THE EFFECT OF THE DEATH OF AN IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER ON A CHILD'S PERCEPTION OF GOD:
A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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by
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APPROVAL SHEET

THE EFFECT OF THE DEATH OF AN IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER ON A CHILD'S PERCEPTION OF GOD:
A MIXED METHODS STUDY

JoLynn Prochaska

Read and Approved by:

__________________________________________
Timothy Paul Jones (Chair)

__________________________________________
Randy L. Stinson

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Eric L. Johnson

Date ______________________________
To my parents

my encouragers, my support

and to

Cohort Four

my colleagues, my friends, and my brothers in Christ
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. RESEARCH CONCERN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Research Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Purpose</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations of the Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Synopsis</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Overview</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Assumptions</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. PRECEDENT LITERATURE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background for Grief Work</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children and Grief</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological Foundation of Study</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Perceptions of God</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Therapy</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Synopsis</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design Overview</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter | Page
---|---
Sample and Delimitations | 77
Limitations of Generalization | 78
Instrumentation | 78
Instrument Validation | 79
Research Procedures | 81
4. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS | 85
Compilation Protocol | 85
Demographics and Sample Data | 87
Findings and Displays by Research Questions | 91
Evaluation of the Research Design | 101
5. CONCLUSIONS | 105
Research Purpose | 106
Research Questions | 106
Research Implications | 107
Research Applications | 116
Research Limitations | 121
Further Research | 123
Appendix | 
1. NORMAL GRIEF REACTIONS | 125
2. TYPES OF GRIEF | 126
3. AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE | 128
4. INITIAL QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED TO THE CONTROL GROUP AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP | 129
5. FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR THE CONTROL GROUP AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP | 130
6. DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET | 132
7. THURSTONE SCALE | 133
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. DIRECTIONS FOR THE COUNSELORS AND TEACHER</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. INITIAL THURSTON SCALE</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. INITIAL LIST OF CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO COUNSELORS</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. EXPERIMENTAL GROUP RESPONSES</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. CONTROL GROUP RESPONSES</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. ANOVA RESULTS OF RESEARCH QUESTION 2</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table                      Page
1. Age distribution for control group .......................... 89
2. Age distribution for experimental group ....................... 89
3. Mann-Whitney for interview question 1 ........................ 92
4. Mann-Whitney for interview question 2 ........................ 93
5. Mann-Whitney for interview question 3 ........................ 94
6. ANOVA interactions with face of God with considerations of groupings ........................................... 96
7. ANOVA procedure with face of God with considerations of groupings ................................................. 97
8. ANOVA interactions with levitation with considerations of groupings .................................................. 97
9. ANOVA procedure with levitation with considerations of groupings ..................................................... 98
10. ANOVA results with interactions .................................. 99
11. ANOVA results without interactions .............................. 100
12. ANOVA results considering “gender” ............................ 100
13. ANOVA results with an age inclusive group ....................... 101
14. ANOVA results considering 6 to 9 year olds ....................... 101
15. ANOVA results considering 10 to 12 year olds .................... 101
A1. Normal grief reactions .............................................. 125
A2. Types of grief .......................................................... 126
A3. Demographic sheet .................................................... 132
A4. Thurstone scale ......................................................... 133
A5. Initial Thurstone scale ............................................... 138
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A6. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God as active</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with anthropomorphism</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with clouds</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God as just a face</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A10. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with fairy tale elements</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A11. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God as a friendly ghost</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A12. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with gender</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A13. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with halo</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A14. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God levitating</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A15. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with light</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A16. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God smiling</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A17. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with supernatural elements</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A18. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with symbolism</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A19. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with wings</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Gender distribution of the control group</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Gender distribution of the experimental group</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Spiritual commitment for control group</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Spiritual distribution for experimental group</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.</td>
<td>Question 1, female 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2.</td>
<td>Question 2, female 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3.</td>
<td>Question 3, female 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.</td>
<td>Question 1, female 2, 6 years old</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.</td>
<td>Question 2, female 2, 6 years old</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6.</td>
<td>Question 3, female 2, 6 years old</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.</td>
<td>Question 1, female 3, 8 years old</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8.</td>
<td>Question 2, female 3, 8 years old</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9.</td>
<td>Question 3, female 3, 8 years old</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A10.</td>
<td>Question 1, female 4, 10 years old</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A11.</td>
<td>Question 2, female 4, 10 years old</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A12.</td>
<td>Question 3, female 4, 10 years old</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A13.</td>
<td>Question 1, female 5, 10 years old</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A14.</td>
<td>Question 2, female 5, 10 years old</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A15.</td>
<td>Question 3, female 5, 10 years old</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A16.</td>
<td>Question 1, female 6, 11 years old</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A17.</td>
<td>Question 2, female 6, 11 years old</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A18.</td>
<td>Question 3, female 6, 11 years old</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Question 1, female 7, 11 years old</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A19</td>
<td></td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A20</td>
<td>Question 2, female 7, 11 years old</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A21</td>
<td>Question 3, female 7, 11 years old</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A22</td>
<td>Question 1, male 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A23</td>
<td>Question 2, male 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A24</td>
<td>Question 3, male 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A25</td>
<td>Question 1, male 2, 7 years old</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A26</td>
<td>Question 2, male 2, 7 years old</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A27</td>
<td>Question 3, male 2, 7 years old</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A28</td>
<td>Question 1, male 3, 7 years old</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A29</td>
<td>Question 2, male 3, 7 years old</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A30</td>
<td>Question 3, male 3, 7 years old</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A31</td>
<td>Question 1, male 4, 7 years old</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A32</td>
<td>Question 2, male 4, 7 years old</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A33</td>
<td>Question 3, male 4, 7 years old</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A34</td>
<td>Question 1, male 5, 8 years old</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A35</td>
<td>Question 2, male 5, 8 years old</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A36</td>
<td>Question 3, male 5, 8 years old</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A37</td>
<td>Question 1, male 6, 9 years old</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A38</td>
<td>Question 2, male 6, 9 years old</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A39</td>
<td>Question 3, male 6, 9 years old</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A40</td>
<td>Question 1, male 7, 10 years old</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A41</td>
<td>Question 2, male 7, 10 years old</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A42</td>
<td>Question 3, male 7, 10 years old</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A43</td>
<td>Question 1, male 8, 10 years old</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A44</td>
<td>Question 2, male 8, 10 years old</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Question 3, male 8, 10 years old</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A45</td>
<td></td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A46</td>
<td>Question 1, female 1, 8 years old</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A47</td>
<td>Question 2, female 1, 8 years old</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A48</td>
<td>Question 3, female 1, 8 years old</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A49</td>
<td>Question 1, female 2, 8 years old</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A50</td>
<td>Question 2, female 2, 8 years old</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A51</td>
<td>Question 3, female 2, 8 years old</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A52</td>
<td>Question 1, female 3, 8 years old</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A53</td>
<td>Question 2, female 3, 8 years old</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A54</td>
<td>Question 3, female 3, 8 years old</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A55</td>
<td>Question 1, female 4, 8 years old</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A56</td>
<td>Question 2, female 4, 8 years old</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A57</td>
<td>Question 3, female 4, 8 years old</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A58</td>
<td>Question 1, female 5, 9 years old</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A59</td>
<td>Question 2, female 5, 9 years old</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A60</td>
<td>Question 3, female 5, 9 years old</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A61</td>
<td>Question 1, female 6, 9 years old</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A62</td>
<td>Question 2, female 6, 9 years old</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A63</td>
<td>Question 3, female 6, 9 years old</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A64</td>
<td>Question 1, female 7, 9 years old</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A65</td>
<td>Question 2, female 7, 9 years old</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A66</td>
<td>Question 3, female 7, 9 years old</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A67</td>
<td>Question 1, female 8, 9 years old</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A68</td>
<td>Question 2, female 8, 9 years old</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A69</td>
<td>Question 3, female 8, 9 years old</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A70</td>
<td>Question 1, female 9, 10 years old</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Question, Gender, Age</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A71</td>
<td>Question 2, female 9, 10 years old</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A72</td>
<td>Question 3, female 9, 10 years old</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A73</td>
<td>Question 1, female 10, 10 years old</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A74</td>
<td>Question 2, female 10, 10 years old</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A75</td>
<td>Question 3, female 10, 10 years old</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A76</td>
<td>Question 1, female 11, 11 years old</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A77</td>
<td>Question 2, female 11, 11 years old</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A78</td>
<td>Question 3, female 11, 11 years old</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A79</td>
<td>Question 1, male 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A80</td>
<td>Question 2, male 12, 6 years old</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A81</td>
<td>Question 3, male 1, 6 years old</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A82</td>
<td>Question 1, male 2, 7 years old</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A83</td>
<td>Question 2, male 2, 7 years old</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A84</td>
<td>Question 3, male 2, 7 years old</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A85</td>
<td>Question 1, male 3, 7 years old</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A86</td>
<td>Question 2, male 3, 7 years old</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A87</td>
<td>Question 3, male 3, 7 years old</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A88</td>
<td>Question 1, male 4, 10 years old</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A89</td>
<td>Question 2, male 4, 10 years old</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A90</td>
<td>Question 3, male 4, 10 years old</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A91</td>
<td>Question 1, male 5, 10 years old</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A92</td>
<td>Question 2, male 5, 10 years old</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A93</td>
<td>Question 3, male 5, 10 years old</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A94</td>
<td>Question 1, male 6, 11 years old</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A95</td>
<td>Question 2, male 6, 11 years old</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A96</td>
<td>Question 3, male 6, 11 years old</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Question 1, male 7, 11 years old</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A97</td>
<td></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A98</td>
<td></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A99</td>
<td></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A100</td>
<td></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A101</td>
<td></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A102</td>
<td></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A103</td>
<td></td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A104</td>
<td></td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A105</td>
<td></td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On a tennis court many years ago, my doubles partner looked at me right before a match and said, “Remember to enjoy the journey.” Through the years, I have spent much time pondering that phrase and its vast implications. When one focuses solely on the “destination” of winning a match, earning a promotion, or fulfilling all the requirements for a degree, then much of the joy, the growth, and the beauty that the journey itself provides have been left unrealized.

The past several years my life have been filled with much, joy, growth, and beauty all because of this recent bend in my journey. While the trek has not been easy and has been filled with the challenges of ministry, deadlines, and life, God placed me in the very learning community that would help encourage, edify, and sustain me all the while. Thank you, Cohort 4, for welcoming the lone female, partnering with me, and also allowing me to be part of your journey.

No words could adequately capture or express my gratitude and appreciation to my parents. For their whole-hearted support and boundless patience have kept me motivated and focused. Thanks to you both, Dad and Mom, for sacrificing your time, talents, and resources to afford me with incredible opportunities throughout all my years. You have invested so selflessly and richly in my life and left in my heart such a deep spiritual legacy that I hope I can one day live up to.

To my church family, I could not have ventured out on this path or continued to walk down it without your prayers and support. Thank you for allowing me the time to pursue this educational endeavor and encouraging me each step of the way. Your kind words and understanding spurred me on.
To Dr. Adam Greenway and Carla Greenway, thank you for believing in me, pushing me, and bringing me to Southern. God truly and richly has blessed and continues to bless my life with your godly friendship. Thank you for opening your hearts and your home to me.

To Dr. Jones, thank you for seeing me not only through the admissions process with the initial interview, but also through the whole of this academic process. Thank you for your patience, your guidance, and your servant’s heart.

To my Redeemer and Savior, Jesus Christ, for your grace and mercy that is new and abounding every day, thank you. For calling and pursuing your sheep daily into your pasture, thank you.

JoLynn Prochaska

Gastonia, North Carolina

December 2016
CHAPTER 1
RESEARCH CONCERN

This research is an examination of how children theologically perceive God following the death of an immediate family member, specifically that of a parent or sibling. Research shows that 20 percent of children will experience a parental death by the time they finish high school.\(^1\) Parental death has a traumatic effect on a child’s development. In fact, 20 percent of children who experience a parental death are “likely to develop a psychiatric disorder.”\(^2\) While parental death is one of the hardest losses to cope with, the loss of sibling also has a profound impact on children.\(^3\) According to a study conducted by Worden, Davies, and McCown, 25 percent of the children who experience a sibling death will exhibit “at risk” behavior.\(^4\) Another study by McCown and Davies revealed that children who lose a brother or sister exhibit “significantly more behavior problems than does the normal population.”\(^5\)


The stress of the death can be so profound, that if he or she does not receive support in the early stages of grief, serious life-long developmental problems may result.\textsuperscript{6} Secular bereavement interventions targeting children’s grief are showing little efficacy in helping children cope with death.\textsuperscript{7} However, research shows that children who have a connection with the church or an understanding of God on a personal level have the ability to cope with the death more easily than those who have no religious affiliation.\textsuperscript{8} Having faith in God provides confidence that there is a greater purpose in life and in death.\textsuperscript{9} Children who have faith have assurance that they can overcome difficulties and do not do so alone.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Introduction to the Research Problem}

Parental death affects approximately 2.5 million children by the time they graduate high school.\textsuperscript{11} When a parent dies, children not only lose their emotional, physical, and spiritual support, but they also lose a model and a protector.\textsuperscript{12} When a child loses a sibling they lose a companion, confident, friend, and “a substantial source of


\textsuperscript{9}Zeligs, \textit{Children’s Experience with Death}, 214.

