

Research Paper

Revisiting Grief: Classical and Contemporary Theories on Childhood Parental Loss

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ABSTRACT

The death of a parent during childhood represents one of the most profound and disruptive forms of loss, with significant implications for a child's emotional, social, and psychological development. This conceptual paper reviews and synthesizes key grief theories to deepen understanding of how children experience and adapt to parental loss. Beginning with classical frameworks Freud's Mourning and Melancholia, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief, and Worden's Tasks of Mourning the paper explores foundational insights into grief as a psychological and relational process. It then examines contemporary models, including the Dual Process Model, Continuing Bonds Theory, Meaning Reconstruction, Disenfranchised Grief, Bonanno's Resilience Theory, and others, which emphasize the dynamic, meaning-making, and socially embedded nature of grieving. By comparing these perspectives, this paper highlights how children's grief is shaped by developmental stage, attachment patterns, cultural contexts, and family dynamics. The discussion underscores the need for flexible, culturally sensitive, and family-centered interventions that validate diverse grief experiences and support healthy adaptation. This synthesis contributes to family social work interventions and bereavement scholarship by advocating for an integrated, compassionate approach to understanding and responding to childhood parental loss.

Keywords: *Childhood Bereavement, Parental Loss, Grief Theories, Attachment, Continuing Bonds, Meaning Reconstruction, Resilience, Disenfranchised Grief*

"Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is the remaking of life."
— Anne Roiphe

The loss of a parent at any age leaves a profound and irreplaceable void, with impacts that can echo throughout an individual's life course. As Sebastian and Karibeeran (2024) note, ***"Whether it occurs at five or fifty, the impact is deeply felt, leaving a lasting imprint on the emotional and psychological well-being of those left behind."*** When this loss occurs during childhood, however, its effects can be particularly far-reaching. Children rely on parents not only for care and protection but also for a secure base that shapes their sense of identity and safety in the world. Disrupting this foundational bond can

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lead to long-term consequences that extend into adulthood, affecting mental health, relationships, and overall life satisfaction. (Sebastian & Karibeeran, 2024).

Childhood parental death can have significant and enduring effects on a young person's mental health, behavior, academic performance, and broader life course outcomes. Research consistently shows that losing a parent before the age of 18 is associated with an elevated risk of depression, self-harm, and hospital admissions for psychiatric conditions in young adulthood, particularly when the death is sudden such as by suicide, accident, or homicide or when it occurs at a very young developmental stage (Berg, Rostila, & Hjern, 2016; Jessop, Fischer, & Good, 2022; Rostila et al., 2016). Academic trajectories may also be disrupted, with bereaved children more likely to experience lower grades, reduced educational attainment, and school failure, which can contribute to long-term socioeconomic disadvantages and limited upward mobility (Berg, Rostila, Saarela, & Hjern, 2014; Feigelman, Rosen, Joiner, Silva, & Mueller, 2017; Hiyoshi et al., 2021). Grief and bereavement theories have been central to understanding the profound consequences of parental death, shaping both research directions and practical interventions.

Foundational models, such as the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), the Ring Theory of Personhood (Krishna, 2019; Vig et al., 2021), and life course perspectives (Elder, 1994; Kamis et al., 2021), provide valuable frameworks to explore how individuals navigate loss, the evolving nature of grief, and its long-term psychological impacts. For example, the Dual Process Model has illuminated how childhood parental loss can manifest not only as trauma and anxiety about further abandonment but also as potential posttraumatic growth in adulthood, particularly in shaping intimate relationships and coping styles (Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2025). The Ring Theory of Personhood emphasizes that parental bereavement can touch every dimension of a person's identity, underlining the need for nuanced, individualized, and evolving support systems (Vig et al., 2021). Life course theories similarly highlight that the timing of parental death and the gender of the deceased parent can influence the persistence of depressive symptoms well into mid-adulthood, with early losses often exerting the most enduring psychological toll (Kamis et al., 2021).

The impact of parental loss is not uniform and is shaped by a range of mediating factors, including the quality of social support networks, family cohesion, communication about the death, the surviving parent's psychological well-being, and the family's overall socioeconomic context (Ellis, Dowrick, & Lloyd-Williams, 2013; Hiyoshi et al., 2021; Jessop et al., 2022). Some studies indicate that while certain behavioral and psychological difficulties may diminish over time, early setbacks particularly in education can leave a lasting imprint on economic stability, occupational prospects, and interpersonal relationships well into adulthood (Feigelman et al., 2017; Hiyoshi et al., 2021). There is also evidence that childhood bereavement is linked to higher rates of delinquency, lower income levels, and increased mortality risk later in life, suggesting that the consequences of parental death extend well beyond immediate grief and adjustment challenges (Hiyoshi et al., 2021).

