

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Martin, Tricia, "A Preliminary Descriptive Examination of Divorce and Grief Resolution Portrayed in Children's Literature" (2022). *2022 Celebration of Scholarly Works*. 2.  
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# A Preliminary Descriptive Examination of Divorce and Grief Resolution Portrayed in Children's Literature

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## INTRODUCTION

### EFFECTS OF DIVORCE

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2020 about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of American children live with divorced parents (2021). The effects of parental divorce on children vary but generally fall into 4 categories (Pehrsson, 2005; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975).

<b>Psychological</b>	Guilt, blame, anger, fear and anxiety
<b>Affective</b>	Depression, sadness, withdrawal. Can manifest as nightmares.
<b>Behavioral</b>	Regressions (bedwetting, thumb sucking), tantrums, aggression.
<b>Physiological</b>	Headaches, stomachaches, GI problems, insomnia, eating disorders

The most vulnerable children are those with whom the effects remain even just one year after divorce. After this time, they are at a higher risk for continued psychological disturbance. Hiding or pretending the divorce or separation did not happen showed even more detrimental effects on the child (Leon 2004; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975).

Judith Wallerstein conceptualized a list of interrelated hierarchical coping tasks (1983). If not mastered, these tasks (shown in the following chart), are developmental risk factors; or psychological readjustments that must be made for the child to move past adverse experiences such as the divorce of parents.

<b>Acknowledging</b> the reality of the marital disruption.
<b>Disengaging</b> from parental conflict and distress and resuming customary pursuits—putting their life ahead of parent troubles.
<b>Resolution</b> of a loss—could be loss of school, friends, home, traditions, daily routines.
<b>Resolving</b> anger and self-blame—toward one or both parents, or themselves.
<b>Accepting</b> the permanence of the divorce
<b>Achieve</b> realistic hope regarding relationships-- his/her capacity to love and be loved.

Kubler and Ross (2009) describe the grief process as five stages; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Wallerstein's psychological tasks integrated with the completion of the stages of grief.

### MALE VS FEMALE

Boys and girls react differently to negative life experiences. Gender differences are explained by the tendency for boys to externalize their emotions as anger while girls internalize their emotions as depression (Sigfusdottir & Silver, 2009).

### CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Books expose children to language. They introduce issues that help children cope with trauma by allowing them to relate to the protagonist. Children's books about divorce often take a realistic fiction approach (Teeter, 1991). Pehrsson explains that bibliotherapy is a therapeutic technique using books and stories to help children connect with the story, leading them to feel validated in, and understand, their own feelings. Books with this purpose can guide parents, teachers and therapists in helping children cope with whatever trauma they have experienced, including divorce (Heath & Young, 2017; Leon, 2004; Pehrsson, 2005).

## RATIONALE/PURPOSE

### Rationale

Few studies analyze children's books about divorce. There is a need for more evidence to support caregivers in helping children after a divorce.

### Purpose

Examine the language used in young children's picture books about divorce to determine if it is consistent with the movement through stages of grief associated with loss.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does the language in children's literature dealing with divorce accurately reflect the grief resolution process experienced by children of divorce?
2. Do male and female characters experience different stages of grief after divorce?

## METHOD

### Acquired Books

- Books selected from Spokane Public Library, online booklists, and medical and child therapy websites.
- Inclusion criteria: Published after 2000, age range 2-12, less than 55 pages, main character is a child dealing with divorce of parents.
- Excluding parent remarriage.

### Determined Variables

#### Combined Kubler-Ross stages of grief with Wallerstein's psychological tasks:

- Denial leads to acknowledgment
- Anger and blame lead to resolution
- Obsession and bargaining lead to disengagement
- Depression leads to resolution of loss
- Acceptance is accepting the permanence of the divorce and achieving hope.

### Collected Data

- Collected information from each book: age, gender and number of siblings of main character, age of target audience, number of words and words/page in each book.
- Read and coded each book following the rubric below.
- Inter-rater reliability: 70%, further training due to confusion resulted in 90% reliability.

### Analyzed Data

- Tallied frequency of stages represented across books.
- Contrasted presence of stages in male characters vs. female characters, and in the total number of books.
- Searched for themes across books.

## RUBRIC

### DENIAL

Everything is fine, Dad is coming back, Making up stories to explain the situation.

### ANGER

My fault, his/her fault, mad, hate, you promised, angry, guilty.

### OBSESS/BARGAIN

If I do this then..., Affects school work. Takes over life. Need to resolve parents' issues. Divorce is all they can think about.

### DEPRESSION

Sad, isolation, no friends, crying, moping, disinterest, miss home or other parent, heartbroken, worry, smallness, fear, confused, betrayed.

### ACCEPTANCE

Happy at both homes, feeling of happiness, feel better, feels love.