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 214-15.


affection.”13 Though children are said to be resilient, the death of an immediate family member changes a child’s very essence and innermost existence. The premise that children have the capacity and ability to grieve was nonexistent until the mid-twentieth century with the pioneering works of Anna Freud and John Bowlby.14

Since that time, additional child psychologists have made substantial contributions to expand the once void literature base, including Nagy, Worden, and Wolfelt.15 Their work has identified how grief manifests itself in children at different chronological and developmental levels. Consequently, their research has helped caregivers become cognizant that not only do children grieve, but also grief affects their lives. No longer would children be overlooked in regard to grief or be the “forgotten mourners.”16

Grief caused by a parental or a sibling death can be so disturbing to children that it can disrupt every aspect of their normal development.17 The stress of the loss can be all encompassing causing lifelong emotional, behavioral, and spiritual problems.18 If, for some reason, a child cannot work through his or her grief, mental or behavioral


disorders may occur anywhere from five to forty years later. Consequently, many adults’ emotional, relational, and even spiritual problems stem from issues that occurred during childhood that were not resolved correctly.

According to Lester, “Many people’s concepts of what God is like, how he works in the world, and how God feels about them are formed in the midst of a childhood crisis.” If children assume that the death occurred because God is either punishing them or did not love them enough to stop it, then they may begin to “question God’s character.” Their view of his nature can therefore become distorted and may cause the children to question and doubt their core spiritual values. Some children may even lose their faith altogether. Children need the assistance of caregivers and professionals to walk with them through their journey of grief and to reassure them of God’s immutable character and unconditional love.

Throughout the better part of this century, numerous studies and research have been conducted focusing on how children of all ages and developmental levels perceive

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21 Ibid., 54.


and conceptualize God.\textsuperscript{26} While all children are not developmentally ready to verbally express their true feelings and understanding about God, they can do so using art as a medium.\textsuperscript{27} The use of drawing allows children to better and more fully express themselves. Pitts posits that this medium is one with which children are “familiar and comfortable, and which is consistent with his [or her] stage of mental growth.”\textsuperscript{28} From the work of Harms, Heller, and Pitts, a baseline for children’s perceptions of God was created based on age, gender, and denominational affiliations.\textsuperscript{29} The missing piece to the puzzle is how children perceive God in the midst of grief. This information could be of great benefit in helping a child transition through the process of grief.

While the first two chapters of the Bible describe creation and life, the next two usher in death.\textsuperscript{30} Scripture records numerous examples of people who experienced the losses of children, friends, parents, siblings, and spouses (Ruth 1; 2 Sam 1-2; Gen 50; John 11; Gen 23). The grief experiences of Naomi, Job, the Psalmists, and Martha exemplify such instances (Ruth 1; Job 1-2; Ps 22; John 11). Through their words and expressions of grief, insight may be gained into how they perceived God while dealing with the deaths of loved ones. This perhaps speaks to how others perceive God during

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[28] Peter Pitts, \textit{The God Concept in the Child} (Schenectady, NY: Character Research, 1977), 6.
\end{footnotesize}
grief. Timeless insight and hope can be gained from Scripture for all generations of Christians today as they encounter loss.

During times of grief, people perceive God in numerous ways. 31 While some perceive that God has abandoned, is mad at, is punishing, or not listening to them, others perceive that God is present and are certain he listens. Their perception, in turn, determines how they move through grief. 32 Grief can also shape one’s perception of God. 33 However one perceives God during their time of grief, it is important for caregivers to listen for any distortion of God’s character, so as to gently communicate Truth. 34 Children are especially vulnerable during this time and need support and guidance during the grief process. They need caregivers who can and will honestly answer their questions. If not corrected, misinformation or perceptions can seriously affect all aspects of a child’s development. 35

**Research Purpose**

Since a link has been established between a child’s spiritual life and the ability to cope with grief, there is a need to study how children perceive God when they are grieving. 36 The purpose of this mixed methods study was to determine the relationship between children’s grief and their perceptions of God. Another important consideration for this study was the perception of God by a child who has not experienced a significant

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34 Parker, “Spirituality in Counseling,” 114.


death. Select demographic information was collected and analyzed in efforts to see what relationship existed, if any, between a child’s loss and his or her perception of God during grief. This study sought to discover information that would help counselors and caregivers better communicate truths about God, his nature, and his character to children in efforts to bring them comfort and hope.

**Delimitations of the Study**

The focus group of this study was comprised of children who are grieving the loss of a parent or a sibling. Specifically, it consisted of children ages 6 to 12 whose caregivers had given permission for them to participate. This age group was chosen as the focus for several reasons. Children ages 6 to 11 are in elementary school, similar to the age group used in previous research investigating children’s perceptions of God, fall mainly in Piaget’s concrete operational stage of development, and therefore exhibit similar characteristics in thought process. Children who were 12 were eligible to participate because the study encompassed children who had experienced a death in the past 12 to 18 months. Therefore children could have been 11 when the death occurred, but 12 by the time they participated in the study.

This study did not include children who were from a divorced home, as children may have been already grieving the absence of a parent from the home. Neither did this study include children who had experienced the death of other close family members. Instead, this study focused only on those children who had lost a parent or sibling within a year to 18 months of the start date of the project. The rationale behind this time frame is that grief caused by a significant loss for a child is thought to typically

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38 Ibid., 11.
last anywhere from a year to 18 months. A further delimitation of the group was that they had to be under the care of a Christian counselor that specialized with children and adolescence. Christian counselors were chosen as they should have similar biblical and theological foundations and not be as limited or restricted by state guidelines, allowing the counselors more freedom to participate in such studies.

The experimental population had to be under the care of a Christian counselor for several reasons. Primarily, Christian counselors would lend more credibility to a study seeking to ascertain children’s perceptions of God than would counselors in the secular field. Additionally, counselors were used to gather data, which not only protected the identity of the children, but also relieved me from coming in direct contact with them and thereby eliminating any ethical issues. This presented a delimitation within itself, as I had to rely on professionals to lead, not only for the drawing exercise, but also to follow up with the children to ask questions about their drawings.

Finally, children had to be established patients under the care of a counselor for at least the initial visit and assessment before the guided exercises could begin. This stipulation allowed a rapport to be established between the counselor and counselee as well as provided the counselor with enough time to assess if the client was ready to participate.

A control group consisting of children between the ages of 6 to 12 who had not experienced a significant loss was also an integral part of this study. These children could not have experienced the death of a close family member or be from a divorced home. They also had to attend the same private Christian school, so they would be exposed to the same biblical teachings. Classroom teachers were used to interview the children for several reasons: to protect the identity of the children, to prevent any ethical issues, and because a neutral party also interviewed the experimental group.

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interviews with the control group and the teachers did not commence until several weeks into the semester, allowing children time to feel comfortable with their teachers.

**Research Question Synopsis**

This study sought to discover how children perceived God after the death of a parent or sibling. The following three questions were used to direct this study:

1. How does the death of an immediate family member affect a child’s perception of God, if at all?
2. What are the similarities and differences in perceptions of God among children who have experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who have not?
3. How is a child’s perception of God after experiencing the death of an immediate family member affected, if at all, by age, gender, or spiritual commitment?

**Terminology**

For the purpose of this study the following terms are defined as follows:

*Art therapy.* Art therapy is the utilization of visual art “for personal growth, insight, and transformation and is a means of connecting what is inside us-our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions-with outer realities and life experiences. It is based on the belief that images can help us understand who we are and enhance life through self-expression.”

*Bereavement.* Bereavement is the culmination of experiences that a person encounters after the death of a loved one. According to children’s psychiatrist William Worden, bereavement is the “adaptation” to the loss.

*Grief.* Grief is one’s behavioral, cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual responses to the death (see appendix 1). Grief manifests itself uniquely in

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41 Worden, *Children and Grief*, 11.

42 Elissa J. Brown and Robin F. Goodman, “Childhood Traumatic Grief: An
individuals, and affects every aspect of one’s being. *Grief* exists in a variety of states (see appendix 2).

*Mourning.* *Mourning* is the “exemplification of grief through cultural practices and rituals and adaptation to the loss.”\(^{43}\) Some of these practices include wearing black to the funeral, visiting the gravesite, as well as commemorating the deceased’s birthday. The process of *mourning* helps people work their way through grief.

*Perception.* *Perception* is what one thinks about something based on certain environmental factors such as age, gender, race, personal experiences, and family experiences.\(^{44}\)

*Spiritual Commitment.* When a person makes “a personal allegiance to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”\(^{45}\) This *commitment* also requires a belief and acknowledgement that Jesus Christ is God’s one and only son who was crucified, buried, and resurrected in order to provide salvation and eternal life for mankind (John 3:16; Rom 10:9-10; 1 Cor 15:1-5).

**Procedural Overview**

This mixed methods study utilized a multi-level triangulation design. Data for this study was both quantitative and qualitative and collected and analyzed from a control group and an experimental group. This study sought to determine children’s perceptions of God in the midst of grief.

The research sample was purposive and obtained by contacting Christian

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counselors who worked with or specialized in children. I contacted these counselors and asked for their help in leading children through a series of specific exercises. The sample was based on those counselors who responded, but a minimum number of 12 children under the care of counselors was necessary to run statistical analysis and to ascertain significance. The sample was unbiased in regards to ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, as counselors and teachers adhere to both ethical and moral codes.

I first contacted counselors via email or phone to identify those who were currently working with grieving children and requested help with the study. Counselors willing to participate were then asked to obtain a verbal commitment and written parental permission for the children to be a part of the study and for their response to be used (see appendix 3). Once permission was granted, the interviews began.

Prompts and specific directions for the drawing exercises, as well as follow up questions about the drawings, and all drawing materials were supplied to the counselors via mail (see appendix 9). Counselors were directed to ask the children a series of three questions, and have them draw their answers (see appendix 4). These questions were to be asked over a period of three different sessions.

Upon completion of each drawing, counselors interviewed the child about their drawings. Follow up questions were provided to direct the conversation about each drawing (see appendix 5). Counselors were instructed to write down the counselee’s explanation verbatim, as well as record some basic demographic information pertaining to the child, including the child’s age, gender, and if the child had made a spiritual commitment or not. This information was to be entered into a table I provided. Each demographic table was coded alpha-numerically (see appendix 6). Counselors were asked to transfer this code onto the back of each drawing as well as on the follow up

\[eterangan{\text{Parents were assured that the child’s identity would remain anonymous.}}\]
questionnaire pages. This code became the child’s identity. At no time did I have access to the names of the children.

Another component to this study was the utilization of a control group, which consisted of 20 children who had not experienced the death of a loved one and were between the ages of 6 and 12. The teachers followed the same protocol as the counselors. Each member of the control group was also asked to draw their answers to three open-ended questions. Though the first question was worded exactly the same, questions 2 and 3 were worded slightly differently (see appendix 4). The control group was also asked follow-up questions (see appendix 5) that helped them to explain the various drawn elements of their answers. The teachers followed the same protocol as the counselors in collecting demographic information for the control group.

Once the third question was answered and the follow up interview was complete, the data that included the drawings, answers to the follow up questions, and the demographic data were mailed to me. When the data from all participants were received, the drawings, the follow up interviews, a Thurstone scale (see appendix 7), and a list of characteristics that appeared on the Thurstone scale and their descriptions were sent to a panel of raters (see appendix 8). The panel of raters consisted of three members who worked with children professionally on a daily basis, including an elementary education teacher/school librarian, a guidance counselor, and an elementary education art teacher. I kept the demographic information.

Once the data was received back from the panel of raters, I organized the data into spreadsheets. I used these spreadsheets in the compilation and analysis of the data. The spreadsheets, which included a code to represent the child, demographic information for each child, and each child’s averaged answers for each of the three questions, were sent to a statistician. In turn a statistician used R, a data analysis software to run three statistical tests, including the Mann Whitney, and two Analysis of Variance tests in
efforts to determine statistical significance. The results of the analysis were displayed in figures, spreadsheets, and tables.

**Research Assumptions**

For this study, I assumed the following:

1. Participating counselors would follow instructions provided by the researcher with counselees.

2. Children’s drawings would have included components that reflect feelings related to grief.
CHAPTER 2
PRECEDENT LITERATURE

This chapter traces the evolution of grief work as applied to children as well as surveys existing literature pertaining to the affects of grief on children. An examination of biblical and theological perspectives regarding grief is also presented by considering both the Old and New Testaments and appropriate commentaries. Finally, time is devoted to reviewing the research that focuses on how children perceive God, how researchers have been able to discover these perceptions, and how this particular study will fill a gap in that research.

**Historical Background for Grief Work**

Theories relating to children and grief have emerged from adult bereavement theories, and fluctuate widely. Theorists such as Sigmund Freud espoused that children were developmentally unable to grieve, while others like John Bowlby posited that children could grieve as early as 6 months of age.⁴ Each theorist presents a theory and approaches grief through the lens of his or her various theoretical constructs, whether psychoanalytic, ethological, behavioral, or cognitive.