Grief theories also inform the design and evaluation of bereavement interventions, ensuring that support services address anticipatory grief, coping mechanisms, and the maintenance of continuing bonds, even when empirical evidence for their long-term effectiveness remains limited (Kochen et al., 2020). Evolutionary and psychological frameworks have further explained the depth of suffering and the variability in recovery trajectories following parental loss, linking attachment mechanisms to grief responses (Reynolds et al., 2020). Person-centered approaches, grounded in these theoretical perspectives, reveal that

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children's coping profiles after parental death can predict later mental health outcomes, such as depression, intrusive grief, or suicidality (Hoppe et al., 2025). However, it is important to recognize that not all bereaved children follow pathways of adversity. Many exhibit remarkable resilience and, in some cases, posttraumatic growth, especially when they receive timely and appropriate psychosocial support and when protective factors, such as supportive relationships and stable caregiving, are present (Jessop et al., 2022; Van Heijningen et al., 2023). These findings underscore the necessity of targeted interventions and long-term support strategies that are sensitive to developmental stage, cause of death, and the unique circumstances surrounding each child's loss (Berg et al., 2016; Jessop et al., 2022; Rostila et al., 2016; Hiyoshi et al., 2021).

Overall, grief and bereavement theories provide an essential conceptual foundation for research and clinical practice, underscoring the complexity and individuality of grief experiences following parental loss. This paper revisits key classical and contemporary grief frameworks to explore how they help illuminate the consequences of parental death, particularly when loss occurs during childhood or adolescence. By mapping these theories, this paper aims to highlight their relevance, limitations, and directions for future work that can inform culturally and contextually sensitive approaches to understanding and supporting individuals living with parental bereavement. While some frameworks discussed here are formally defined as models rather than theories, they are included because they offer structured approaches that inform theoretical understandings of grief and its practical applications.

CLASSICAL THEORIES

Classical grief theories developed by Freud, Bowlby, Kübler-Ross, and Worden provide foundational frameworks for understanding how children experience and process the loss of a parent. Freud's psychoanalytic perspective suggests that early loss, if not adequately processed, can contribute to later depression, with unresolved grief potentially manifesting as melancholia in adulthood, especially when the child remains fixated on the lost parent (Birtchnell, 1970). Building on this, Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes that children's grief is fundamentally rooted in their early attachment bonds; he argued that children are often less emotionally equipped than adults to cope with the death of a parent, and may rely on defense mechanisms such as denial, which can lead to long-term psychological challenges if not resolved (Birtchnell, 1970; Bakanova, 2023). Kübler-Ross's well-known stage model—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—has also been adapted for understanding children's grief, although research highlights that children often move through these emotional states in a non-linear, developmentally unique way (Bakanova, 2023). Worden's Tasks of Mourning expand this perspective by outlining practical steps that can help bereaved children: accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain of grief, adjusting to a world without the deceased parent, and finding enduring ways to remember them (Bakanova, 2023). Contemporary research builds on these classical foundations by recognizing that children's grief is shaped by age, developmental stage, family context, and the availability of supportive interventions. Collectively, these classical theories continue to help caregivers and practitioners understand the multifaceted nature of childhood grief, identify risk factors for complicated grief, and tailor interventions that support healthier long-term adjustment after parental loss (Bakanova, 2023; Birtchnell, 1970).

Freud's Mourning and Melancholia

In his influential 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud distinguished between mourning a normal, healthy response to the loss of a loved object and melancholia,

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which he saw as a pathological form of grief marked by profound self-criticism and depression. Freud argued that while both states involve similar symptoms such as sadness and withdrawal, mourning is a process in which the individual gradually detaches emotional energy (libido) from the lost object and eventually recovers, whereas in melancholia, this detachment fails, and the lost object is unconsciously incorporated into the self, leading to self-reproach and a diminished sense of self-worth. Later interpretations and critiques have noted that Freud's model initially emphasized a clear endpoint to mourning, but his later work suggested that the process of grieving and identification with the lost object can be ongoing and complex, blurring the line between normal and pathological responses to loss. Contemporary research has also explored the neuropsychiatric underpinnings of Freud's ideas, finding some physiological correlates for the psychological processes he described, such as changes in brain regions associated with depression. Freud's concepts have had a lasting impact on psychoanalysis, literature, and cultural theory, shaping how loss, identity, and the work of mourning are understood and represented.

Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1922) is considered one of the earliest psychoanalytic explorations of grief and continues to influence contemporary understandings of bereavement. Freud distinguished between *mourning*, which he described as a healthy and adaptive process of gradually detaching emotional energy from the deceased loved one, and *melancholia*, a pathological form of grief characterized by an internalized sense of loss that can manifest as self-reproach, guilt, and depression (Freud, 1922; Clewell, 2004). His ideas laid the groundwork for understanding how unresolved grief can develop into enduring psychological distress.

Freud's framework remains relevant for understanding the impact of childhood parental loss. Later scholars have argued that children may struggle to fully process such profound losses, which can lead to unresolved mourning or depressive symptoms that persist into adulthood (Hill & Price, 1967; Birtchnell, 1970). Developmental psychologists and psychoanalysts have expanded Freud's ideas, emphasizing that children's grief is shaped by age, cognitive development, and their limited capacity to comprehend the permanence of death (Green, 2013; Pacaol, 2021). For instance, children may cope through defensive mechanisms such as denial, magical thinking, or ego-splitting, which can complicate healthy grieving and increase vulnerability to later psychological issues (Clewell, 2004; Birtchnell, 1970). Empirical research has supported Freud's early insights by demonstrating clear links between childhood bereavement—particularly the death of a parent—and increased risk of depression and melancholic states later in life (Hill & Price, 1967; Birtchnell, 1970). Overall, Freud's contribution highlights the importance of distinguishing between normal and complicated grief and recognizing the unique challenges children face in mourning a parent. His ideas underscore the need for age-appropriate support to prevent unresolved grief from solidifying into pathological forms of melancholia that can persist across the lifespan (Green, 2013; Clewell, 2004)

