heart, But Never Break / Glenn Ringtved	NO
Dance Like a Leaf / AJ Irving	NO
Day Tiger Rose Said Goodbye, The / by Jane Yolen	NO
Dead bird, The / Margaret Wise Brown	NO
Dear Star Baby / Malcolm Newsome and Kamala Nair	NO
Death is Stupid / Anastasia Higginbotham	NO
Dreams we made, The / Lisa Bentley	NO
Everett Anderson's Goodbye / Lucille Clifton	NO
Fox: A Circle of Life Story / Isabel Thomas & Daniel Egneus	YES

Title & Author	Authored/ Informed by Expert?
Funeral, The / Matt James	NO
Ghost Wings / Barbara Joosse & Giselle Potter	NO
Gift of the Tree, The / Alvin Tresselt and Henri Sorensen	NO
Good-bye Sheepie / Robert Burleigh & Peter Caralanotto	NO
Goodbye Book, The / Todd Parr.	NO
Grandad Tree, The / Trish Cooke	NO
Grandma Lives in a Perfume Village / Fang Suzhen & Sonja Danowski	NO
Grandma's Purple Flowers / Adjoa J. Burrowes	NO
Grandpa's Stories / Joseph Coelho & Allison Colpoys	NO
Harry and Hopper / Margaret Wild	NO
Holes in the Sky / Patricia Polacco	NO
I Miss You: A First Look at Death / Pat Thomas	YES
I Remember Miss Perry / Pat Brisson and Stephane Jorisch	NO
I'll Always Love You / Hans Wilhelm	NO
Ida, Always / Caron Levis & Charles Santoso	NO
If Nathan Were Here / Mary Bahr Fritts	NO
If You Miss Me / Jocelyn Li Langrand	NO
In Grandpaw's Pawprints / Lauren Mosback	YES
Invisible Leash, The / Patrice Karst	NO
Is daddy coming back in a minute? / Elke & Alex Barber	NO
Jester Has Lost His Jingle, The / David Saltzman	NO
Ladder to the Moon / Maya Soetoro-Ng	NO
Lasting Love / Caroline Wright	NO
Longest Letsgoboy, The / Derick Wilder	NO
Lost in the Clouds / Jonathan Glancey	YES
Maybe Dying is Like Becoming a Butterfly / Pimm van Hest	YES
Memory String, The / Eve Bunting	NO

Title & Author	Authored/ Informed by Expert?
Missing Mommy / Rebecca Cobb	NO
Mouseboat / Larissa Theule	NO
My Father's Arms are a Boat / Stein Erik Lunde	NO
My Nana's Garden / Dawn Casey	NO
My Old Pal, Oscar / Amy Hest	NO
Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs / Tomie DePaola	NO
One Wave at a Time / Holly Thompson	NO
Ordinary Day, An / Elana K. Arnold	NO
Our Tree Named Steve / Alan Zweibel	NO
Purple Balloon, The / Chris Raschka	NO
Remembering / Xelena Gonzalez	NO
Remembering Ethan / Leslea Newman	YES
Rosie and Crayon / Deborah Marcero.	NO
Rough Patch / Brian Lies	NO
Saddest Time, The / Norma Simon	NO
Saturdays are for Stella / Candy Wellins	NO
Saying Good-bye to Uncle Joe / Nancy Loewen	YES
Saying Goodbye to Daddy / Judith Vigna	NO
Saying Goodbye to Lulu / by Corinne Demas	NO
Scar, The / Charlotte Moundlic	NO
Something Very Sad Happened / Bonnie Zucker	YES
Sophie / Mem Fox	NO
Sour Cherry Tree, The / Naseem Hrab	NO
Stones for Grandpa / Renee Londner	NO
Sweet, Sweet Memory / Jacqueline Woodson	NO
Tenth Good Thing about Barney,The / Judith Viorst	NO
Today and Today / Kobayashi Issa	NO

Title & Author	Authored/ Informed by Expert?
Treasure box, The / Dave Keane	NO
Uncle Monarch and the Day of the Dead / Judy Goldman	NO
What Happens When a Loved One Dies? / Dr. Jillian Roberts	YES
When a Pet Dies / Fred Rogers	YES
When Dinosaurs Die / Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown	YES
Where Do They Go? / Julia Alvarez	NO
Why Do I Feel So Sad? / Tracy Lambert, LPC	YES
Zara's Big Messy Goodbye / Rebekah Borucki with Gina Moffa, LCSW	YES

Appendix B

Final lists of books analyzed for this project by author type.

Title	Death is Irreversible	All life functions end at time of death	Everything Alive Dies	Physical Reasons Someone Dies (illness, accident, bodies wear out)	Death can result in a range of emotions	Includes sociocultural practices or beliefs (heaven, among the stars, funerals, burial, wake, reincarnation)	Includes Additional Resources (glossary, resources, discussion questions, suggested activities)	Uses Direct Language to describe death: "dead" "dying" "death"	Avoids unclear language: "passed away" "eternal sleep" "gone"	Number of characteristics present (0 to 9)
Balloons for Tiger	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	3
Ben's Flying Flowers	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	7
Fox: A Circle of Life Story	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	4
I Miss You: A First Look at Death	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	8
In Grandpaw's Pawprints	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	5
Lost in the Clouds	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	5
Maybe Dying is Like Becoming a Butterfly	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	8
Remembering Ethan	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	4
Saying Good-bye to Uncle Joe	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	8
Something Very Sad Happened	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	6
What Happens When a Loved One Dies?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	9
When a Pet Dies	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	8
When Dinosaurs Die	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	9
Why Do I Feel So Sad?	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	5
Zara's Big Messy Goodbye	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	6

Table B1: Characteristics present in 15 books authored or informed by experts.