## RESULTS

Figure 1  
Number of Stages Present

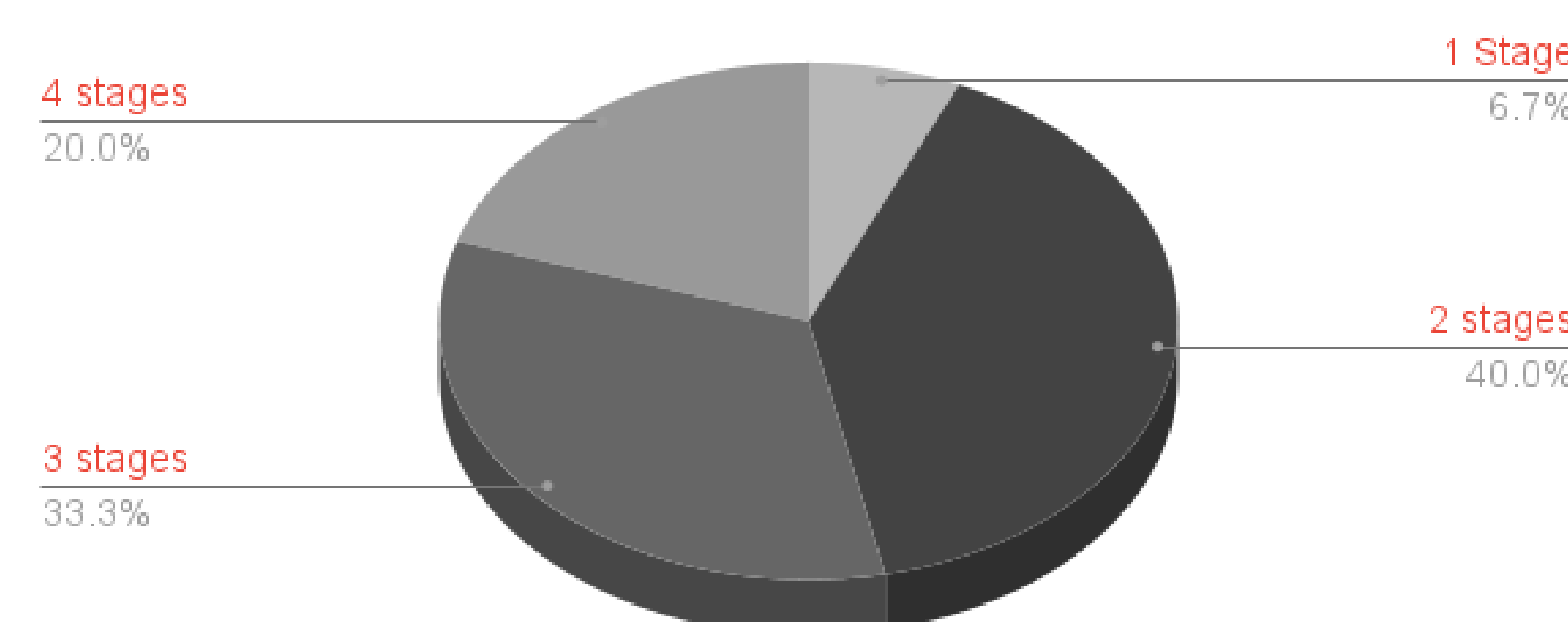


Figure 1: How many stages are present in each book? One book has only 1 stage and no books contained all 5 stages. Approximately half of the books contained 1-2 stages and half contained 3-4 stages. The median number of stages is 3.