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory

John Bowlby's attachment theory revolutionized the understanding of early child development by proposing that children are biologically predisposed to form emotional bonds attachments with caregivers. These attachments serve as a secure base from which to explore the world and as a safe haven in times of distress. Drawing from psychoanalysis, ethology, and evolutionary biology, Bowlby argued that the quality of these early attachment relationships profoundly shapes personality development, emotional regulation, and mental health across the lifespan, with disruptions such as prolonged maternal deprivation linked to

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later psychological difficulties. Mary Ainsworth expanded on Bowlby's theoretical framework by empirically identifying distinct attachment patterns—secure, anxious, and avoidant—based on variations in caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness. Central to the theory is the concept of internal working models: mental representations of the self and others that guide expectations and behavior in future relationships. Recent research has extended attachment theory beyond childhood, highlighting its relevance to adult relationships and psychotherapy. Studies show that secure attachment is associated with better mental health outcomes and more effective therapeutic relationships, while insecure attachment styles, although often viewed as risk factors, may also serve adaptive functions in specific social contexts. Bowlby's work was profoundly influenced by his observations of children separated from their parents during wartime, as well as by interdisciplinary ideas such as Lorenz's concept of imprinting in ethology. Today, attachment theory remains foundational in developmental psychology, clinical practice, and ongoing research into the dynamic interplay between early caregiving relationships and lifelong well-being.

John Bowlby's attachment theory posits that a child's emotional bond with a primary caregiver forms the foundation for their psychological development and profoundly shapes their capacity to cope with loss. According to Bowlby, the loss of a parent disrupts this vital attachment bond, often triggering intense grief that unfolds in recognizable phases: protest, despair, and detachment (Bretherton, 1992). The theory emphasizes that the quality and security of early attachment relationships strongly influence how a child processes and recovers from parental loss. Children with secure attachments are generally better able to navigate grief in healthy ways, whereas those with insecure or disorganized attachments may be more vulnerable to complicated or prolonged grief reactions and may face increased risks of later emotional or behavioral difficulties, such as depression and anxiety disorders (A., 2024). Bowlby argued that the most damaging aspect of parental loss is not merely the physical absence of the parent but the severing of an ongoing attachment relationship, which can undermine a child's sense of safety, trust, and self-worth (Bretherton, 1992). Contemporary research continues to support Bowlby's foundational ideas, indicating that children who experience the death of a parent are at higher risk for mental health challenges, especially when they lack stable, supportive relationships or opportunities to express and process their grief (Stroebe, 2002). Moreover, the internal working models formed through early attachments shape how individuals interpret and respond to later losses, influencing their coping strategies and resilience throughout life (A., 2024). Overall, Bowlby's attachment theory underscores the critical importance of stable, nurturing relationships in childhood and highlights the enduring impact that the loss of a parent can have on emotional development and well-being.

Kübler-Ross's Five Stages

The Kübler-Ross model, commonly known as the "five stages of grief," describes a sequence of emotional responses that individuals may experience following a significant loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her pioneering work with terminally ill patients in the late 1960s, the model originally aimed to illuminate the emotional journey of those facing their own mortality (Cummings, 2015). Over time, the framework has been widely adapted to encompass various types of loss, including bereavement, divorce, job loss, and other major life transitions. The model's enduring influence lies in its groundbreaking role in bringing attention to the emotional complexity of grief and encouraging more open, compassionate conversations about death, dying, and loss (Cummings, 2015).

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However, contemporary grief researchers and practitioners caution against applying the five stages too rigidly. Studies and clinical observations emphasize that grief is highly individual, non-linear, and does not necessarily follow a predictable progression (Mccoyd, 2022). Not everyone experiences all five stages, nor do they occur in a fixed order. Critics argue that an overly prescriptive use of the model can inadvertently invalidate diverse grieving experiences, leaving some individuals feeling that they are grieving “incorrectly” if their emotional responses do not align with the stages (Mccoyd, 2022). Despite these valid criticisms, the Kübler-Ross model remains deeply embedded in popular culture and continues to be referenced in some clinical and educational contexts. When used with sensitivity and flexibility, it can serve as a helpful starting point for understanding the multifaceted nature of grief, while recognizing that each person’s journey through loss is unique and shaped by personal, cultural, and situational factors.

The Kübler-Ross model, which outlines five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—can be used to help understand how children and adolescents may process the loss of a parent. Although the stages provide a recognizable framework, grief in young people is highly individual and rarely follows a simple, linear path (Fitryani et al., 2021). Research on late adolescents who have lost their mothers has found that while many do move through some or all of these stages, others may not reach acceptance for a long time, underscoring the deeply personal nature of grief during youth and the need for sufficient time and support to process such a profound loss (Fitryani et al., 2021). The model offers a valuable lens for recognizing the broad range of emotions children may experience ranging from initial disbelief and anger to eventual acceptance but it is important to acknowledge that not all children will experience every stage or in the same order. Some may revisit stages repeatedly or become “stuck” in certain emotional responses (Fitryani et al., 2021).