Freud approached grief psychoanalytically, contending that human behavior is the result of the interaction among the three component parts of the mind: the id, ego, and superego. In the early twentieth century, Freud originated the idea that people, specifically adults, had to “work” through their grief; he presented his germinal ideas in a paper

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entitled, “Mourning and Melancholia.”

2 His famous work, which presented the first theory or model of grief, identified peoples’ reactions to death. He classified the responses as either normal or pathological and provided detailed descriptions of both.

3 According to Freud, in order for grief to end, the person must let go of the mental attachment of the deceased or reverse it in some way. Grief work helps one arrive at the point of decathexis which is when the ego “becomes free and uninhibited again” allowing the individual to focus energy in other areas.

Grief work is painful and requires a tremendous amount of effort and time, for it requires that bereaved individuals revisit their relationship and memories of the deceased and not only detach themselves emotionally from them but also sever any attachment to them. From a psychoanalytic perspective the ego plays the primary role in this process, and since Freud believed a child’s ego was not fully developed, he did not view them capable of grief.

While Freud developed the actual concept of grief work, Erich Lindemann coined the phrase in 1944 through his research with 101 survivors and relatives of the victims of the Coconut Grove Fire. Both Freud and Lindemann focused their work on

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4Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245.

5Ibid., 244.

6Ibid., 244-45.

7Ibid., 245.

the relationships that existed between the deceased and the survivors, and how it affected their grief reactions. Much like Freud, Lindemann asserted that in order to complete grief work, one must “disengage emotionally from the deceased”; however, Lindemann also noted that one must “adapt to a new environment that does not include the deceased.”

Though Lindemann was the first to conduct empirically-based research focusing on grief, acute grief, and detailing the differences between normal and abnormal grief reactions, some aspects of his work have been considered problematic. His research did not report all of his methodologies or record all of his data. Questions also surround the validity of his analysis, as none was provided. Additionally, the population used for the study was small, and an unrepresentative sample.

According to Lindemann, when a person is able to free one’s self from the attachment to the deceased, “readjust to the environment” without the deceased, and develop new relationships, he or she is exhibiting a “normal reaction” to grief. Characteristics of normal grief would consist of physiological issues including breathing difficulties, exhaustion, and digestive issues as well as emotional issues including feelings of guilt, hostility, and coolness toward others. The range in which normal grief may


9Wright and Hogan, “Grief Theories and Models,” 351.


12 Archer, The Nature of Grief, 17.


14 Ibid., 141.
appear following a death varies from immediately present to being “apparently absent.”\textsuperscript{15} Lindemann classifies the adverse response as abnormal or morbid grief, resulting when one delays or avoids terminating the emotional connection with the deceased.\textsuperscript{16} Morbid reactions are more intense physiologically, emotionally, and socially than what is exhibited with normal grief reactions and could have lasting consequences. The timeframe for abnormal grief is determined by the length of time needed to complete the grief work.\textsuperscript{17} For the most part, Lindemann’s research was accepted and used as the impetus for bereavement counseling.\textsuperscript{18} His research helped provide standards by which to identify those people who were grieving outside of the norm.\textsuperscript{19} Counselors have used Lindemann’s framework for grief work despite the criticism it has received for being too simplistic.\textsuperscript{20}

Several years later in 1949, Anderson presented additional pathological issues that Lindemann had not considered in his work.\textsuperscript{21} While Lindemann presented grief as acute, Anderson interjected that grief in some instances may be chronic with an immediate beginning after the loss and not cease in a prescribed time frame.\textsuperscript{22} Anderson’s was the first large-scale study to focus on pathological grief; however, he failed to pointedly define or describe the morbid grief he encountered which left his work or findings

\textsuperscript{15}Lindemann, “Symptomatology and Management,” 141.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{19}Wright and Hogan, “Grief Theories and Models,” 351.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid.
difficult to emulate.\(^{23}\) Though his work was published within five years of Lindemann’s, Anderson did not receive the same acceptance or notoriety. Perhaps Lindemann’s prescription for grief work was more appealing as it appeared to have universal generalizability.\(^{24}\) Regardless, Anderson’s work identified and encompassed those with chronic grief syndrome or a prolonged grief disorder that would be hard to help.

Others, like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, attempted to further describe and capture the commonalities people experience in grief and how they can move or work through it.\(^{25}\) In 1969, Kubler-Ross published *On Death and Dying* based on research and interviews she conducted with more than 500 terminally ill patients.\(^{26}\) Through the course of her seminal work, she observed that dying patients passed through a series of stages including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.\(^{27}\) Kubler-Ross and Kessler noted that not everyone would pass through all five stages, nor would they do so in a sequential manner.\(^{28}\) In their journey through the grief process, the bereaved may lapse back into one or several of the stages even though they have already experienced a particular stage.\(^{29}\) One of the most important aspects of her work was the articulation that everyone grieves uniquely.\(^{30}\)


\(^{24}\)Parkes, “Grief,” 371.


\(^{27}\)Ibid., 52, 63, 93, 97, 124.


\(^{29}\)Ibid.

\(^{30}\)Ibid.
and treating the bereaved as individuals.

Though Kubler-Ross’ stages have been embraced throughout the Western world, her work is not without its critics. Some noted that her work was actually a modified version of Bowlby’s and Parkes’ phases of grief, merely and revised to the stages of dying. 31 Others have been quick to cite that her work was based on the dying and their preparation for death, not those grieving a death. 32 Since Kubler-Ross’ interviews targeted only the terminally ill and how they felt about their approaching deaths, some have posited that the information gathered could only be applied to others with a terminal illness and the stages could not be generalized to those who are grieving the death of a loved one. 33 According to some, the methodology Kubler-Ross utilized was flawed and her data should be considered neither valid nor reliable. 34 Questions have also emerged concerning her interview techniques. Kubler-Ross interviewed approximately 200 terminally ill patients. The interviews were non-directed and consisted of the patients being asked to share their own personal thoughts and feelings regarding their impending deaths. 35 After the data was collected, it was then interpreted and placed in categories. The interpretation of the data was subjective and based on Kubler-Ross’


35Shneidman, Death, 445.
“intuition.” As a result, the data could not be empirically verified. Stages appeared to be created on the basis of Kubler-Ross’ opinion rather than on any “systematic pattern of responses from the patient[s].” Additionally, no details were provided as to how to evaluate which stages a person had already progressed through or what happened after he or she reached the acceptance stage.

As people work through their grief they often regress or revisit feelings of past emotions or of the stages. According to one study, this resurgence of grief persisted in 33 percent of adolescents up to a year after the death, and yet for others it lasts a lifetime. The stage of “acceptance” is never fully reached. For these individuals grief is more cyclical in nature. Similar to this idea is Nader and Salloum’s suggestion that grief is a continuum. They negate the idea of Kubler-Ross’ “discrete stages of grief,” and instead advocate that the many faces of grief, while different, are related and fall more on a continuum. A continuum allows for flexibility and fluid movement back and forth from one end of the spectrum to the other with grief being on one end and acceptance on the other.

37 Ibid.
39 Buglass, “Grief and Bereavement Theories,” 45.
The Paradigm Shifts

Anna Freud and her colleagues opened the door for the paradigm to shift with their pioneering work with infants and toddlers at the Hampstead Nursery in World War II.\textsuperscript{43} The Hampstead Nursery in London was established by Anna Freud to help care for and observe infants, toddlers, and children who belonged to single-parent families.\textsuperscript{44} The time and research spent on the children led Freud and her colleagues to a novel discovery—children as young as three can and will grieve the loss of a caregiver.\textsuperscript{45}

In the 1960s, John Bowlby furthered Anna Freud’s work with his own research that focused on the bond or attachment that infants had with their primary caregiver. Bowlby, an ethologist evidenced by his study of human behavior, began his work with children in 1937 in the London Child Guidance Clinic upon becoming a qualified psychiatrist.\textsuperscript{46} Prior to his professional training, he taught at a school for maladjusted children, an exposure which significantly influenced his career path.\textsuperscript{47} This experience, along with observations of a child client whose mother was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and therefore absent in the child’s life, served as the impetus for his research.\textsuperscript{48}

After much research, Bowlby introduced what he called “attachment theory” to explain the connection between an infant and their caregiver.\textsuperscript{49} Though Freud and

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\textsuperscript{44} John Bowlby, \textit{Attachment} (New York: Basic, 1969), 24.
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\textsuperscript{45} Freud and Burlingham, \textit{Infants without Families}, xx.
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\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 61.
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\textsuperscript{49} Bowlby, \textit{Attachment}, 177.
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Lindemann did much to pioneer grief work, Bowlby’s work was the first to be “systematically tested for validity” and based on empirical evidence. His work also followed the bereaved over a period of time, which had been a critique of his predecessors’ research. Through his studies he realized that children’s needs for attachment are innate; by six months they have developed an attachment to a primary mother-figure, which is based upon who is providing and meeting the majority of the child’s needs. Bowlby, therefore, concluded that infants as young as six months old can exhibit some signs of grief and distress including sadness, anger, and anxiety when their mother-figure is gone.

By the age of two, children begin to attach themselves to other caregivers; however, the attachment to the primary caregiver remains the strongest. If this attachment is broken, for example, through a death, the emotional and behavioral state of the child becomes altered. Children, even as young as three, will show more typical signs of grief and go through phases of grief including urge or yearning to recover the lost, disorganization and despair, and reorganization. A permanent separation from the primary caregiver can negatively affect children for the rest of their lives, and even predispose them to psychiatric illness.

50 Wright and Hogan, “Grief Theories and Models,” 351.


54 Bowlby, Attachment, 305-8.


57 Ibid., 317; Bowlby, Separation, 23.
While both Bowlby and Sigmund Freud espoused that grief work allows one to progress to the point that he or she can cope with the loss, Bowlby’s work brought him to conclude that children experience and exhibit grief in a very real way. Robert and Erna Furman supported Bowlby’s idea that children can grieve at a young age. However, unlike Bowlby who posited that children would grieve when they experience detachment from a caregiver, the Furmans held to a cognitive approach of grief and proposed that before children can grieve they have to understand the concept that death is final.\(^{58}\) The Furmans also asserted that children need a stable, inner representation of the missing object and stable, secure surroundings in order to share and express their emotions and feelings.\(^{59}\)

While the Furmans identified that complications could keep a child from grieving, children would have the cognitive as well as emotional maturity and ability to grieve between the ages of three-and-a-half to four years of age.\(^{60}\) Like Freud, psychoanalysts Wolfenstein and Nagera would take issue with the approach of the Furmans, arguing that a child’s ego would not be mature enough to handle such a traumatic loss as a death.\(^{61}\) With the complexity of the grief process, including a deluge of memories, surges of emotions, and tough questions, the ego would protect the


individual from the pain by preventing him or her from being able to go through the process.

Neither Wolfenstein nor Nagera identified a specific age but pushed the time back in adolescence to when the child “detached” from their parents.\textsuperscript{62} Both Wolfenstein (1966) and Nagera (1970) believed the process of decathexis did not happen as quickly as Freud did. They believed the process was slower, allowing the individual to sort and process through their memories at a safer pace.\textsuperscript{63} Children cannot adequately and safely deal with the plethora of concentrated emotions associated with the memories of the deceased; therefore, their defense mechanism suppresses this process until they are developmentally ready.

Wolfenstein explained her theory by stating that people can only truly grieve after they have gone through the “trial of mourning,” giving up the “first love” of their primary caregivers and separating themselves from the caregivers.\textsuperscript{64} Nagera posited that with the dynamic developmental changes a child is undergoing, very little mourning can occur and what does occur can only do so “simultaneously with and in subordination to” developmental needs.\textsuperscript{65}

Erna Furman would counter that children go through the grief process and do so by completing three tasks.\textsuperscript{66} She proposed that children must understand and deal with the finality of death, mourn, and return back to daily life.\textsuperscript{67} If children completed all


\textsuperscript{64} Wolfenstein, “How Is Mourning Possible?” 113, 116.

\textsuperscript{65} Nagera, “Children’s Reactions,” 362.

\textsuperscript{66} Furman, \textit{A Child’s Parent Dies}, 163.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
three tasks in a supportive environment, their development would not be impeded. Over a decade later Bowlby expanded his own work and supported the Furmans. He too posited that certain environmental factors play a role in how children grieve a death, and if children can work through the phases of grief he proposed they could continue to thrive developmentally.68

**Children’s Grief Work Continued**

Scientists have made great strides in the twentieth century with theories concerning when and how children grieve. A variety of these theories emerged from adult bereavement work and helped adults become aware that children do grieve in some way. In turn, the ground-breaking work conducted by Anna Freud, John Bowlby, and others opened the door for further research with the focus centering upon how grief affects children, how children understand grief, and how they can resolve it.