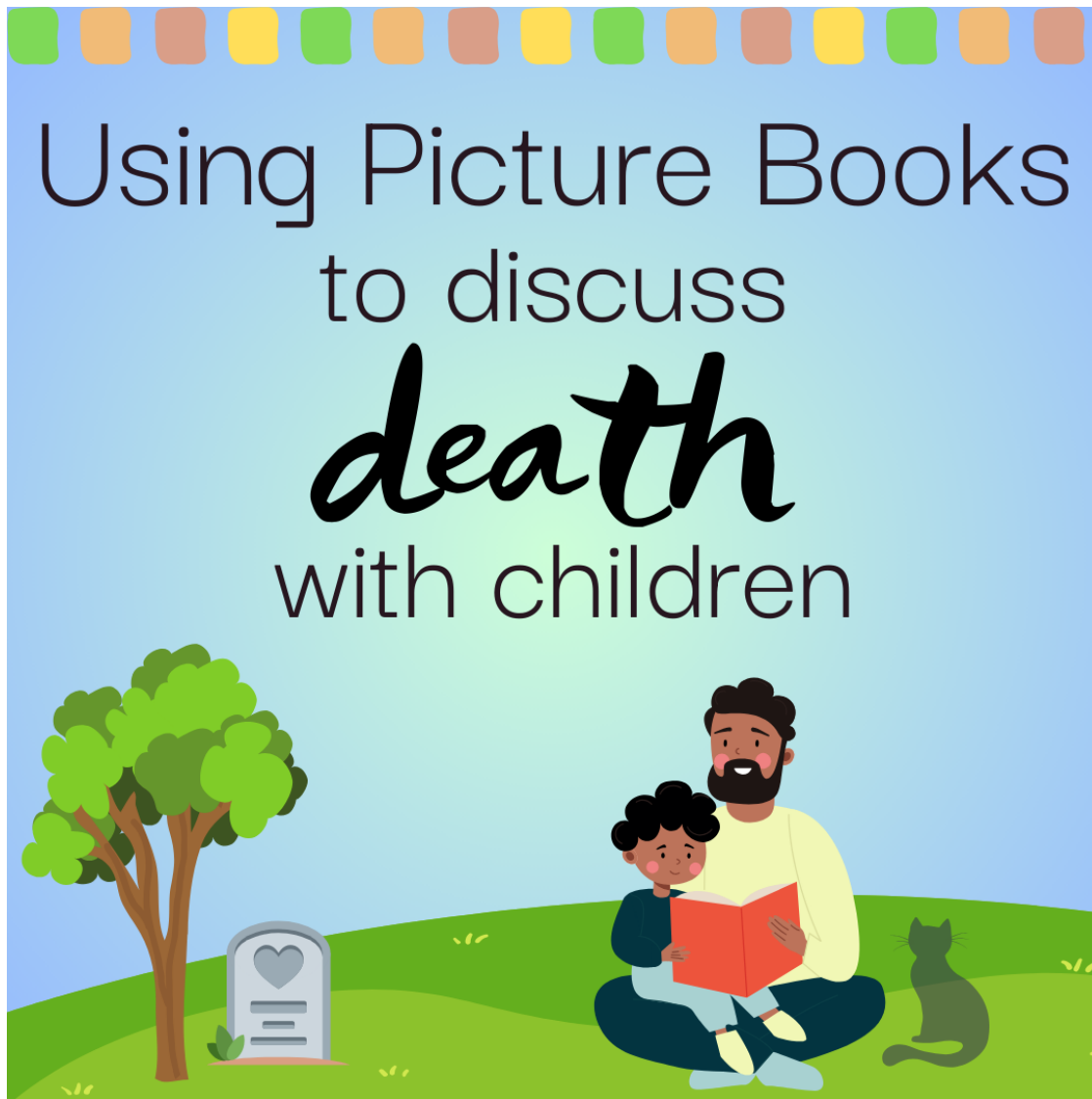
Appendix B (continued)

Title	Death is Irreversible	All life functions end at time of death	Everything Alive Dies	Physical Reasons Someone Dies (illness, accident, bodies wear out)	Death can result in a range of emotions	Includes sociocultural practices or beliefs (heaven, among the stars, funerals, burial, wake, reincarnation)	Includes Additional Resources (glossary, resources, discussion questions, suggested activities)	Uses Direct Language to describe death: "dead" "dying" "death"	Avoids unclear language: "passed away" "eternal sleep" "gone"	Number of characteristics present (0 to 9)
Air Miles	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	1
Always Remember	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	1
Badger's Parting Gifts	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	2
Bravo, Little Bird!	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	1
Day Tiger Rose Said Goodbye, The	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	2
Funeral, The	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	2
Good-bye Sheepie	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	4
Harry and Hopper	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	5
If You Miss Me	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
My Old Pal, Oscar	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	2
Rosie and Crayon	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Rough Patch	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	2
Stones for Grandpa	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	4
Sweet, Sweet Memory	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	2
Tenth Good Thing about Barney, The	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	4

Table B2: Characteristics present in 15 books written by non-experts.

Appendix C

The action component of this project is a multi-image carousel which highlights the most effective picture books about death.



First slide of “Using Picture Books to Discuss Death with Children” social media post.

For entire series of 10 slides, visit: <https://tinyurl.com/booksanddeath>