Contemporary grief researchers caution that a rigid application of the five stages can be misleading and even counterproductive, as it may cause grieving children or their caregivers to feel they are grieving “incorrectly” if their experience does not match the stages exactly (Avis et al., 2021). Instead, the Kübler-Ross model should be used as a flexible guide to validate diverse emotional responses and to inform supportive interventions, rather than as a strict, prescriptive roadmap (Avis et al., 2021). Moreover, cultural context and individual differences play significant roles in shaping how grief is experienced and expressed, suggesting that any support should be tailored to each child’s developmental stage, cultural background, and unique needs. Ultimately, while Kübler-Ross’s framework can help caregivers and professionals understand and support grieving children and adolescents, flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness to each child’s unique grief journey are essential (Fitryani et al., 2021).

Worden’s Task of Mourning

Worden’s Tasks of Mourning is a widely recognized model in contemporary grief theory that outlines four essential tasks individuals must work through to adapt to a significant loss: (1) accepting the reality of the loss, (2) processing the pain of grief, (3) adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and (4) finding an enduring connection with the deceased while continuing life (Hogan & Schmidt, 2015). Unlike stage-based models such as Kübler-Ross’s, Worden’s approach emphasizes that these tasks are not linear; individuals may revisit tasks multiple times and complete them in any order, reflecting the deeply personal and often cyclical nature of mourning. The model’s strength lies in its

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practical, active orientation—it reframes grief not as something that passively “happens” in stages but as a process requiring intentional effort and adaptation (Hogan & Schmidt, 2015). Worden’s framework has significantly influenced modern grief counseling by guiding professionals, such as social workers and therapists, in helping mourners navigate denial and acceptance, express painful emotions, adjust to new roles and identities, and maintain meaningful, healthy bonds with the deceased. Its emphasis on balancing continuing bonds with the necessity of moving forward resonates strongly with contemporary understandings of grief as a multidimensional and lifelong process. Because of its flexibility and attention to personal meaning-making, the model is applicable across various types of loss, including sudden or anticipated deaths, and is often integrated into broader grief theories and clinical assessment tools (Hogan & Schmidt, 2015). Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to support individuals in establishing a “new normal” after loss—honoring the past relationship while adapting to life in the present and future.

Worden’s Tasks of Mourning can be meaningfully applied to understand the grief experienced by children following the loss of a parent. Research and clinical case studies have shown that, like adults, children benefit from engaging with the four core tasks: accepting the reality of the loss, experiencing the pain of grief, adjusting to a world without the deceased parent, and maintaining an enduring connection with the parent while continuing their own lives (Pacaol, 2021). These tasks help children process their emotions, adapt to new family dynamics, and make sense of their profoundly changed world (Pacaol, 2021; Welsh, 1998). Importantly, Worden’s framework recognizes that for children, these tasks are not linear and may be revisited multiple times as they grow, influenced by developmental stage, family context, and the support provided by surviving caregivers (Cox, 1999; Welsh, 1998).

Studies emphasize the vital role of the surviving parent or caregiver in offering consistent love, reassurance, and stability, which can help children feel safe enough to express their grief openly (Welsh, 1998; Cox, 1999). Rituals, memorial activities, and opportunities for children to talk about the deceased parent further support them in maintaining a healthy ongoing connection (Pacaol, 2021). Worden’s tasks also provide a practical guide for professionals to identify children who may be at risk for complicated grief and to design age-appropriate interventions such as counseling, expressive art activities, and peer support groups (Cox, 1999). Overall, applying Worden’s framework to childhood parental loss offers a structured yet flexible approach that acknowledges the unique developmental needs of grieving children and highlights the importance of supportive environments for healthy mourning.

CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF GRIEF

While classical theories laid the groundwork for understanding grief as a psychological and emotional response to loss, contemporary approaches have expanded and refined these foundations to account for the complexity, individuality, and social context of grieving. Modern grief theories recognize that mourning is not a simple, linear process but an adaptive, dynamic experience shaped by personal, cultural, and situational factors. Models such as the Dual Process Model, Continuing Bonds, Meaning Reconstruction, Disenfranchised Grief Theory, Resilience Theory, the Two-Track Model of Bereavement, and the Loss of the Assumptive World each offer unique perspectives on how individuals navigate loss and integrate it into their ongoing lives. By exploring these contemporary frameworks, this section highlights how current understandings of grief can deepen our

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insight into parental loss and inform more sensitive, flexible support for bereaved individuals, especially children and families.

Dual Process Model

The Dual Process Model (DPM) is one of the most influential contemporary frameworks for understanding how individuals cope with bereavement. Developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (1999), the model was designed to address limitations in earlier grief theories that tended to frame grief as a linear, singular process. Instead, the DPM emphasizes that healthy grieving involves an ongoing, dynamic process of oscillation between two core types of coping: loss-oriented and restoration-oriented (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Loss-oriented coping focuses on confronting and working through the emotions and pain directly related to the loss itself this can include yearning, sadness, anger, and remembering the deceased. In contrast, restoration-oriented coping involves adjusting to secondary stressors and life changes that result from the loss. These tasks include reorganizing daily life, taking on new roles and responsibilities, forming new routines, and engaging in activities that help build a renewed sense of normalcy (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). A central contribution of the DPM is its emphasis on oscillation, the idea that people adaptively move back and forth between confronting the loss and taking breaks from the intense emotional work of mourning. This process allows individuals to manage grief in more manageable doses and to restore balance by focusing at times on practical life demands or sources of distraction and respite. Recent research highlights how this flexibility can foster resilience and better long-term adjustment (Larsen, Hybholt, & O'Connor, 2024).