A student and colleague of Bowlby’s, Colin Parkes, has worked to expand the knowledge base about children and bereavement. Parkes’ work in both the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been instrumental to the fields of grief work and bereavement.69 In 1962, Bowlby asked Parkes to join his research project at Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. His side of the project involved observing young women and how they reacted to the death of their husbands during the first year as well as the factors that influenced their grief.70

His collaborative research with Bowlby led to a modification of Bowlby’s initial three phases of grief originally published in 1960. In 1970 they added a fourth


phase, one that would precede the other three phases, numbness and shock.\textsuperscript{71} Phasal models have met criticisms on several fronts. Worden, who is discussed in the developmental section of this chapter, believes phasal models lack efficacy because, unlike with task models, the bereaved only have a passive role.\textsuperscript{72} This particular phasal model was likened to Kubler-Ross’ stages of grief in the regard that it too was linear and therefore did not make an allowance for people to vacillate in and out of the other phases.\textsuperscript{73} Years later Parkes himself stopped using the term “phases of grief” for this very reason.\textsuperscript{74} Both Bowlby and Parkes readily acknowledged that everyone experienced grief differently and therefore would neither enter nor exit the phases in the same manner or speed.\textsuperscript{75}

In Parkes’ later research with the Harvard Bereavement Project in 1973, he worked to identify the “risk indicators” of those who would be susceptible to problems later on.\textsuperscript{76} The discovery of these risk factors was used to identify those bereaved family members who would benefit from some type of intervention or would be susceptible to problems after the death of a loved one.\textsuperscript{77} Additionally, they were able to observe and identify the typical response of the bereaved in the instances of unforeseen deaths.\textsuperscript{78}


\textsuperscript{72}William J. Worden, \textit{Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy}, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed. (New York: Springer, 2009), 38.

\textsuperscript{73}Mallon, \textit{Working with Bereaved Children and Young People}, 3.

\textsuperscript{74}Colin M. Parkes and Holly G. Prigerson, \textit{Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life}, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 7.

\textsuperscript{75}Parkes, “Grief,” 372.

\textsuperscript{76}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77}Ibid., 373.

\textsuperscript{78}Ibid., 372.
from this longitudinal study, which lasted four years, also led Parkes and Weiss to the identification of three tasks the bereaved need to complete to recover from their grief.\(^79\)

The first task requires the bereaved to have a cognitive understanding and firm explanation of the death.\(^80\) The second task, which both Freud and Lindemann would disagree with, involves having an emotional acceptance of the loss in which the bereaved can remember the loved one without re-experiencing the agony of the loss.\(^81\) These psychoanalysts supported the idea of emancipation from one’s emotional ties from the deceased in order to complete grief work, while Parkes adamantly supported the idea of embracing the memory of the loved one.\(^82\) Assuming a new identity is the final task and involves the bereaved accepting their new role in the world without their loved one.\(^83\)

Parkes later presented the idea of an “assumptive world,” which helps to explain why the loss of a loved one for a child can be so devastating.\(^84\) Everyone operates in an assumptive world, a world that encompasses everything and everyone one knows to be true.\(^85\) Problems arise when this normal, routine world is knocked out of balance by a tragedy such as death. This shift in the norm is extreme for children who have little to no experience navigating life that involves major changes such as the loss of a parent and


\(^80\)Ibid., 156.

\(^81\)Ibid.


\(^83\)Ibid.


\(^85\)Ibid.
then the potential loss of a home, friends, and school to name a few. As a result, they have to reconstruct their whole world and make what Parkes calls a psychosocial transition. During this transition period, children are at their most vulnerable and “open to both help and to harm.”

Feeling that the work of Bowlby, Parkes, and others were deficient, Klass, Silverman, and Nickman proposed a new theory in 1996 that was purported to possibly help children and adults during their bereavement. Using research from the Harvard Child Bereavement study, a prior longitudinal study that involved parentally bereaved school-aged children, they would posit people, in particular children, not only continue a relationship with the deceased but benefit from this continuing relationship. The qualitative data collected from the bereavement study pointedly revealed that it was the norm for children to remain connected to the deceased and that this relationship continued to develop just as the child did.

The idea that one did not have to intentionally sever the relationship with the deceased during the grieving process was an altogether different perspective than any that had been articulated up until this point. Prior to this study, people believed that if a tie

86 Mallon, Working with Bereaved Children and Young People, 5.


89 Ibid., 73-74.

90 Ibid., 16, 18.

was maintained with the deceased then grief work had not been completed or that the bereaved was suffering from chronic grief or some type of psychological issue. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman advocated for a perpetuation of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased.

Interviews with children, who were a part of the Child Bereavement study, revealed that instead of trying to live without their loved ones, they continued their relationship with the deceased. These relationships were not viewed as “pathological” behavior as the children were not pining over the loss, but instead seen as a normal part of the bereavement process for them. According to Klass, Silverman, and Nickman maintaining these relationships that were “constructed” through the children “develop[ing] a set of memories, feelings, and actions that kept them connected to their deceased parent” were helpful to the child during their grief. The relationships were evidenced by children visiting the gravesite, believing that the deceased were watching over them, or behaving in such a manner that the deceased would approve. The continued relationships appeared to not only provide the children with peace but helped them move on with their lives.

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94 Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, *Continuing Bonds*, 73.


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 74.
experienced continuing bonds, 58 percent of the 40 families stated it had a comforting effect on them.99

Supporters of the Continuing Bonds Model readily embrace that it is the norm for an individual not to emancipate oneself from the deceased and that it is not necessary to do so in order to resolve their grief.100 They also advocate that maintaining the connection is not indicative of pathology.101 Others have voiced interjections, citing the Continuing Bond Model failed to furnish adequate empirical data to support findings and that subsequent research provides little support for it.102 Research has shown that people have encountered negative effects as a result of maintaining a bond with the deceased or experienced maladjustment to life.103 This maladjustment can in turn lead to chronic grief or the bereaved holding on to the past rather than incorporating the relationship into the present.104 Klass, Silverman, and Nickman have also been chastised for


misrepresenting some of Bowlby’s amended work. Fraley and Shaver postulate that the originators of the Continued Bond Model fail to mention that Bowlby modified his work through the years replacing the term “detachment” with “reorganization.” The term reorganization as Bowlby uses it allows for the continuation of a relationship with the deceased rather than cessation of it.

Like the Continuing Bonds Model, the Dual Process Model, originated by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, focused on how individuals cope with the loss of a loved one. Their innovative work, first published in 1999, was based on what they outlined as the inadequacies of previous grief work perspectives. According to Stroebe and Schut, bereavement involves a variety of stressors that can be grouped mainly into two categories, loss-oriented stressors and restoration-oriented stressors. Loss-oriented stressors are those that surround the actual loss, while restoration-oriented stressors pertain to the challenges of living life without the deceased.

The uniqueness of their approach is not in identifying or describing the stressors, but in what they postulate is the most effective way to cope with the stressors and with bereavement. The key element of the Dual Process Model is the concept of

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oscillation, which allows the bereaved to alternately confront and avoid stressors as they are able. This model does not promote a linear sequence of tasks to complete or defined stages, instead it advocates fluidity. At times, the bereaved deals directly with the loss of the loved one, other times with the changes in life that occur as a result of the loss, but typically not simultaneously, thus reprieving the bereaved of having to confront grief all at once. The flexibility and fluctuation that oscillation allows promotes what Stroebe and Schut states is “necessary for optimal adjustment” of both mental and physical health, and distinguish it from other grief work theories. This model is especially descriptive of how children cope with grief. As all children are not developmentally ready to understand the finality of death or all that it encompasses, children often express grief intermittently. Children may cry one minute and then go outside to play the next. Stroebe and Schut would cite this as an exemplification of oscillation as they postulate, “Children shift back and forth between grief and engagement.”

In a follow-up study utilizing the Dual Process Model, some of the bereaved adjusted poorly, exhibiting signs of chronic grief. Richardson’s research revealed chronic grief could occur in instances where individuals relied too heavily on the loss-oriented tasks. Her study, along with others, showed that the adjustments of those utilizing the

113 Christ, “Impact of Development,” 73. Also discussed in depth in the next section, Children and Grief.
Dual Process Model were dependent upon an assortment of variables including the circumstance of death, gender differences, and cultural differences.\textsuperscript{116}

\textbf{Children and Grief}

Ecclesiastes 3 states that there is a time for everything to happen on earth, including a time to be born, to die, and to mourn. From D. A. Carson’s perspective, “All we have to do is live long enough, and we will be bereaved. All we have to do is live long enough, and we will die. In a fallen world, these points are immutable, yet grief and pain always catch us unaware.”\textsuperscript{117} At times the perpetual cycle of nature is cut too short and leaves behind the young to grieve. Death has life-changing and lasting impacts on the ones left behind, especially children. How a child understands death determines how they are able to move through the grief process.\textsuperscript{118} Children at different developmental levels view death differently. In fact, where a child is developmentally will determine how they experience and exhibit signs of grief.\textsuperscript{119}

Children express grief emotionally, physically, and behaviorally, and though one may dominate the other at times, they are inter-related.\textsuperscript{120} Further, the child’s level of cognitive development along with their development in these other areas influences

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116}Archer, “The Nature of Grief,” 104; Richardson, “A Dual Process Model,” 323.
\item \textsuperscript{117}D. A. Carson, How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 97.
\item \textsuperscript{120}Alan Wolfelt, \textit{Helping Children Cope with Grief} (Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development, 1983), 23.
\end{itemize}
both their understanding of, and responses to, death. Several main developmental theories have been embraced to help explain when and how children grieve. Each of these theories is progressive in nature and allows for a maturation of understanding of death at each level.

**Cognitive Development**

Probably the most well-known and widely accepted is Piaget’s Cognitive Theory of Development. Though Piaget did not set out to address children’s understandings of death, his work provides a foundation that can be applied to it.\(^\text{121}\) In his first stage, the Preoperational Stage, children are between the ages of 2 and 7 and do what he coins “magical thinking.” This “magical thinking” and egocentricity are the quintessence of this level in which children’s thinking is concrete, literal, and has a tendency to distort reality to fit their idiosyncratic understanding.\(^\text{122}\) Children may believe if they think hard enough about something, it will become reality. They do not understand that death is irreversible, and have a tendency, due to their egocentric nature, to think they may have contributed or caused the death.

Hungarian psychologist Maria Nagy’s work corresponds with Piaget’s, but deals specifically with the cognitive aspects of grief at certain ages.\(^\text{123}\) In Nagy’s first stage, which occurs between the ages of 3 and 5, children deny that death is a final event; instead, they view it as temporary and reversible.\(^\text{124}\) At this level a child may express his or her grief by exhibiting signs of confusion and asking repetitive questions about the


\(^{122}\) Ibid., 5.


deceased. Displays of regressive behavior may appear and manifest as thumb sucking or wetting the bed or clothes.

Contrary to the aforementioned, children in this stage may also appear to be ambivalent about what is going on in their environment. They may ask what seem to be inappropriate questions partly because they are seeking to understand, and partly because they do not have the vocabulary needed to express them appropriately.\(^{125}\) Preschoolers may cry one minute and play the next. These children will possibly mimic the mourning behavior of those around them as they search to find what to do in this unfamiliar situation. They may also yearn for all of their loved ones to stay close by, as they could grow fearful of experiencing the death of another one.\(^{126}\)

Piaget’s second stage, which he identified as the Concrete Operational occurs between ages 7 and 11. There is improved capacity for reasoning at this level. The child understands immediately what is meant by death, and that it is irreversible; however, it does not mean that he or she is readily able to cope with death. Though children at this age have a more realistic understanding of the mysteries of life, they do not believe death can find them.\(^{127}\) Nagy’s second stage, which occurs between the ages of 5 to 9, reiterates that children believe death is removed from them. She also states that children have a tendency to personify death, believing it can be avoided if one is smart.\(^{128}\)

Children at this stage of development demonstrate their grief a little differently than those in the first stage of development. They will immediately show what are deemed as appropriate emotions for the loss of the loved one. Periods of sadness, anger,


denial, and guilt, will be apparent and they will show more physical symptoms such as fearfulness, sleeplessness, and separation anxiety. Not only will children idealize the deceased but also talk openly about wanting to be with that loved one. Along these same lines, this age group will express the happy memories they have with anyone that will listen. It is not uncommon for children to look for the deceased in the days and weeks to come and even sight them.

In Piaget’s Formal Operational Stage, children range in age from 11 and up think more logically, as well as take more than one variable into account. This child can understand how the death happened and comprehend some of its implications in regards to how his or her life will change. Preadolescents understand the importance of the rituals that accompany death, but the experience may cause them to question religious and cultural beliefs, such as what happens after you die. At this age, children will think of their personal demise but try to avoid these thoughts so they do not have to cope with it. According to Nagy’s third stage, when children are 9 and above they realize that death is final, that it cannot be avoided, it is irreversible, and that it will happen to all the living. Children in this category want to know the cause of death, as well as the social implications of not only the death but for those left behind.

Older children want detailed information about the events surrounding the death of their loved, enabling them to feel some sense of control. The need for control for these children is also expressed by trying to stifle their own emotions. Preadolescents

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132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., 23.

134 Christ, “Impact of Development,” 76.
do not like to openly share their emotions. They may, however, uncharacteristically demonstrate them by exhibiting signs of aggression toward others or even isolating themselves. At this age, children strive to become more independent, as demonstrated by a desire to handle things on their own. This is also seen through their preference to grieve semi-privately and express their emotions less often than their younger counterparts. Though they want to suppress their grief, it may resurface later on in life. Fear is another common emotion these children have in the sense of dying, being abandoned, or even losing the other parent.