Figure 2  
Proportion of Occurrence of Each Stage

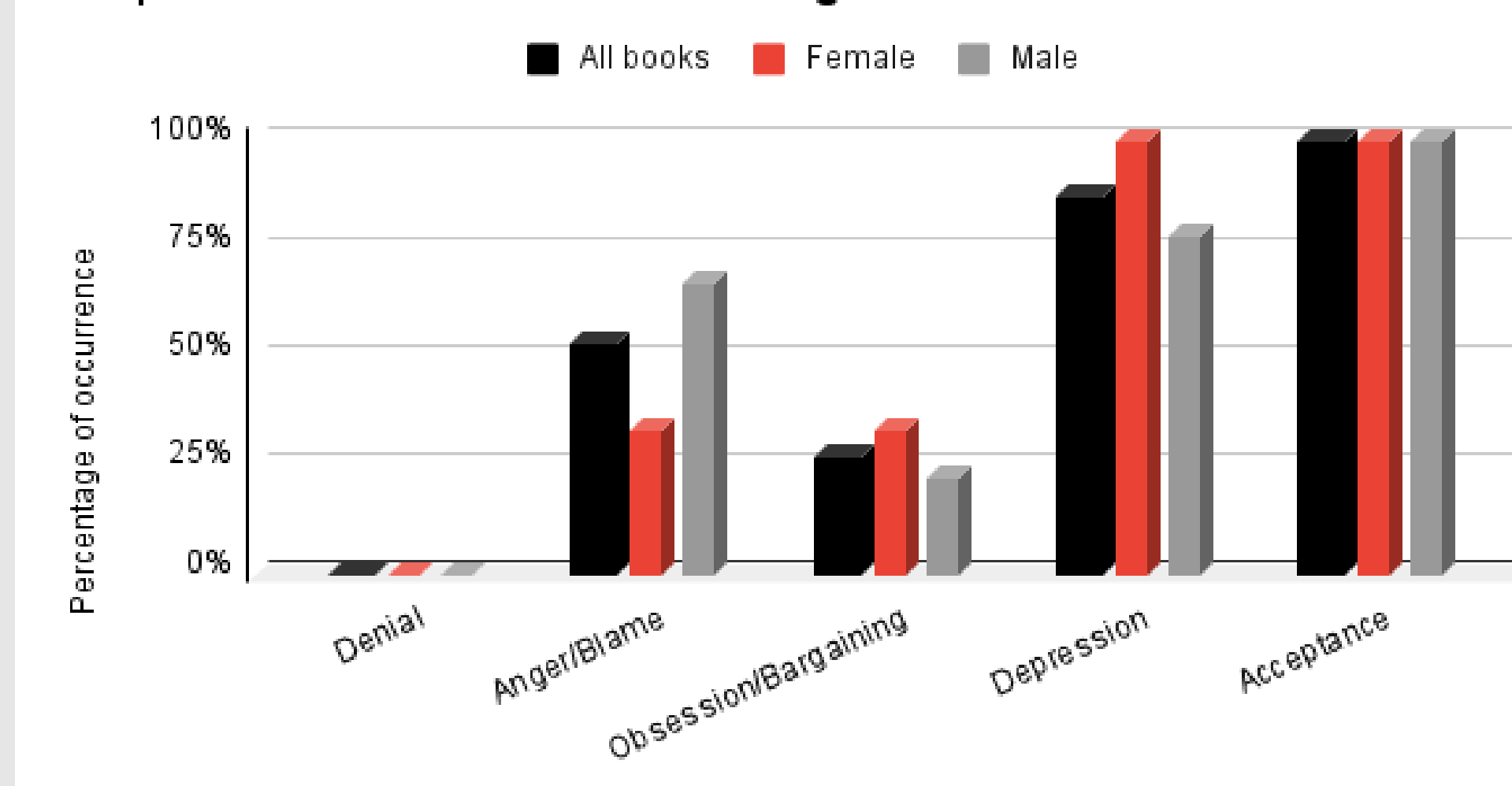


Figure 2: The proportion of occurrence of each stage in all 15 books and breakdown between female and male main characters. None of the books contained denial, and all of the books contained language denoting acceptance. All the female characters (6/15) experienced depression compared to 78% of male characters (9/15). Books with male characters portrayed anger or blame (67%) twice as much as the female characters (33%).

## DISCUSSION

### Question 1

Generally, children's books about divorce do not accurately reflect the stages of grief that children experience. These books show that child characters that experience divorce have reduced psychological wellbeing as is consistent with research over time (Schaan, 2016 and Wallerstein, 1983). Inconsistent with Wallerstein's research are the stages that the fictional characters experience. According to Wallerstein, young children (ages 3.5-5) have the highest incidence of denial and only 50% of children achieve the stage of acceptance (Wallerstein, 1975). Current children's books for this young population do not attempt to portray feelings of denial. Further, all the characters in the books achieve acceptance of familial separation. Teeter's analysis claims that children's books portray a child's experiences realistically, although it was based on variables such as custody, living arrangements, and parent remarriage (1991). The difference in the stages experienced by the fictional characters and reality may be due to the nature of children's books in being uplifting. Adding aspects of denial and not achieving acceptance may add too much complexity and length to the storyline of books written for the younger population.

### Question 2

Children's books about divorce show consistency with current evidence on how males and females experience grief after divorce. Males have the tendency to externalize their emotions resulting in anger and aggression. In contrast, females internalize their emotions resulting in sadness, depression, and isolation (Sigfusdottir & Silver, 2009). Another interesting inconsistency is the number of female main characters in the current analysis is almost half while Teeter's analysis portrayed the main characters as 80% female. This may be due to boys and girls having an equal chance of experiencing the divorce of their parents.

### Clinical Implications

- A list of more complete books can be compiled for the use of bibliotherapy by parents, teachers, and therapists.
- The data give knowledge of the stages of grief that children experience, and the language associated with it, including the differences between girls and boys. This can lead to early intervention which can reduce the long-term effects and increase resilience.
- Speech Language Pathologists can use language associated with the stages to expand a child's vocabulary and help kids receptively/expressively ID feelings associated with each stage.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The limitations include the limited sample size of 15 books at the younger age level. Additional books may be available at higher levels. The lower level books available did not have a lot of varying storylines or concepts to allow for a comprehensive analysis of the language of grief. Additionally, there is not a lot of research on literature about children of divorce or language of grief. Future directions from this research could include a deeper look into the specific vocabulary used in each stage and what phrases or words are most commonly used. Further questions of interest include:

- Do books of higher levels contain a higher average of the stages?
- Do books of higher levels contain different language/concepts within each stage?
- How do books portray the impact of stepparents and blended families on children?
- How many children have speech/language delays or regression after divorce?

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