Importantly, the DPM recognizes that grieving does not happen in isolation but is influenced by cultural, social, and situational contexts. It has been adapted and extended to understand not only individual bereavement but also collective forms of grief, such as ecological grief related to climate change or community-wide losses after disasters (Fiore, 2019). This adaptability makes the model highly relevant in diverse settings and populations. Overall, the Dual Process Model remains a widely used and respected framework in grief research and practice because it offers a realistic, compassionate understanding of the *complex, non-linear nature of mourning*. Its principles have informed grief counseling, therapeutic interventions, and support programs that encourage mourners to acknowledge their pain while also engaging in restorative activities that rebuild a meaningful life after loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Larsen et al., 2024).

The Dual Process Model (DPM) can be effectively applied to help children cope with the loss of a parent by encouraging a healthy balance between confronting grief (loss-oriented coping) and engaging in activities that help them adapt to new life circumstances (restoration-oriented coping). Research shows that children who lose a parent during childhood often experience this loss as a profound trauma, which can lead to heightened sensitivity to abandonment and long-term challenges in forming and maintaining relationships. However, when restoration-oriented coping is supported, bereaved children also show potential for resilience and personal growth (Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2025).

The DPM framework helps caregivers, counselors, and educators understand the importance of allowing children to oscillate between directly expressing their grief—through conversation, play, or creative outlets—and participating in normalizing, future-focused activities such as schoolwork, hobbies, or peer relationships (Wigginton, 2017). This dynamic movement between grieving and restoration can help protect children from

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becoming overwhelmed by prolonged exposure to distress while also providing opportunities to build new coping skills and sources of meaning.

Early, sensitive intervention is especially crucial for children from challenging or unstable family contexts, as their grief may be more intense and complicated (Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2025). Using the DPM framework, professionals can tailor interventions that help children process painful emotions while simultaneously supporting them to develop new routines, strengthen social connections, and envision a life beyond their loss. Ultimately, this balanced approach can foster greater resilience and healthier long-term adjustment (Wigginton, 2017).

Continuing Bonds Theory

Continuing Bonds Theory is a major perspective in contemporary grief research that challenges the traditional notion that healthy mourning requires the bereaved to “detach” or “move on” from the deceased. Instead, this theory proposes that many people naturally maintain ongoing psychological, emotional, or symbolic connections with deceased loved ones as part of their adjustment to loss (Selvili & Klass, 2025). These bonds can take diverse forms, including cherishing memories, sensing the continued presence of the deceased, engaging in internal conversations with them, or integrating their values and influence into one’s identity and future life choices (Selvili & Klass, 2025).

Continuing Bonds Theory emerged in response to earlier grief models—such as Freud’s concept of decathexis which framed the severing of ties as necessary for recovery. In contrast, the continuing bonds perspective recognizes that maintaining a relationship albeit transformed is not only normal but can be an adaptive and comforting aspect of bereavement (Hewson et al., 2023). Research shows that sustaining these bonds can help mourners reconstruct meaning in the aftermath of loss, find comfort during times of distress, and foster personal growth by allowing the deceased to remain a valued part of the self (Hewson et al., 2023).

However, the way continuing bonds are experienced matters greatly. Internalized, integrated bonds such as feeling inspired by the deceased’s guidance or using their memory to navigate life decisions are generally associated with better psychological adjustment and resilience. In contrast, more externalized or intrusive experiences, such as vivid hallucinations or an inability to accept the finality of death, may be linked to complicated or prolonged grief if not understood and integrated in a healthy way (Hewson et al., 2023). Today, Continuing Bonds Theory is widely recognized as a vital element of modern grief scholarship, highlighting the evolving, relational, and deeply cultural dimensions of mourning. It has reshaped grief counseling and bereavement support by encouraging families, caregivers, and professionals to validate the ongoing presence of the deceased in mourners’ lives rather than pushing for “closure” (Selvili & Klass, 2025).

Continuing Bonds Theory can be meaningfully applied to understanding childhood grief following the loss of a parent. Research shows that when children are able to maintain a healthy, ongoing psychological connection with their deceased parent through cherished memories, symbolic rituals, or internal conversations—this bond can support their emotional adjustment and promote positive functioning into adulthood (Karydi, 2017). The presence and role of the surviving parent or caregiver is crucial in shaping how these bonds are formed and sustained. By encouraging open remembrance, supporting the child’s expressions of grief, and validating the continuing presence of the deceased in family life,

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caregivers can help integrate the loss in ways that foster resilience rather than prolonged distress (Karydi, 2017).

Studies indicate that these ongoing bonds can be a source of hope, meaning-making, and even spiritual growth for bereaved children, especially when they are supported in expressing their feelings and preserving connections through stories, keepsakes, or family rituals (Hewson et al., 2023). However, it is important to recognize that the impact of continuing bonds depends on how they are experienced and interpreted. Internalized bonds—such as feeling guided by the deceased parent’s values or imagining their encouragement in everyday life—are generally linked to healthier adjustment and a stronger sense of identity. In contrast, more externalized or unintegrated bonds—such as persistent illusions of physical presence or intrusive experiences—can be associated with ongoing distress or complicated grief if not appropriately supported (Hewson et al., 2023).