**Emotional Development**

The way children grieve is not only affected by their cognitive development, but also by their behavioral and social development. Erik Erikson, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, observed and studied how children socialize and how this affects their personalities. He proposed that individuals go through eight distinct stages, each with two possible outcomes. Through these stages the ego develops and enables one to become a more competent individual. The ego identity is always changing as the individual is exposed to new experiences and information acquired through daily interactions. Each stage in Erikson’s theory is concerned with becoming competent in an area of life such as trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry.

During the childhood years, children are busy developing “their attitudes toward major aspects in both their local, social environment as well as the world culture.”

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136 Kroen, Helping Children Cope, 59.


the first four years of life, a child’s social development is based mainly on genetics and dealings with both parents and siblings.\textsuperscript{139} According to Erikson, during these years, a child learns to trust those around him as well as begin to work on being self-reliant through the help of his or her parents and family. If a child loses a parent at this stage, it can throw the world into turmoil because of the dependency on the parent to help provide the security and guidance needed to navigate through these stages successfully. Children may instead become despondent, withdrawn, and have feelings of guilt.\textsuperscript{140}

While in elementary school, children still look to their parents for approval and encouragement, which helps them feel competent and in turn builds self-esteem; therefore if a child experiences the loss of a parent at this point, a lasting negative impact on a child’s self-esteem can result.\textsuperscript{141} Eventually children begin to grow less dependent on their family and more dependent on self and friends to help them shape their personality according to the experiences they have with their friends.\textsuperscript{142} Children begin to intentionally choose behaviors according to what they feel their peers accept, so they can be accepted. According to Erikson, at this stage children do not want to be singled out or have any attention drawn to them that is not considered normal. A death does just that, making the child feel awkwardly out of place, and they have little, if any, experience with which to know how to respond.\textsuperscript{143}

By the time children finish elementary school, they have acquired a gamut of social attitudes learned from friends, adults, and the media. They assimilate these

\textsuperscript{139}Lester, \textit{Pastoral Care}, 57.

\textsuperscript{140}Tate and Parker, “Using Erikson’s Developmental Theory,” 219-22.


\textsuperscript{142}Lester, \textit{Pastoral Care}, 57.

\textsuperscript{143}Costa and Holliday, “Helping Children Cope,” 208.
attitudes and use them to guide them throughout the rest of their lives, unless these attitudes are challenged. Robert Havighurst, a developmental psychologist, affirms that attitudes are learned by: imitating those they respect, a collection of experience within a given idea, group or institution and their memories, perceptions of these experiences, and an intense experience with a person, object, or situation.\textsuperscript{144} These intentional choices, along with genetics and other behavior traits picked up from family members, work together to form the social attitudes of a child. The death of a primary caregiver impacts the attitudes a child acquires in his or her formative years, which in turn affects the child’s standards by which moral and ethical decisions are made. The social development of a child is extremely important; it helps connect a child to others and gives them the opportunity to enjoy the sense of community and fellowship with others, especially that which is present in the church. It may also help protect them against psychological disturbances that may occur if not connected to a support system.\textsuperscript{145}

**Developmental Considerations**

All of these developmental factors must be considered when trying to understand how and why children grieve the way they do. Worden suggested that in order for children to acclimate to the loss of a loved one, they must complete certain tasks that are directly paired with their stage of development.\textsuperscript{146} Discussion of his research will be detailed in this section as opposed to the grief work section as Worden correlates his tasks directly to a child’s is cognitive, emotional, and social levels.

Worden advocates that in order for children to adapt to loss, they must work their way through four tasks, which include understanding, grieving, commemorating,

\textsuperscript{144}Robert Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks in Education* (New York: David McKay, 1972), 32.


\textsuperscript{146}Worden, *Children and Grief*, 12.
and moving on. Regardless of where children are developmentally, these tasks must be completed before life can return to some sense of healthy normalcy. These tasks do not have to be completed sequentially and may take quite some time to complete, as a child may not be ready developmentally to accomplish one or all of the tasks.

In the first task, the child must accept the reality of a loss before they can deal with it, and come to grasp the reality of the situation. This only occurs in Piaget’s operational stage. Next, the child needs to actually mourn the loss by experiencing the pain or emotional aspects of the loss. Though children may have the ability to comprehend death between the ages of 5 and 7, they lack the ego and social skills to deal with the intensity of their feelings. Children may experience some of the same feelings adults do as they grieve, including sadness, guilt, anger, and anxiety. The third task involves returning back to the environment in which the deceased is missing and learning to live life all over again. A final task is to relocate the dead person so life can begin again without the deceased. Children have to understand and find a place in their life for the one they lost and at this point allocate a meaning to death.

While Worden posits that each of the four tasks must be completed in order to ensure a healthy readjustment back to life, some disagree. As mentioned, some advocate for a severing of the ties to the deceased, and others, such as Klass, Nickman, Parkes, and Silverman, would argue to the contrary. Worden eventually modified his final task to

147 Worden, *Children and Grief*, 12.


149 Ibid.


151 Ibid., 16.

152 Ibid.

support the Continuing Bond Model advocated by Klass, Nickman, Silverman.\textsuperscript{154} He readily acknowledged that while people need to move on with life, it is important to find “the enduring connection” with the deceased and take it with them.\textsuperscript{155}

Though there are many contributing factors that will impact how a child will grieve—such as the type of relationship the child had with the deceased, how the deceased died, if the death was expected or not, if the child was present at the death, a child’s gender, a child’s developmental level has the most influence. The developmental level determines how a child will process and react to death cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. A child’s developmental level influences how a child will grieve and yet grief can also influence how a child will develop. When children do not come to a healthy resolution to their grief, disorders may occur immediately or later on in life.\textsuperscript{156} In fact, mental illness may occur 5 to 40 years later if a child does not pass through the phases of grief completely.\textsuperscript{157}

**Theological Foundation of Study**

Scripture records numerous examples of people who experienced the losses of children, friends, parents, siblings, and spouses (Ruth 1; 2 Sam 1-2; Gen 50; John 11; Gen 23). The grief experiences of Naomi, Job, Martha, and in particularly the Psalms, exemplify such instances (Ruth 1; Job 1-2; John 11; Ps 22). Through their words and expressions of grief, insight may be gained into how they perceived God while dealing with the death of loved ones. This perhaps speaks to how others perceive God during

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\textsuperscript{154}Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 50.\\
\textsuperscript{155}Ibid.\\
\textsuperscript{156}Ibid.\\
grief. Timeless insight and hope can be gained from Scripture for Christians who today encounter loss.

Ruth

The Old Testament provides a vivid account of the grief experienced by many of its prominent people; however, in some instances not only is their grief shared, but so is their perception of God. Naomi first loses her husband, and then approximately 10 years later loses both of her sons (Ruth 1:3-5). Her dialogue with her daughters-in-law makes it apparent that she perceives God has forsaken her. Naomi exclaims to both Ruth and Orpah, “It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me” (Ruth 1:13).

Part of this pronouncement may come as a result of the stigma associated with her husband being buried in a foreign land. According to Block, “To be buried in an unclean foreign land was considered the ultimate punishment (Amos 7:17).” An additional aspect of could be from losing so much, including hope. Another commentator states,

Because Naomi’s husband and sons have died and she is too old to take a new husband and bear more sons, she, too, is barren, in a sense, just as her homeland had been during the grip of the famine that had driven her family to Moab. She has no life to claim for herself or offer her daughters-in-law. She is in the throes of grief. She has lost everything.

Her conversation with Orpah and Ruth also reveals that she attributes God with the responsibility for their loss and suffering (Ruth 1:13). She verbally identifies God as the source for the tragedy and “accuses God of making her life bitter.” This feeling is

159 Ibid., 629.
161 Block, Judges, Ruth, 637.
further expressed in the following verses, as Naomi avows, “‘Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The L ORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me’” (Ruth 1:21-22). While Naomi denotes God as being sovereign and omnipotent, she mistakenly links “sovereignty without grace” and power “without compassion.” Naomi’s overwhelming grief causes her to distort God’s character and consequently become disillusioned with him.

**Job**

Through Job’s intense journey of grief and loss, not only are his possessions destroyed but his are children killed; he provides the reader with his perception of God (Job 1-2). Despite the fact that Scripture insists that Job did not sin in his reactions from his grief, Job does perceive God as being both “absent” and “silent” during his suffering (Job 29-30). In his dialogue towards the end of the book, Job reminisces of the days when he felt God’s presence with him, in him, and with his children (Job 29:2-10). He is quick to point out that while he once felt God was with him, those days are no more. Job also reflects on his unanswered cries to God as he proclaims, “I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer” (Job 30:20). Robert Alden writes that in chapter 30 Job “perceived God as an enemy rather than a friend, as a “ruthless” one rather than a merciful one. This conceptualization is also referenced in Job 10:3, 16:9, and 19:22, as God is portrayed as a powerful assailant.

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Psalms

Psalms is described by Brueggemann as a written record of people’s “conversations with God about things” and notes that it is especially helpful because it “expresses both sides of the conversation.” Another commentator states that Psalms provides a “textual holy place where humans share their joys and struggles with brutal honesty in God’s presence.” These written conversations allow the reader to be privy to the psalmists’ innermost thoughts and feelings about life and God. While Psalms contain many joyful hymns and poems of praise and adoration, this book also includes numerous vivid descriptions of those who are experiencing grief or lament.

The psalms of lament comprise the largest category of the psalms and are “calls to God or prayers” about personal suffering. Jinkins defines a lamenting psalm as one that “cries aloud to the heavens and calls up God.” The laments come from both individuals and communities; they “usher us into the presence of grief” and are “narratives of loss and suffering.” In these particular chapters, the psalmist often begins by openly expressing his innermost thoughts and feelings about hopeless despair (Pss 3-6, 22, 28, 31).

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171 Ibid., 117.

172 Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman, eds., “Lament
enough to handle whatever is requested, God is also portrayed as sometimes being distant or quiet.\textsuperscript{173}

Regardless of how God is perceived by the writers at the beginning of each of the lamenting psalms, all conclude by adorning God with praise for providing hope, answers, protection, and provision (Pss 3-6, 22, 28, 31).\textsuperscript{174} Both Westermann and Brueggemann speak to this type of movement in the psalms, being reflective of the static nature of life.\textsuperscript{175} These psalmists are in distress as they lift up their heavy-hearted petitions to God, but through the sanctifying process they move from pleas to praise. Brueggemann writes, “In that movement of transformation are found both the power to life and the passion for praise of God.”\textsuperscript{176} In the end, God is perceived as one who faithfully answers and is present in both seasons of joy and of sorrow.

An example of this format appears in Psalm 22, which is also the psalm in which Jesus prayed on the cross. The psalmist begins by crying out to God asking for help and exclaiming, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest” (Ps 22:1-2). The psalmist perceives God as forsaking and abandoning him demonstrated in the first few verses.\textsuperscript{177} As the psalm progresses, the writer continues to cast forth his lament describing in rich detail the depth


\textsuperscript{175}Brueggeman, \textit{Message of the Psalms}, 125; Westermann, \textit{Praise and Lament}, 52.

\textsuperscript{176}Brueggeman, \textit{Message of the Psalms}, 128.

\textsuperscript{177}Craigie, \textit{Psalms 1-50}, 198-99.
of his anguish, yet displaying his confidence that God will act (Ps 22:12-16). However, as the psalm concludes, the suppliant not specifying God’s intervention, is confident that God should be praised and worshipped and admonishes others to do so (Ps 22:22-31).178 The psalmist’s opinion seemingly vacillates to viewing God as being present in times of trouble, listening to cries for help, having dominion, and being righteous (Ps 22:23-31).

Martha

The grief of Martha for her brother Lazarus in The New Testament presents a different perspective than those previously discussed. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has already been buried (John 11:17). Hearing that Jesus was coming, Martha goes out to meet him, and in her conversation with him reveals two distinct perspectives. At first, she alludes to her disappointment with Jesus for not coming: “‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”179 For a brief moment she appears to perceive that God was absent. Gangel states, “The presence of death meant the absence of God.”180 However, she immediately affirms her confidence in the Messiah in the next breath by saying, “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask” (John 11:21-22).181 Her perception of God instantly vacillates from a God who is absent to one who is present and in control.

178 Craigie, Psalms 1-50, 198-99; Goldingay, Psalms, 323.


Perceptions of God

Grief may affect how one perceives God. A person’s perception of God may also be influenced by how he or she views life. Some people have a skewed view of life that its meaning on earth is about what occurs only between one’s date of birth and the date of death. Consideration of a greater purpose and meaning outside of one’s self or after one’s life on earth ceases is minimal or nonexistent. When this viewpoint is held, people may tend to perceive that God is absent. A very different conception of life is presented by Toby Jennings:

Life does not belong to us to worship it—for all intents and purposes—as we see fit. . . . Rather than idolizing life, then, we should consider the reality that we are dust (Ps 103:14; Isa 40:17). The LORD of the cosmos gives and dismisses created human life as he sees fit (Ps 90:3-10). We should, rather, loosely hold our lives—which are not our own anyway, nor are they primarily for our own consumption. . . . A balance is needed between a right embrace of the sanctity of life as an invaluable gift from its gracious Giver yet simultaneously its genuine dispensability as nonessential to being.

