

Grief Processing in Childhood and Adolescence: Theoretical Perspectives and Psychoeducational Implications

Maria Anna Formisano, Ph.D.^{1*}, Raffale Felaco²

¹Psychologist and Lecturer, University of Salerno, Italy.

²Psychologist, Editor of the magazine *Psychology News*.

***Corresponding Author**
Maria Anna Formisano, Ph.D.

Psychologist and Lecturer,
University of Salerno, Italy.

Article History

Received: 01.07.2025
Accepted: 18.07.2025
Published: 09.08.2025

Abstract: This paper analyzes the delicate role of the school in supporting grief processing during the developmental years, within a sociocultural context that, while exposing individuals to death through media, represses its private elaboration. It examines the different manifestations of grief in childhood and adolescence, highlighting the specific psychological needs of each phase. The school, as an "educating community," is not limited to an emergency response but must adopt a multidimensional and strategic approach. The objective is to transform the educational institution into a genuine hub of resilience, capable not only of supporting the bereaved student but also of educating the entire community on finitude, empathy, and active citizenship.

Keywords: grief, developmental age, school context, psychoeducational support, resilience.

Cite this article:

Formisano, M. A., Felaco, R., (2025). Grief Processing in Childhood and Adolescence: Theoretical Perspectives and Psychoeducational Implications. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(8), 7-10.

Introduction

Current scientific literature converges in recognizing the importance of supporting children and adolescents through the grief process as a cornerstone for protecting their psychological well-being. This need is situated within a complex sociocultural scenario, marked by a close interconnection between collective attitudes toward death and an individual's capacity to integrate the experience of loss. This awareness, however, clashes with a significant paradox of our era: on one hand, constant and often sensationalized media exposure to death; on the other, a profound collective difficulty in processing and sharing personal pain. Although the fear of death is a primordial terror shared with the animal world, human specificity lies in the ability to mentalize death—that is, to represent it and preserve its memory, a faculty that, as hypothesized by Testoni (2015), could have had a paralyzing outcome for the species.

Within this cultural framework, as analyzed by historian Philippe Ariès (1975), the Western attitude has progressively privatized death, expelling it from daily narrative and turning it into a taboo. Consequently, the loss of a significant figure becomes a particularly destabilizing experience, with effects that are amplified during the developmental years. As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1970) emphasized, death transcends its biological nature to become a complex emotional and relational phenomenon, requiring an articulated process of subjective reappraisal and reorganization.

From a psychodynamic perspective, grief is not defined as a pathological condition to be prevented, but rather as a complex psychophysiological reaction and an unavoidable adaptive process that triggers a profound reorganization of the intrapsychic balance. In line with John Bowlby's attachment theory, the pain of loss is the natural response to the rupture of a fundamental bond. Therefore, while the response to grief has universal aspects, its phenomenology and course are strictly modulated by developmental variables.

During childhood, the understanding of death evolves through distinct stages. The reaction to grief is dominated by separation from the caregiver, with whom, especially in the early years, an almost symbiotic bond is established. Consequently, the first step in any support intervention is to assess the child's stage of cognitive and emotional development (Felaco, 2021). On an emotional level, feelings of confusion, anger, and guilt may emerge, sometimes accompanied by the fantasy of having somehow caused the loss. It is therefore essential for the reference adult to provide validating "affective scaffolding," creating a safe space that allows the child to freely express their distress.

In adolescence, conversely, grief is grafted onto a terrain of profound identity transformation. The matured capacity for abstraction allows for a full conceptual understanding of death; however, this new awareness collides with the typical vulnerabilities of this phase, such as a sense of omnipotence and egocentrism. The adolescent is thus faced with a complex dual

task: integrating the pain of loss with the developmental challenges they are experiencing. This process carries the risk of maladaptive outcomes, such as risk-taking behaviors, anger, and social withdrawal (Felaco & Papa, 2021).

Regardless of age, the suffering resulting from the loss of a significant relationship can become paralyzing. The current paradigm has shifted from the concept of "overcoming" grief to that of "integrating" the loss into the subject's identity and life story. If this integration process becomes complicated—due to factors such as insecure attachment models or inadequate social support—dysfunctional manifestations may emerge. These are often attributable to emotional dysregulation patterns and can present as anxiety-depressive-symptoms, aggression, and a decline in academic performance.

In this context, the school emerges as a privileged ecosystem for observation and intervention. As highlighted by Formisano (2019), it is not merely a place of instructional delivery but an "educating community." Within this community, teachers, by virtue of their continuous presence and the relationship they build with students, assume the crucial role of reference figures. They are in a unique position to detect signs of distress, offer "emotional first aid," and, if necessary, activate broader support networks.

In summary, enhancing the relational and psychoeducational skills of school staff is not an additional burden but an indispensable strategic choice. Investing in teacher training is fundamental to transforming the school into a genuine bastion of resilience. This ensures that young people receive competent and integrated support, which is vital for their healthy development. Future research should focus on developing and empirically validating school-based intervention models and training programs designed to provide educators with the specific skills needed to effectively support grieving students.