Overall, applying Continuing Bonds Theory to childhood parental loss highlights the importance of allowing and encouraging children to remember and relate to their deceased parent in meaningful ways, rather than expecting them to “move on” or sever ties completely. This perspective aligns with contemporary, relational approaches to grief that emphasize connection, integration, and the enduring influence of loved ones across the lifespan (Karydi, 2017; Hewson et al., 2023).

Meaning Reconstruction Model

The Meaning Reconstruction Model is a major contemporary framework for understanding grief that shifts the focus from viewing bereavement solely as a series of emotional stages or attachment disruptions to seeing it as an active, ongoing process of making sense of loss. Developed and advanced by Robert Neimeyer and colleagues, the model argues that when someone experiences a profound loss, such as the death of a loved one, their assumptive world—the fundamental beliefs and meanings that shape how they understand themselves and their place in the world—is deeply disrupted (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Rather than simply “recovering” from grief, the model suggests that mourners engage in an active search for new meaning that helps them integrate the loss into their ongoing life story. This process is often described through three core components: sense-making, benefit-finding, and identity reconstruction (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). *Sense-making* involves trying to understand why the loss occurred and what it means; *benefit-finding* refers to identifying any growth, insights, or positive shifts that might emerge from the experience; and *identity reconstruction* relates to redefining who one is in a world irrevocably changed by loss (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011).

Research consistently shows that the inability to find meaning in a significant loss is strongly associated with complicated or prolonged grief, while successful meaning-making is linked to better psychological adjustment, resilience, and even posttraumatic growth (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Importantly, the process of meaning reconstruction is deeply personal and shaped by the mourner’s prior beliefs, relationships, cultural background, and spiritual or existential framework. It often unfolds in phases marked by feelings of discontinuity, disorientation, and gradual adjustment as new meanings and life narratives take shape (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011).

Therapeutic approaches that incorporate meaning reconstruction such as narrative therapy, grief-focused writing interventions, and guided conversations—have been shown to help

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bereaved individuals articulate their loss, reshape their stories, and discover new sources of purpose and coherence (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). Because it addresses the profound existential questions that often arise after bereavement, the Meaning Reconstruction Model has become a cornerstone of contemporary grief theory, offering a more nuanced, hopeful, and personally tailored framework for supporting mourners as they navigate the challenge of living in a changed world (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). The Meaning Reconstruction Model can be powerfully applied to childhood and adolescent grief following the loss of a parent by supporting young people as they work to make sense of the death, find new sources of meaning, and gradually reshape their identity and worldview in its aftermath. Research shows that when a child loses a parent, it often causes a deep disruption in their sense of security, trust, and understanding of how the world works. This existential rupture typically unfolds in phases of discontinuity, disorientation, and, eventually, a re-establishment of meaning as they adapt to life without the parent (Neimeyer, 2019).

Therapeutic approaches grounded in this model help children and adolescents articulate their feelings, explore questions about why the loss happened, and develop new personal narratives that integrate the parent's memory and the realities of a changed family structure. Creative interventions such as therapeutic writing, drawing, storytelling, or other expressive arts are increasingly used to support meaning reconstruction in young people because they offer safe, age-appropriate ways to process difficult emotions and reframe their experience (Barak & Leichtentritt, 2016).

The Meaning Reconstruction Model also emphasizes the importance of recognizing each child's prior beliefs, spiritual or cultural background, and the quality of support they receive, as these factors strongly shape how they find meaning in loss. By helping children discover significance, positive shifts, or new sources of connection within their grief, practitioners can support healthier adjustment, reduce the risk of complicated or prolonged grief, and promote posttraumatic growth as children learn to live with their loss and continue developing in resilient ways (Neimeyer, 2019; Barak & Leichtentritt, 2016).

Disenfranchised Grief Theory

Disenfranchised grief is a significant concept in contemporary grief theory that describes the experience of a loss that is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned. Introduced by Kenneth Doka, the theory highlights how societal norms and expectations can deprive individuals of the "right to grieve," leaving them without the typical support structures that help people process loss (Doka, 1989, 2002). Disenfranchised grief often arises when the relationship to the deceased is socially unrecognized or stigmatized such as the loss of a pet, a miscarriage, or the death of a non-traditional partner or when the mourner's capacity to grieve is underestimated, as frequently happens with children or marginalized groups (Doka, 2002).

By challenging traditional grief models that view mourning as a universally acknowledged and supported process, the concept of disenfranchised grief draws attention to the powerful role of social validation, cultural narratives, and communicative dynamics in shaping how grief is experienced and expressed (Doka, 1989). This perspective expands the field of bereavement research by emphasizing that unacknowledged or unsupported grief can lead to feelings of isolation, anger, shame, and prolonged or complicated grief reactions (Doka, 2002). Recognizing disenfranchised grief has influenced practice by encouraging clinicians and caregivers to identify hidden forms of grief and to provide spaces where diverse grief experiences can be safely expressed and validated.