When life is deemed as temporal and its meaning part of a bigger plan, an eternal plan, God may be thought of in a much different light. Instead of being perceived as absent, God may be perceived as being intimately involved and providing hope. Death is not just the cessation of life on earth, but it is the beginning of an eternal life (John 11:25-26, 14:1-3; Phil 3:20-21). Life and death are merely the necessary steps towards the ultimate destination of eternity. The promise and knowledge that life continues forever should provide immense comfort for the grieving and minimize the pain death brings to those left behind (1 Thess 4:13-18). Jennings writes that this revelation provided in the New Testament “equips the families of humanity with weaponry against death.”

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183 Ibid., 19.

184 Ibid., 43.
In *God’s Healing for Life’s Losses*, Robert Kelleman describes the various opinions of God people have while they are grieving.\(^{185}\) He posits that, as people journey through the aspects of grief, their perceptions of God will fluctuate; however, people have to make a choice of how they will ultimately regard him.\(^{186}\) Their perception will in turn determine how they move through grief.\(^{187}\)

**Children’s Perceptions of God**

Throughout the better part of this century, numerous studies and research have been conducted that focused on how children of all ages and developmental levels perceived and conceptualized God.\(^{188}\) The research delving into how children perceive God was first conducted by means of surveys, short questionnaires, and interviews that collected both written and verbal responses.\(^{189}\) However, even during these early studies it was suggested that children should be allowed to draw their answers, as to add more validity and depth to the findings.\(^{190}\) Since then, researchers and psychologists have allowed children to respond through the medium of art as it elicits a truer, more accurate response from children.\(^{191}\)

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186 Ibid., 52-53.
187 Ibid., 53.
190 Case, “Children’s Ideas of God,” 144.
Ernest Harms

While Case, who conducted the early research on the use of children’s art, admonished that future studies seeking to discover how children understood God should use children’s drawings, it was not until approximately twenty years later that someone utilized this methodology. E. Harms conducted the first research using children’s artwork to illustrate how children perceived God. Harms posited that children were not developmentally able to verbally express their true feelings and understanding of God. Others have agreed and echoed his sentiments regarding the inadequacies of expression that verbal communication poses for children.

In 1944, Harms conducted a comprehensive study including 4,000 children from ages 3 to 18 to discover how children perceived God. The children that participated in the study attended both private and public schools, regardless of their religious backgrounds. Children were simply asked to “try to imagine how God would look to them, if they were to picture Him in their mind.” They were given a few minutes to think about their answer, and then given instructions to draw their answers on the paper provided. No time constraints were issued to the children, and once finished they were asked to write an explanation of their drawing on the back of the paper.

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197 Ibid.
The significance of his research lies in the fact that he gathered data using both a verbal and nonverbal approach. This approach yielded different results than previous research that relied solely on oral responses. During analysis of the drawings and responses, distinctive characteristics were noted among certain age groups. Harms categorized these characteristics into three stages that children move through regarding their perception of God.

The fairy-tale stage encompasses children between the ages of 3 and 6, who tend to perceive God as king with or without a beard, who either lives in a golden house or a house made of a cloud. The most notable characteristic drawn by children age 7 to 12 showed a transition in thought to a more concrete perception of God. Harms labeled this stage the realistic stage. Children use a variety of religious symbols or images to represent God from the crucifix to the Jewish star to a priest. In the final stage, the individualistic stage, children ages 13 to 18 perceive God in diverse ways. While Harms states there were a few similarities among the drawings, the vast majority differed.

Peter Pitts

Other studies, including one by Peter Pitts, which utilized 180 children, soon followed also using art as the vehicle. Pitts reaffirmed Harms’ earlier assertion regarding the use of drawings. He asserted, “The best way for a child to reveal his or her concept of God is through a medium with which he or she is both familiar and comfortable, and which

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200 Ibid.

201 Ibid., 117.

is consistent with his or her stage of mental growth, such as drawing.” Since children operate in the realm of the concrete, using a medium that expresses such is more logical.

The subjects of his study were children from the United States, who ranged in age from 6 to 10, and represented 7 different religious denominations including Mormon, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Unitarian-Universalist, and Jewish. Upon analysis of the 180 drawings, Pitts concludes that a child’s religious background impacts a child’s perception of God. Similarities appeared in the artwork of children that belonged to the same denomination. Pitts posits that not only how a child perceives God’s shape, form, facial expression, and even dress is influenced by a child’s denominational background, but so are the type and the amount of religious symbols that appear in the drawing.

David Heller

In 1986, David Heller sought to add to the research base pertaining to children’s perceptions of God by seeking to discover how children’s religious background, developmental level, and gender influence their perception. Heller’s study included forty children from Jewish, Catholic, Hindu, and Protestant backgrounds who ranged in age from 4 to 12. While his population of children was diverse and consisted of an even number of males and females, they were all located in one geographic region, Ann Arbor, 203 Peter Pitts, *The God Concept in the Child* (Schenectady, NY: Character Research, 1977), 6.


205 Ibid.

Michigan. Several methodologies were used to collect data including drawings, interviews, written letters to God, and playing with dolls.207

Heller begins the discussion of his results with the religious themes that emerged among the four various groups. Time is spent analyzing the results from each of the denominations, beginning with the Jewish children. All ten of the Jewish children perceived God as one who “occurs within the realm of human history.”208 Their drawings contained a distinctive historical orientation by portraying God in scenes or with images of the past. To them, their “God” was different or separate than that of the other children’s “God.” Another motif prevalent in the work of these children was that of suffering. While God is not portrayed as one who wants his people to suffer, he was perceived to allow it for a reason and as one who will help in the midst of suffering.

The theme most prevalent among the Catholic children drawings is God’s involvement with marriage and families. God is perceived as being actively and intimately involved in the relationship dynamics of the spouses and among each member of the nuclear family. Their art also underscores concerns with guilt and purity, as well as forgiveness.209 The concept of forgiveness is fleshed out “by a sense of understanding, acceptance, and tolerance of others.”210

Protestant children, specifically children affiliated with the Baptist denomination, were said to perceive God as a provider and nurturer. This motif is evidenced in the pictorial representations of food, and God being present at a meal or planning one. These children also perceive God as being emotionally reserved and

208 Ibid., 18.
209 Ibid., 27-29.
210 Ibid., 29.
distant. Their drawings reflect a God who is physically present and responsible for the order and organization of everyday life, but one with whom the children do not seemingly share their feelings.\textsuperscript{211}

The final ten children, who represented the Hindu religion, perceive God and their community as being interrelated and connected. Community identity and awareness are held in high esteem in this group with children having a strong sense of belonging and being an integral part of the community. The Hindu children portray God as being an abstract force, but yet ironically “close enough to be a real person.”\textsuperscript{212} Consequently, the Hindu children exhibit a strong dedication to God, articulated by images of devotion.\textsuperscript{213}

Heller also looked to see what role age played in a child’s perception of God. He grouped the children into three age groups: 4 to 6, 7 to 9, and 10 to 12. Similar to Harm’s findings, the youngest group perceived God in a playful, fun, fantasy way. According to Heller, this group, being more egocentric, perceived God as existing for their needs, revolving around them. Children who are 4 to 6 also depict God as having a dual or split nature. God is perceived as being both good and bad.

The 7 to 9 year olds perceived a God who saw them as special. God is portrayed as a central image in the drawings with the subjects of the study often appearing beside him.\textsuperscript{214} Heller’s findings show this middle group still perceived God as a fantasy or in a mysterious way, exhibited by his appearance in dreams and granting wishes. The oldest group perceives God in a more realistic yet abstract way and frequently used

\textsuperscript{211}Heller, \textit{The Children’s God}, 32.

\textsuperscript{212}Ibid., 35.

\textsuperscript{213}Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{214}Ibid., 46.
religious symbols in their drawings. God is depicted often as a Savior, and is perceived as being omnipresent and involved in all facets of the child’s life.\textsuperscript{215}

The next section of analysis in Heller’s study pertains to gender. Twenty boys and twenty girls participated in his investigation. The males in his study perceived God as masculine and as being omniscient and omnipresent as well as pragmatic and rational in nature.\textsuperscript{216} They conceptualized a God that is actively involved in the intricacies of all of life. Yet while involved in the details, God is viewed as being physically and emotionally distant.\textsuperscript{217}

The female children perceived God much unlike their male counterparts. They saw God as being concerned more with the aesthetics rather than the rational. While the girls portrayed God as being more passive in regard to everyday life, they did depict him as being physically and emotionally present. They were also more likely to entertain the idea that God was androgynous and could even be a female.

Heller uses “interpretative” analysis to explain the children’s pictures.\textsuperscript{218} He connects his results and observations to the work of theorists from many different branches of psychology including David Elkind, Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud, James Fowler, and Jean Piaget.\textsuperscript{219} His work has not been without its critics as some have questioned his interpretation as well as the validity of his study. Some have taken issue with Heller’s analysis and his methodology.

\textsuperscript{215}Heller, \textit{The Children’s God}, 53.

\textsuperscript{216}\textit{Ibid.}, 57.

\textsuperscript{217}\textit{Ibid.}, 61.


In a study conducted by Hope College, researchers Dickie, Eshleman, Merasco, Shepard, and Johnson’s sought to discover children’s perceptions of God in regard to their “distance from and involvement with him.” Their discoveries led them to a different conclusion. Heller proposed that as children transitioned from early to middle childhood and depended less upon their parents, their perception of God as a confidant shifted into being more of an “authority” figure. The researchers’ results showed that the contrary was true that as children enter the transitory time of independence they actually perceive God as being closer.

Hay and Nye posit that Heller’s analysis was tempered by his pronounced religious views. Gottlieb notes that there is no statistical analysis provided to compare the group differences in Heller’s study. Heller’s methodology could have been strengthened if he had “consider[ed] the validity” of his approach, it was not as “broad-sweeping,” and if had used multiple raters. Since all of the children that participated in Heller’s study were from the Ann Arbor area, and the fact that he only met with each child one time for a limited amount of time also have some questioning the study’s generalizability and its validity. According to Hay, Nye, Coles, and others, children

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221 Ibid., 140.

222 Ibid., 145.


have a tendency to be inhibited and not share their thoughts and feelings openly about matters of spirituality with adults with whom they have a limited relationship.  

**Robert Coles**

In *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles presents thirty years of interview snippets he collected from 500 children ages 8 to 12, all of them were interviewed at least once. While some of the children were interviewed only a couple of times, most were interviewed a minimum of five different times and some up to twenty-five times. In some cases, Coles spent a year or more interviewing the children in the context of their everyday life. Coles’ methodology and the many hours spent with the children earned him their trust. The relationships Coles established with the children during the course of their conversations were more extensive than those established by Heller. This approach allowed Coles to collect more comprehensive information about each child and the child’s perceptions about God than someone like Heller who performed a formal, one-time interview.

The children Coles interviewed were from across the world with varying backgrounds or even a complete absence of faith. While Heller’s work was published first, Coles’ research had actually begun earlier. This particular book is the last in a series of eight that Coles wrote pertaining to children of crisis. He and Heller posed

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228 Ibid., 25, 207.


some of the same questions in their research with children such as “what does God look like?” and “where is God?” in efforts to discover their perceptions of God. In fact, Heller acknowledges consulting some of Coles’ earlier works and using it as a basis for his methodologies.\textsuperscript{231} The two researchers gathered responses both in verbal and pictorial form, but Coles collected his data utilizing a phenomenological approach.\textsuperscript{232}

One would surmise that Coles, a psychoanalytic psychiatrist, would employ some type of psychodynamic interpretive lens with his analysis; however, he applies no “closed interpretive framework” with the results.\textsuperscript{233} Instead, he allows the children to tell their story while simply listening.\textsuperscript{234} Coles describes his own work by stating that the “major thrust of this book is narrative rather than abstract and analytic.”\textsuperscript{235} Though he does not seek to apply an interpretation to the children’s interviews and drawings, he does attempt to understand the meaning behind the results.

When Coles asked children from varying religious backgrounds, including those with little to no foundation in religion, how they perceived God, 255 of the 293 drawings focused primarily on God’s face. These results led Coles to conclude that despite a child’s religious background or a lack of one, everyone has a conception of God.\textsuperscript{236} He posited that every person has an innate “spiritual awareness” from the very beginning of life.\textsuperscript{237} The majority of research and theory pertaining to children and religious education

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{231}] Heller, \textit{The Children’s God}, 6.
\item[\textsuperscript{232}] Coles, \textit{The Spiritual Life of Children}, 66, 274.
\item[\textsuperscript{233}] Andrew Wright, \textit{Spirituality and Education} (New York: Routledge Farmer, 2000), 47.
\item[\textsuperscript{234}] Hay and Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 54.
\item[\textsuperscript{235}] Coles, \textit{The Spiritual Life of the Child}, 39.
\item[\textsuperscript{236}] Ibid., 5.
\item[\textsuperscript{237}] Hay and Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 54.
\end{itemize}
had been conducted in the realm of cognitive development.\textsuperscript{238} Coles’ work helped swing the research pendulum away from a staged religious development that prioritized cognition.\textsuperscript{239} Though common themes also appeared among the participants in Heller’s study, all forty children were from a religious background.