Psychoeducational Intervention as Grief Support

When the school community is affected by a student's bereavement, the institution is called to a systemic mobilization of its resources. Such a critical event is not a simple human challenge to be delegated to a single teacher, but a true test of the maturity of the school's internal psychological processes and the solidity of its organizational culture. From this perspective, the role of the educational institution is not to replace other systems, such as the family or clinical services, but to act as a support architecture integrated into daily life. It thus establishes itself as a fundamental protective factor within the child's life ecosystem, as theorized by the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, designing an effective intervention means implementing a strategic process that aligns and synergizes the resources of the family, school staff, and external professionals.

An effective intervention first presupposes a recognition of the context's complexity. The organizational management of loss confronts the human dimension of the adults involved, who must face their own anxieties related to mortality. At the same time, the communicative culture within family systems does not always allow for a transparent and shared processing of pain, creating support vacuums that the school organization is called upon to fill.

It is at this juncture that school leadership must activate the strategic levers at the institution's disposal. The school's function transcends mere instructional delivery to manifest in the ability to activate system-level process monitoring. Teachers, as strategic

human resources, act as the organization's "sensors" (Formisano, 2019); however, it is the responsibility of the leadership and system-level figures (e.g., inclusion coordinators, school psychologist) to collect and interpret data from the classrooms. Variations in learning processes and relational dynamics are not problems to be isolated, but indicators that require a coordinated system activation.

Added to this is the need to develop an organizational-relational architecture founded on psychological safety at the institutional level, promoting a culture where fragility and emotional expression are considered an integral part of the growth process. A mature organization, moreover, does not improvise in the face of crisis; on the contrary, it implements and disseminates standardized operating protocols (Mahon et al., 1999), clear procedures that every staff member—from teachers to administrative and technical staff—must know to manage the emergency effectively. All this presupposes a strategic investment in enhancing human capital. Staff training ceases to be a cost and becomes the most profitable investment in terms of organizational well-being (Formisano, 2021). Ensuring that teachers and collaborators have access to validated conceptual frameworks and operational tools is the *conditio sine qua non* for the quality of support processes.

A competent organization, in fact, does not act on instinct but bases its practices on robust operational models. In addition to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980), which is fundamental to understanding the root of pain, the integration of more dynamic frameworks is essential. Worden's (2008) Task Model of Grieving provides an operational map for designing support actions, while the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) offers a strategic lever for correctly interpreting students' behaviors, protecting their natural oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processes.

The translation of these models into concrete practices is therefore articulated through a portfolio of interventions that the leadership promotes and supervises. On one hand, primary and proactive processes, such as including "Death Education" curricula in the school's three-year educational plan (PTOF), represent a direct investment in the organizational culture, increasing the entire community's "resilience capital." On the other hand, secondary and reactive processes are activated, which constitute the crisis management protocol. This begins with strategic communication and then unfolds through active listening by teachers, emotional validation processes, and flexibility in teaching methods, understood as an intelligent adaptation of the system.

Ultimately, managing bereavement in the classroom is the litmus test of the educational institution's ability to be much more than a simple provider of instruction. It is through the design of clear processes, constant investment in the skills of its human capital, and the adoption of a culture of continuous improvement, typical of a "learning organization" (Senge, 1990), that the institution evolves into what its highest mission requires: an authentic organization that generates well-being and a strategic bastion of human and social resilience for the community.

Concluding Remarks

The complex interplay between grief processing in the developmental years and the role of the school places the latter before one of the most delicate challenges to the psychophysical well-being of its students. This responsibility is heightened by a

clear cultural paradox: despite pervasive media exposure to death, Western society shows a growing difficulty in integrating loss into the collective narrative, relegating it to a private and often silent experience (Ariès, 1975). The resulting void in social and family support invests the school with a non-delegable responsibility, which transcends mere emergency management to become a true educational mandate.

The need for school-based intervention is founded, first and foremost, on a psychological and pedagogical imperative. As highlighted by the studies of Felaco (2021), the phenomenology of grief is strictly dependent on the subject's developmental stage. A child's reactions, dominated by magical thinking and the need for "affective scaffolding" to express confusion and guilt, differ profoundly from those of an adolescent, who is called to integrate the pain of loss with complex tasks of identity development. To ignore this developmental specificity is to provide an inadequate response. Therefore, the school, as a fundamental life ecosystem for the minor (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), has the task of offering a support context that is not only protective but also developmentally attuned.

However, to fulfill this task, the educational institution must evolve from a simple place of instructional delivery to a "learning organization" (Senge, 1990), capable of strategic reflection on its own processes. It is in this perspective that the contribution of Formisano (2019; 2021) proves fundamental: the school does not respond to crisis with individual empathy alone, but with the activation of robust organizational processes. It implements clear protocols, monitors signs of distress, and, above all, invests in strengthening its human capital. Training teachers, equipping them with operational models like Worden's (2008) Task Model or Stroebe and Schut's (1999) Dual Process Model, transforms staff into a strategic lever for well-being.