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Disenfranchised grief is particularly relevant for understanding how children may experience parental loss in ways that are minimized or overlooked by the adults around them. Children who lose a parent whether through death, parental alienation, or complex family transitions such as divorce often suffer profound losses to their sense of security, family structure, and identity. Yet their grief may not be fully recognized or supported by peers, teachers, or even surviving family members (Harman, Matthewson, & Baker, 2021). This lack of acknowledgment can leave children to mourn in silence, increasing their vulnerability to unresolved grief, depression, or behavioral difficulties (Ferow, 2019; Doka, 2017). Developmental factors further complicate this dynamic: children may lack the language or emotional insight to articulate their grief, and surviving parents or guardians may be too overwhelmed by their own sorrow to provide consistent support (Doka, 2017). Research indicates that open communication, age-appropriate support, and opportunities for children to share their feelings in safe environments are essential to counteract the isolating effects of disenfranchised grief (Ferow, 2019).

Family dynamics play a critical role in shaping whether a child's grief is validated or disenfranchised. When surviving parents, siblings, or extended family members fail to acknowledge the child's grief whether due to their own distress, loyalty conflicts, or new family structures like remarriage children can feel emotionally abandoned and unsupported (Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2024; Harman, Matthewson, & Baker, 2021). For example, in situations of parental alienation, children may be pressured to reject or forget the lost parent, resulting in ambiguous or hidden losses that are grieved in isolation (Harman, Matthewson, & Baker, 2021). Similarly, the introduction of a stepparent can create loyalty conflicts, making it harder for children to openly mourn the deceased parent while negotiating new attachments (Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2024).

Secure, communicative, and cohesive family environments can buffer against the harmful effects of disenfranchised grief, while poor family cohesion or insecure parent child attachment can deepen a child's sense of isolation and hinder emotional recovery (Jiao, Chow, & Chen, 2020). The presence of supportive siblings can also help children express their grief and foster resilience, whereas only children may experience more intense loneliness and struggle more to find outlets for their sorrow (Jiao, Chow, & Chen, 2020). Overall, the concept of disenfranchised grief in childhood parental loss highlights the importance of validating children's experiences, creating supportive spaces for open communication, and addressing family dynamics to prevent hidden grief from evolving into long-term psychological distress (Doka, 2002; Harman, Matthewson, & Baker, 2021).

Bonanno's Resilience Theory

Bonanno's Resilience Theory, developed by George Bonanno, is a significant contribution to contemporary grief research that reframes how individuals' responses to loss are understood. Unlike traditional grief theories that often assume bereavement inevitably involves intense, prolonged mourning, Bonanno's work demonstrates that resilience defined as the ability to maintain relatively stable, healthy psychological and physical functioning despite loss is actually the most common trajectory after bereavement (Bonanno et al., 2002). His large-scale, longitudinal studies identified multiple patterns of adjustment: some people show minimal disruption (resilience), others follow a path of gradual recovery, and a smaller proportion experience chronic grief or enduring distress.

This perspective challenges the once-dominant notion that intense grief must be fully "worked through" for healthy adjustment. Instead, Bonanno's research emphasizes that the

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absence of prolonged grief does not mean avoidance or suppression, but often reflects effective coping and adaptive flexibility. Key predictors of resilience include pre-loss factors such as acceptance of the reality of death, the capacity to access positive memories of the deceased, secure attachment, belief in a just and meaningful world, and strong social support systems (Bonanno et al., 2002; Kustanti et al., 2024).

Bonanno's resilience framework has broadened the grief literature by normalizing diverse responses to loss and cautioning against pathologizing people who recover relatively quickly. This approach has also informed clinical practice by encouraging professionals to focus not only on risks and symptoms but also on strengths, resources, and protective factors that promote adaptive coping (Kustanti et al., 2024). Bonanno's Resilience Theory in childhood parental loss provides a hopeful and practical lens for understanding how many children are capable of healthy adaptation, even after experiencing profound disruption. While the loss of a parent in childhood is one of the most significant stressors a child can face, research shows that a substantial proportion of bereaved children maintain or regain healthy emotional, social, and academic functioning over time (Silcox, 2021).

Protective factors that foster resilience in bereaved children include strong, supportive relationships with surviving family members, secure attachment bonds, consistent routines, involvement in extracurricular activities, and access to caring role models who help the child develop a positive self-concept and life narrative (Silcox, 2021). Biological and psychological research also suggests that individual differences in neurobiological systems such as oxytocin and dopamine pathways may influence resilience and growth following early traumatic loss (Dvi Lansky et al., 2025).

Importantly, Bonanno's framework highlights that while some children may experience enduring distress and require focused support, many others adapt well when provided with the right environment and resources. This shifts the focus from viewing grief only through the lens of risk and pathology to recognizing and supporting the natural strengths that help children find meaning, maintain connections, and thrive despite early adversity. Schools, community organizations, and family systems thus play a crucial role in promoting resilience by providing stability, opportunities for social engagement, and spaces for grieving and remembrance (Silcox, 2021). By applying Bonanno's resilience perspective, grief support professionals are reminded to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and instead emphasize each child's unique capacities for coping and growth, offering interventions that build on what is working well rather than assuming all bereaved children require intensive therapy or clinical labeling.