**Halmut Hanisch**

Regardless of the critiques, and despite Coles’ strong influence, many reference Heller’s research and results. Not even a decade later, Helmut Hanisch followed up with Heller’s study and added yet another piece to the literature base. Hanisch set out to discover if children’s religious backgrounds or lack thereof influenced their perceptions of God. For his study, Hanisch used two groups of children from Germany. One group was comprised of 1,471 children ages 7 to 16 years old that had grown up being exposed to the Christian church and its traditions by their families. The other group consisted of 1,187 children also aged 7 to 16, but was from a part of Germany in which church membership was less than 27 percent.\textsuperscript{240}

The results from Hanisch’s study yielded both surprising and not so surprising results. According to Hanisch, children between the ages of 7 and 9 perceive God much in the same way regardless of their religious background.\textsuperscript{241} Children between the ages of 7 to 9 conceptualize God as having anthropomorphic qualities and living up in the clouds. The main difference between the two groups is that children from the nonreligious background perceive God even more fairy-tale like than the religious children.\textsuperscript{242}

\textsuperscript{238}Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 442.

\textsuperscript{239}Hay, Nye, and Murphy, “Thinking about Childhood Spirituality,” 51.

\textsuperscript{240}Hanisch, “Children’s and Young People’s Drawings,” 2.

\textsuperscript{241}Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{242}Ibid., 2.
Once children reach 9 years of age, perceptions among the religious and nonreligious groups begin to differ. The anthropomorphic qualities assigned to God by the children who have a religious background gradually disappear, and they begin depicting him in a more realistic manner. Children from the nonreligious background, however, maintain their child-like anthropomorphic perception of God.243

Just as the older children in Harm’s and Heller’s studies frequently used a variety of symbols to portray their perceptions of God, the same was true in Hanisch’s study. While both groups continued to hold perceptions of God, they were vastly different. The older children from the religious background perceived God as existing and being a compassionate as well as loving God. Their drawings utilized symbols to portray these perceptions.244 Those in the nonreligious group chose symbols, such as a black hole, to depict their general perception of God as being dead or nonexistent.245

Ted Slater

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ted Slater provided additional insight into how children perceive God. He focused strictly on children from evangelical Christian families. His study consisted of thirty-one subjects who were from an exactingly evangelical Christian background and between the ages of 3 and 11. Slater purposed his study to determine how these children’s conceptualization of God changed through their various stages of development.

The children were instructed to first imagine what God looked like, and then to draw their image. Children were allowed ten minutes to complete their pictures. Upon


244 Ibid., 15.

245 Ibid., 22.
completion, children were asked to explain their drawings. Interviewers recorded the children’s thoughts on the backs of their drawings.

Slater, like Heller and others, found younger children to be narcissistic by nature, exemplified by the fact that they include themselves in the drawings alongside God. Also discussed in his analysis are gender themes, which yielded results similar to Heller’s. Girls depicted a happy God more feminine in nature and enjoying the aesthetics, while boys portrayed God exhibiting supernatural elements and as being busy but not in a sense for enjoyment. A final similarity with his study is that as children progressed developmentally, they perceived God in a less egocentric manner. One point of deviation with Slater’s research, compared to the others, is that he reported no decline of anthropomorphic characteristics as children grew older. Slater’s work, while praised for generalizability among ages and directness, was criticized for its small sample size and simplistic statistical analysis.

Kay and Ray

Consistent with the work of others, in 2004, Kay and Ray found marked differences between boys’ perceptions of God and girls’ perceptions of God. Their work included 135 children between the ages of 4 and 11, and focused primarily on the influence of both gender and age on children’s perceptions of God. They compared the characteristics that appeared in both the boys and girls drawn responses and found that boys included certain characteristics of God more often than girls and vice versa.


247 Ibid.


249 Ibid., 244.
According to their findings, boys drew God as a super hero and with more supernatural elements, including items such as an invisibility belt, power sash, and a bow and arrow than did girls. While girls also utilized supernatural elements in their drawings of God, it was to a lesser extent. Girls had more of a tendency to draw God in social relationships than boys. When comparing other elements, such as wings, clouds, levitating, and happy, Kay and Ray found these particular features present more often in girls’ drawings than boys. Kay and Ray concluded that there were distinctive gender differences between children’s perceptions of God.

Hope College

As referenced, Dickie, Eshelman, Merasco, Shephered, and Johnson conducted a study at Hope College in Michigan in 1997, exploring the influential factors on a child’s perception of God. Unlike the previous studies, this particular study only used verbal responses from children. Additionally, parents were asked to participate by completing a questionnaire that focused on how much “quality time” they spent with their children. Their study involved 49 children (27 boys and 22 girls) between the ages of 4 and 10 (age 4-5 n=17, age 7-8 n=18, age 9-10 n=14) and their parents (18 fathers and 24 mothers). The children were interviewed individually in thirty minute sessions and asked questions that ranged from their perceptions of God to God’s personal involvement in their lives.

This study yielded several results related to the influential factors of children’s perceptions of God, including parental role, age, and gender. In an effort to discover if a child’s perception of their parents influenced their perception of God, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was first run. Next, a multiple regression analysis was

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\(^{251}\) Ibid., 248.

\(^{252}\) Dickie et al., “Mother God, Father God,” 139-42.
performed to “examine parents’ nurturance and difference from God, and child’s age and
genrer” and was also run to “examine the father’s and mother’s power and difference
from God, and child’s age and gender.”

When both age and gender were controlled, children who viewed their father as nurturing perceived God in the same manner. Similarly, children who viewed their mother as powerful perceived God as powerful.

Additionally, Pearson correlations were utilized to analyze the relationship between the time a father spent (r=37, p< .05) and the time mother spent (r=35, p< .05) with their child and the child’s perception of God. The outcome of the study revealed a positive correlation between the two factors. Parents’ interactions with a child directly influence the perception a child has of God. Children whose parents were less involved in their lives either in regard to time or emotionally perceived God as closer.

Parts of this study supported earlier extensive research on the influence of the parental relationship and children’s perceptions of God, including that of Kirkpatrick and Shaver. In 1990, Kirkpatrick and Shaver gathered data from two surveys. The first survey collected information about childhood experiences and relationships with parents, current relationships, and demographic variables from over 1,000 respondents. Data from the first 670 surveys were used. While respondents from the first survey were also invited to participate in the follow-up survey, only 213 participated (180 females and 33 males). The second survey consisted of both open and closed questions pertaining to the


254 Dickie et al., “Mother God, Father God,” 142-43.

person’s religious background (including the “religiousness” of one’s parents), religious experiences, as well as current religious beliefs and commitments.\(^{256}\)

Though fathers were included in the surveys, Kirkpatrick and Shaver focused and reported on the effect maternal attachment had on one’s spirituality. The population was sorted into two main groups based on their mother’s religiousness (either low or high), and then into three subgroups based on their attachment to their mothers (avoidant, secure, or anxious/ambivalent). According to their findings, when maternal religiousness was low and the attachment between the child and the mother was avoidant, the child was identified as more religious and had a higher mean score on seven out of ten possible areas.\(^{257}\)

Both of these studies cite Bowlby’s attachment theory as possible explanations for their findings. Bowlby’s theory states that everyone has an innate need for a primary attachment figure, usually the primary care giver. If one does not have this type of relationship or it is broken, then long-term consequences can occur. According to Dickie et al., and Kirkpatrick and Shaver’s findings, if the child lacked a strong connection with a primary attachment figure, then God became the substitute attachment figure. The less involved the parent was in the child’s life, the closer the child perceived God was in his or her life.\(^{258}\)

According to their results, a child’s perception of God is directly correlated with the parent-child relationship. How children view their father or mother corresponds with how they perceive God, whether they perceive him as nurturing or powerful. Additionally, how involved a parent is in a child’s life also affects a child’s perception of


\(^{257}\)Ibid., 325.

God. If a child does not have or loses a primary attachment figure, then God may become the attachment figure for the child.

The Hope College project also investigated whether a child’s perception of God is influenced by age, gender, or perception of God’s gender. To determine the correlation among these variables, children participated in a thirty-minute interview. During the interview, children were asked to identify what they perceived God’s gender to be and to listen to six stories that described difficult circumstances. The stories were displayed on a felt board. Upon completion of the stories, children were asked to locate where they felt God would be in the midst of that particular situation.259 Multiple ANOVAs were conducted to determine the significant effects of the variables on a child’s perception of God.

The majority of the children perceived God as a male (N=30, 70 percent), while 28 percent (N=12) perceived God as “neither male nor female.”260 Several ANOVA’s were run to determine if a relationship between God’s gender, a child’s age, a child’s gender, and God’s distance existed. The ANOVA that specifically considered God’s gender and children’s age yielded no statistical significance in regard to their perception of God’s distance in the midst of certain circumstances.261

Statistical significance was found when an ANOVA tested a child’s age and gender as independent variables and God’s personal involvement as a dependent variable. The results from this ANOVA revealed that older children perceive God as closer and more involved in their lives than do younger children. The reason offered for this finding is that the need for an attachment figure never ceases in one’s life and as children

259 Dickie et al., “Mother God, Father God,” 142.
260 Ibid., 143.
261 Ibid.
transition into adolescence and begin to distance themselves from their parents, they attach themselves to God.

Dickie et al., also performed an ANOVA examining perceptions of God’s gender and child’s gender on perception of God’s proximal distance. The study found that if boys perceived God as a male then they perceived God as closer, and if females perceived God as a non-male, either as a female or without gender, then they perceived God as closer, $F(1,39) = 5.36, p = .03$. The researchers postulated that though the need for an attachment figure is life-long, during adolescence males tend to separate themselves from the primary care giver who is usually female and females do the opposite.

Summary

From the work of David Heller, Helmut Hanisch, Dickie et al., and others like them, a baseline for children’s perceptions of God using both nonverbal and verbal approaches, was created based on age, denominational affiliations, gender, and parental influence. Though their work was comprehensive, the subjects used were those children who were healthy and non-grieving. Counselors and therapists seeing the vast information those children’s drawings provided began to incorporate it in therapy as a means to uncover children’s feelings and thoughts. Furthermore, work was begun to interpret these drawings.

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262 Dickie et al., “Mother God, Father God,” 143.

263 Ibid., 145.

Art Therapy

Not until the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was interest shown in the possible uses for children’s artwork. Some psychologists looked at children’s drawings as a means to classify a child developmentally. Others saw it as a tool to evaluate personality. Regardless of the perspective taken, children’s drawings serve as a vehicle through which children better verbalize or communicate what they are feeling. Art therapist Cathy Malchiodi asserts that art “may help children express themselves in ways that language cannot.” Children do not always have the ability to articulate and express their emotions verbally, especially those emotions that may be difficult to process.

According to some, art provides a vehicle through which children can even articulate grief. A child’s artwork has the ability to speak volumes more loudly and say more than he or she ever could. Children’s drawings can capture their subconscious thoughts and feelings, make portions of themselves visible, and can even be a tool to help them through difficult times. Evidence demonstrates that drawings have the potential to promote constructive coping.


266 Thomas and Silk, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Children’s Drawings*, 27.

267 Ibid., 29.


While children’s drawings can provide a window into a child’s soul so to speak, it is vital to keep in mind the context of the child and the child’s developmental level. Renowned art education professor, Viktor Lowenfield, asserts that children move through six stages of artistic development. At the first level, when a child is between the ages of 2 and 4, he or she will scribble. The marks children make at this stage are by happenstance and exhibit their inability to exert control over their gross and fine muscle movement. While children will choose to use color at this stage, their choice is not tied to the object for their primary focus is the marking on the page.

Children leave behind the Scribble Stage and enter the Preschematic Stage as they begin to intentionally draw figures. This change occurs around the age of 4 and children stay in this stage until around 7. During the Preschematic Stage, children gain the ability and muscle control to draw crude shapes and identify them as people or objects. Color choice for these various objects are subjective and based on an “emotional relationship” but not linked to reality.

As children begin to draw more concretely and with added details, they enter the Schematic Stage, occurring around the age of 7 and lasting until around 9.

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273 Lowenfeld, *Creative and Mental Growth*, 64-65.

274 Ibid., 68-69.

275 Ibid., 86.

276 Ibid., 84; Anning and Ring, *Making Sense of Children’s Drawings*, 18.

277 Lowenfeld, *Creative and Mental Growth*, 84.

278 Ibid., 92, 131.

“baseline,” a line drawn somewhere on the page to denote the base or surface of the picture, is a key element that appears on a child’s artwork at this stage. The utilization of the baseline is an acknowledgement that objects and people exist in relationship to space and time. If the baseline is absent in a child’s picture, Lowenfeld asserts that there must be an “emotional experience” the child encounters to cause them to feel disconnected to reality. Additionally, children may omit or over exaggerate other elements or details in their pictures to express what they are feeling.

Color use also becomes significant during this stage as children begin to associate and assign colors in a realistic manner versus a subjective one. Children will begin using the same colors for the same objects as they experience them in the physical world. An emotional experience of sorts can also cause children to deviate from choosing their normal color patterns.