It is precisely in this organizational transformation that the school's fully educational task regarding grief is realized. This task is articulated on three levels:

- **Educating for an Understanding of Loss:** Through primary interventions like "Death Education," the school takes on the responsibility of educating all students about life, loss, and resilience as integral parts of the human experience, providing an emotional and conceptual alphabet for facing adversity.
- **Fostering Empathy and Solidarity:** The community management of a bereavement becomes a powerful, albeit painful, pedagogical opportunity. The school actively teaches compassion, solidarity, and mutual responsibility, transforming the pain of one into an opportunity for relational growth for the entire educating community.
- **Nurturing Resilience:** By offering the grieving student flexible and validating support, the school does not merely protect them but provides them with the relational and environmental tools to integrate the loss and continue their developmental path. In this way, the student learns not just to "get over" pain, but acquires the fundamental competence of navigating life's difficulties.

In conclusion, addressing grief in school is not an additional burden, but the highest expression of its mission. It is the demonstration of the institution's capacity to be a bastion of human and social resilience, one that not only protects students from the

inevitable sufferings of life but actively educates them to understand, navigate, and transform them into an opportunity for cognitive, personal, and social growth.

Future research must continue to investigate and validate intervention and training models that make this educational mandate a consolidated reality in every institution.

Bibliography

1. Ariès, P. (1998). *Storia della morte in Occidente: Dal Medioevo ai giorni nostri* (S. Vigezzi, Trad.). Rizzoli.
2. Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Loss: Sadness and depression*. Basic Books.
3. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
4. Felaco, R. (a cura di). (2021). *Bambini in lutto*. Pensa Multimedia.
5. Felaco, R., & D'Anselmo, F. M. (2016). *Amare in assenza: Fronteggiare il lutto con la psicoterapia*. Kaizen Edizioni.
6. Formisano, M. A. (2019). *Osservazione e guida all'apprendimento: Tra psicoeducazione e neuroscienze*. Area Blu Edizioni.
7. Formisano, M. A. (2021a). *Dirigenza scolastica e benessere organizzativo: Aspetti psicologici*. Area Blu Edizioni.
8. Formisano, M. A. (2021b). La transizione dall'infanzia all'età adulta: Attribuzioni e caratteristiche. *L'Eco della Scuola Nuova*.
9. Kübler-Ross, E. (1970). *On death and dying*. Scribner.
10. Mahon, M. M., Goldberg-Arnold, J., & Big-Cunningham, J. (1999). Concept of death in a sample of Israeli kibbutz children. *Death Studies*, 23(1), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/074811899201181>
11. Marzano, A., & Formisano, M. A. (2016). Le pratiche narrative per il miglioramento dell'efficacia dei processi di apprendimento. *METIS*, 6(1), 15–20.
12. Parkes, C. M. (2001). *Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life* (3rd ed.). Taylor & Francis.
13. Parkes, C. M. (2006). *Love and loss: The roots of grief and its complications*. Routledge.
14. Pereira, R. (1995). *Abordaje sistémico de la pérdida y el duelo* [Trascrizione del seminario]. Scuola di Terapia Familiare dell'Hospital de la Sta. Creu i S. Pau.
15. Pereira, R. (2002). Duelo: Desde el punto de vista individual al familiar. *Sistemas Familiares*, 18(1-2), 7-22.
16. Pereira Tercero, R. (1998). Le deuil: De l'optique individuelle à l'approche familiale. *Cahiers Critiques de Thérapie Familiale et de Pratiques de Réseaux*, 21, 27-44.
17. Pincus, L. (1974). *Death and the family: The importance of mourning*. Pantheon.
18. Rando, T. A. (1993). *Treatment of complicated mourning*. Research Press.
19. Rando, T. A. (Ed.). (2000). *Clinical dimensions of anticipatory mourning*. Research Press.
20. Rubin, S. S. (1990). Treating the bereaved spouse: A focus on the loss process, the self and the other. *Psychotherapy Patient*, 6(3-4), 117–132.
21. Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Doubleday/Currency.
22. Shuchter, S. R., & Zisook, S. (1986). Treatment of spousal bereavement: A multidimensional approach. *Psychiatric Annals*, 16(5), 295–300.

23. Silverman, P. R., Nickman, S., & Worden, J. W. (1992). Detachment revisited: The child's reconstruction of a dead parent. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 62(4), 494–502.
24. Stroebe, M. S. (1992). Coping with bereavement: A review of the grief work hypothesis. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 26(1), 1–17.
25. Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. *Death Studies*, 23(3), 197–224.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/074811899201046>
26. Testoni, I. (2015). *L'ultima nascita: Psicologia del lutto e del morire*. Bollati Boringhieri.
27. Volkan, V. D. (1985). Complicated mourning. *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 12-13, 333–350.
28. Worden, J. W. (2008). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner* (4th ed.). Springer Publishing Company.
29. Gargano, K., (2025). Educational Communities: the role of school leaders in cooperative management. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 15-17.
30. Formisano, M. A., Felaco, R., (2025). The construction of Emotions: a neuroscientific approach. *ISAR Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 3(3), 31-35.
31. Formisano, M. A., (2024). Psychological Dimensions of School Space Design. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(11), 78-81.