Table 1: Comparison of Classical and Contemporary Grief Theories Applied to Childhood Parental Loss

Theory/Model	Key Focus	Core Concept	Relevance To Parental Loss in Childhood	Key Considerations/Limitations
Freud's Mourning & Melancholia	Psychoanalytic foundation	Mourning (normal) vs. melancholia (pathological grief)	explains how unresolved attachment and identification can complicate grief	Does not address developmental stages; limited for child-specific contexts
Bowlby's Attachment Theory	Attachment & separation	Secure base, internal working models,	Shows how a child's attachment style shapes grief reactions, long-term	May overlook wider social/cultural context; mainly focused on caregiver-child bond

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Theory/ Model	Key Focus	Core Concept	Relevance To Parental Loss in Childhood	Key Considerations/Limitations
		protest-despair-detachment sequence	emotional adjustment	
Kübler-Ross's Five Stages	Stage-based process	Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance	Offers a framework for recognizing common grief reactions in children/adolescents	Not always linear; stages can mislead if rigidly applied
Worden's Tasks of Mourning	Task-oriented adaptation	Accept loss, process pain, adjust, maintain enduring connection	Highlights practical steps for helping children grieve adaptively	Requires adult guidance; tasks may recur across development
Dual Process Model	Oscillating coping	Loss-oriented & restoration-oriented coping, healthy balance	Validates combining grief expression with normal life routines, helping children manage grief without overwhelm	Cultural/contextual adaptation needed
Continuing Bonds Theory	Ongoing relationship	Maintaining psychological connection to the deceased	Encourages healthy remembrance rituals, memory work, internal dialogue	Some bonds can be maladaptive if externalized in unhealthy ways
Meaning Reconstruction	Sense-making & identity	Meaning-making, benefit-finding, redefining self	Supports narrative therapy, creative expression, helps children rebuild sense of security	Complex in young children; needs developmental sensitivity
Disenfranchised Grief	Social validation	Hidden or unrecognized losses, right to grieve	Explains how children's grief can be overlooked in divorce, alienation, family conflict	Calls for family/school awareness and validation
Bonanno's Resilience Theory	Multiple pathways	Resilience as common response, stable functioning, protective factors	Emphasizes children's capacity for healthy adaptation with right support; reframes focus from only risk to strengths	Less prescriptive for interventions; needs integration with cultural factors

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper highlights that revisiting both classical and contemporary grief theories provides vital insight into the complex and varied ways children experience parental loss. Together, these frameworks demonstrate that grief is not a simple, linear process but a multidimensional experience shaped by attachment, meaning-making, social contexts, and individual resilience. While classical theories like Freud's psychoanalytic perspective and Bowlby's attachment theory laid the foundation for understanding grief's emotional and developmental impacts, contemporary models such as the Dual Process Model, Continuing

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Bonds Theory, and Meaning Reconstruction have expanded this understanding to include relational, narrative, cultural, and resilience-based dimensions. By comparing these perspectives, this paper shows that no single theory fully captures the diverse ways children respond to the death of a parent. Instead, an integrative approach is essential.

Interventions grounded in robust theoretical frameworks are more likely to address the complex emotional, relational, and social aspects of grief, and can be adapted for specific populations, such as children bereaved by parental suicide, ambiguous loss, or disenfranchised grief contexts. For example, integrating the concept of *continuing bonds* can help caregivers and professionals encourage children to maintain meaningful connections with the deceased parent, rather than pressuring them to “move on.” Likewise, the Dual Process Model highlights the importance of balancing grief-focused coping with restoration-oriented activities that promote healthy adjustment and resilience.

Moreover, theoretical insights such as *liminality* the state of being “in between” during major life transitions can help professionals understand the ambiguity children often face after parental loss, especially when family structures change through remarriage or step-parenting. Recognizing the *importance of social support* central to multiple theories can strengthen both formal bereavement services and informal community-based networks, making interventions more responsive and holistic. These frameworks also have implications for family dynamics. As shown in theories like Disenfranchised Grief and Bonanno’s Resilience Theory, the surviving parent and extended family play a crucial role in validating children’s grief and fostering environments that balance remembrance and recovery. Schools, community organizations, and faith-based institutions can also be engaged to build supportive networks that counter isolation and encourage open dialogue about loss.

For social workers, counselors, educators, and policymakers, this synthesis underscores the need for training and practice guidelines that are *developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and flexible* enough to accommodate diverse grief trajectories. Future practice should emphasize not only emotional support but also activities that foster meaning reconstruction, resilience, and social connectedness. Finally, ongoing research is needed to test how these theories and models intersect in real-life family contexts, particularly in non-Western cultural settings where family and community roles may differ. Exploring how digital technologies, peer groups, or creative arts interventions can operationalize these theories for children can further bridge research and practice.

Overall, using grief theories and models in practice is not just an academic exercise it bridges research with real-world support, improves outcomes for bereaved families, and affirms that children’s grief deserves understanding, validation, and care that evolves with their needs.

CONCLUSION

This paper confirms that no single grief theory fully explains children’s experiences of parental loss. An integrative framework offers deeper understanding and flexible guidance for practice. Professionals must adapt grief support to cultural, developmental, and family contexts. Theories must inform training, policy, and community interventions. Ongoing research connects evolving grief models with real-world family care. Children’s grief deserves support that grows with their changing needs.

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