As they enter the next phase, the Gang Age, children ages 9 to 11, focus on and have the ability to draw realistically. The basis for color choices at this stage can be likened to the Preschematic Stage in that they are both subjective and tied to the emotional state. The similarity in color choice is the only commonality these two stages share, for by the time children reach the Gang Age stage the inability to control motor activity is long gone. Children even begin to abandon the use of geometric lines that characterized

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280 Lowenfeld, Creative and Mental Growth, 116.
281 Ibid., 114.
282 Ibid. 120-21.
283 Ibid., 160.
284 Ibid., 131.
285 Ibid., 133.
286 Anning and Ring, Making Sense of Children’s Drawings, 18.
287 Lowenfeld, Creative and Mental Growth, 164.
their drawings in the Schematic Stage in efforts to help their drawings appear more realistic.\(^{288}\) For example, the baseline is disregarded as children understand the concept of the plane and details are now added to people in drawings to help them appear feminine or masculine.\(^{289}\) During this stage, if a child encounters an emotional disturbance, it will manifest itself in the artwork with the spatial relationships and correlations among objects being affected.\(^{290}\)

As children reach the Stage of Reasoning, between the ages of 11 to 13, they lean toward one of two categories, the visually-minded or the subjectively-minded.\(^{291}\) The visually-minded child approaches their work with an observer’s perspective, while the subjectively-minded child will draw with the vantage point of an insider.\(^{292}\) The visually-minded can draw more realistically as they can capture shades of light and color and how various conditions present in the drawing will and should affect the elements within the drawing.\(^{293}\) Though visually-minded children will pay attention to details, they are most concerned with the drawing in its entirety.\(^{294}\) Subjectively-minded children will focus on the details, especially those they are most interested in or that are most important to them.\(^{295}\) While the two groups have their differences, both tend to prefer a subject or topic they can see.\(^{296}\)

\(^{288}\)Lowenfeld, *Creative and Mental Growth*, 156.

\(^{289}\)Ibid., 159-60.

\(^{290}\)Ibid., 161.

\(^{291}\)Ibid., 188-89.

\(^{292}\)Ibid.

\(^{293}\)Ibid., 189.

\(^{294}\)Ibid., 190.

\(^{295}\)Ibid., 191.

\(^{296}\)Anning and Ring, *Making Sense of Children’s Drawings*, 18; Lowenfeld,
Klepsch and Logie carried the research further by using children’s drawings to explain and explore children’s self-esteem, their attitudes, their feelings, and their perceptions of others.\textsuperscript{297} They asserted, as many before them, that for young children, drawings articulated messages that their words could not and provided a way for others to “uncover information about the inner self” of a child.\textsuperscript{298} Their work presented the analysis of 85 children’s drawings regarding the aforementioned topics, and presented guidelines on how to interpret children’s artwork.

Art psychotherapist Patricia Crone also posits that drawing is an extension of someone’s “personal and interpersonal communication.”\textsuperscript{299} She believes that a child’s drawing provides insight into the inner world of the child and divulges information about his or her “personality, perceptions, values, and attitudes.”\textsuperscript{300} Her research focuses on how and why therapists should use art therapy as a part of counseling sessions. Crone details not only how to conduct art therapy but why the interpretation of it is so important. Interpretations of things such as color, content, and placement are considered. She emphasizes that while artwork provides a great indicator of where a child is or what he or she is feeling, it should be followed up with some type of interview or conversation with the child about the work.\textsuperscript{301} Crone also indicates instances when art therapy would be beneficial and identifies grief as such a time.\textsuperscript{302}

\textit{Creative and Mental Growth}, 202-3.

\textsuperscript{297}Klepsch and Logie, \textit{Children Draw and Tell}, 12.

\textsuperscript{298}Ibid., 8.


\textsuperscript{300}Klepsch and Logie, \textit{Children Draw and Tell}, 12.

\textsuperscript{301}Anning and Ring, \textit{Making Sense of Children’s Drawings}, 5; Malchiodi, \textit{Understanding Children’s Drawings}, 40, 213.

\textsuperscript{302}Crone, \textit{Using Drawings in Assessment Therapy}, 260.
According to Malchiodi, research with grieving children is scarce. She propositions that artwork by terminally ill children can also be used to provide insight into grieving children. Malchiodi, Klepsch, Logie, and others have spent time looking at certain elements of artwork from children who are both healthy and not healthy. Some of their findings will be discussed below.

**Interpretations of Drawings**

While research has been limited, the results of the studies have concluded that the contents, colors, and location of objects of grieving children’s drawings contrast considerably from those who are not. The content of a grieving child’s artwork includes “the use of symbols of death including angels, crosses, coffins, flowers, and even ghosts.” Even their color choices differ. Non-grieving children use a variety of colors, while those who are grieving use a certain few. Specific colors used by the grieving include red, black, and white, with each of those colors representing some type of emotion. The intensity of the color or hue of it also has meaning. The darker a color appears on the page is a sign that the child is feeling healthy, whereas if it appears in a light manner it symbolizes that a child is not feeling well.

The location of where a child draws on a page is also important. Children that are grieving or terminally ill have a tendency to draw predominantly in the upper-left hand corner of their page. The content of this corner will often times contain a road or sun.

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304 Crone, *Using Drawings in Assessment Therapy*, 300.
or moon. According to Malchiodi, this speaks to the journey or cessation of life. Other content for grieving and terminally ill children will contain windows or snakes more than non-grieving and healthy children.\textsuperscript{308} If a child draws certain themes repeatedly, it can be said that it is one of worth or value to the child.

What the child omits or exaggerates in a drawing is also important to note. If a child omits certain body parts such as hands or arms they may feel inadequate or insecure.\textsuperscript{309} If they omit the leg or foot they may be indicating that they do not feel supported or they may feel helpless.\textsuperscript{310} Finally, if a child omits the mouth he or she may be expressing that he or she is having difficulty relating to others.\textsuperscript{311} How a child exaggerates a figure is also important. If a child takes up the whole page with a figure he or she is expressing aggression. The opposite is also true, and if a child draws figures in a small manner they are expressing that they are timid or shy.\textsuperscript{312}

The way children may draw people also symbolizes certain things about themselves. For instance, if a child draws himself or herself as a clown or a monster they may have a poor self-image.\textsuperscript{313} If they draw themselves as a cowboy they want to be perceived as “tough,” whereas if they draw themselves as a stick person they are hesitant to identify themselves in any manner.\textsuperscript{314}

Children’s artwork serves as a pictorial language and is more communicative and descriptive in nature than spoken language. Not only are children less inhibited to

\textsuperscript{308}Bach, \textit{Life Paints Its Own Span}, 91; Klepsch and Logie, \textit{Children Draw and Tell}, 212.

\textsuperscript{309}Klepsch and Logie, \textit{Children Draw and Tell}, 44.

\textsuperscript{310}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{311}Ibid., 44-45.

\textsuperscript{312}Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{313}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{314}Ibid.
share in drawings, it is also developmentally easier for them to communicate in that manner. Research has shown how children at specific developmental levels draw. It has shown what healthy children draw and how, as well as what and how children, who are sick and grieving, draw. Research has even shown specifically how children who are not grieving draw God, but research is lacking in the area of how a grieving child draws God. This is the puzzle piece missing from the literature base. How do children perceive God in the midst of grief? This project seeks to find the answer to this question, as this information could be of great benefit in helping a child transition through the grief process and in their spiritual development.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This chapter describes the methodology employed to discover how children perceive God during times of grief. The process is described, as well as the population, possible delimitations of the population, and generalizability to the population. Additionally, the methodology used for collecting and analyzing the data for this study will be discussed.

Research Question Synopsis

The following questions were designed in an attempt to discover how a parentally or sibling bereaved child perceives God and does so either similarly or differently than a child who has not experienced the death of an immediate family member. The first two questions sought to determine the perceptions of both a grieving child and a child who has not encountered a significant loss, while the third question explored the relationship between demographics and a child’s perception of God. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does the death of an immediate family member affect a child's perception of God, if at all?

2. What are the similarities and differences in perceptions of God among children who have experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who have not?

3. How is a child's perception of God after experiencing the death of an immediate family member affected, if at all, by age, gender, or spiritual commitment?

Research Design Overview

The study utilized a multi-level triangulation design that allowed the utilization
of two or more research methods to answer research questions about the same topic.¹ This project involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to be analyzed in efforts to ascertain children’s perceptions of God during times of grief. These “different methods (quantitative and qualitative)” were “used to address different levels within a system.”² According to Creswell and Clark, the findings from these different methods were “merged together into one overall interpretation” in efforts to strengthen the findings.³ Though contradictory by nature, using both of these types of data helped provide a comprehensive explanation to the research questions.⁴ A strength of this design and for this study was that it allowed for data to be collected simultaneously and analysis performed “separately and independently.”⁵

This research design was used to collect, record, and analyze children’s perceptions of God during times of grief. The first phase of this study commenced by collecting data qualitatively by way of an interview. Both the experimental group and control group of children were asked a series of three open-ended questions and asked to respond to these questions by drawing their answers. These questions were asked one at a time, on separate days, in individual sessions. Interviews for the experimental group were conducted by Christian counselors. Teachers facilitated the interviews with the children who were in the control group. Details of the interview protocol are described later in this chapter.


⁴Ibid., 122.

⁵Creswell and Clark, Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research, 66.
Upon completion of each of the drawings, children were asked a series of follow-up questions allowing them to explain the various elements and aspects present in their drawings. Counselors transcribed the verbal responses for the experimental group and the respective teachers for the control group. Both the counselors and the teachers were asked to provide demographic information for each child.

Phase 2 utilized a quantitative approach. A panel of raters was assigned the task of looking for specified, coded patterns or images in each child’s artwork and in the explanation the child provided about the drawing. Each panel member received a Thurstone scale to assess the frequency of select characteristics based on the drawn and verbal responses of the children. The scale was accompanied with a description of the characteristics based on their definitions in precedent research literature. Each member of said panel received all the drawings and interview explanations of the drawings. Upon evaluation, the data was sent back to the researcher for further analysis.

**Population**

Both an experimental group and a control group were used for this study. The experimental group was purposive and obtained by contacting certified Christian counselors who worked with or specialized in children. Originally, counselors accredited by National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) were to be the source from which counselors were contacted; however, difficulty in accessing the NANC database led to the inclusion of Christian counselors certified by other Christian-based organizations.

Counselors that were willing to participate were asked to obtain parental permission (see appendix 3) for children with whom they were working that were between the ages of 6 to 12 and had experienced a parental or sibling death within the past six to eighteen months. As previously stated, children who were 12 were allowed to participate because the study included children who had experienced a death in the past six to eighteen months.
All children who fit within the parameters of the experimental category were chosen to participate, but a minimum number of twelve respondents were needed to run statistical analysis and to ascertain significance. This population proved to be tough to access. Ultimately, fifteen children participated, eight boys and seven girls. While the requirement for the number of participants was exceeded with this group, having twenty-five participants or more would have been optimal.

The control group was a convenience sample and selected from a group of children who were between the ages of 6 to 12, attended the same private Christian school, were willing to participate, and received parental permission to participate. These children could not have experienced a significant loss such as a death or divorce. The school was located in my hometown, which allowed easy access to the population.

I contacted the principal about potential student participation in the project. In turn, the principal presented the opportunity to children at the school between the ages of 6 to 12. Those that wanted to participate were given a permission slip to be filled out by the parent. Once the slip was returned, several teachers from the school led the participants through the drawing and interview exercises. A total of twenty children, consisting of eleven girls and nine boys, engaged in the activity. All children who returned the permission slip were allowed to participate in the study.

**Sample and Delimitations**

Approximately 2.5 million children will experience the death of a parent by the time they turn 18.\(^6\) Not all children will see a counselor or even more specifically a Christian counselor to help them through this time of crisis. As a result, only a portion of those children that lose a parent or sibling could possibly be a part of the research sample. In order for children to go to a counselor, they had to have a caregiver who was willing to

set up the appointments and take them, as well as have the financial means to pay for the sessions. Another delimiting factor of this project was dependent on the counselor: if he or she chose to participate in the study, as well as adhere to the instructions or request.

**Limitations of Generalization**

Since the sample size was limited to those under the care of a Christian counselor and mainly children who had an affiliation with church, the findings of this research would not generalize to children who have not been exposed to Christian teachings.

The ultimate goal of this research was to gain an understanding of a child’s perception of God after the death of a parent or a sibling. The findings are geared towards Christian caregivers, counselors, and ministers who can incorporate the information, using it to help children grow in their understanding of God and their faith.

**Instrumentation**

The research required the gathering of two different data sets from the experimental group and from the control group. The counselors who interviewed the experimental group, and the teachers who interviewed the control group, gathered the first set of data in two different types of interview. First, the counselors and teachers asked a series of three open-ended questions to the participants on an individual basis over a period of three different sessions (see appendix 4). One question was asked at each session. Upon completion of each drawing, the counselors and teachers spent up to fifteen minutes interviewing the children about the drawings. They asked the children a series of questions to help explain their drawings (see appendix 5), which were recorded in writing.

The counselors and teachers also supplied the second set of data, the demographic data (see appendix 6). A coded demographic chart was provided for each
participant of the study. The code was unique for each child and to be transferred on to the drawn and verbal responses as a means for keeping each child’s answers together.

Once I received the data, I distributed it to the panel of raters. The panel of raters received the children’s drawn responses and their verbal explanations to the three questions; however, they did not receive any of the demographic data. The raters also received a “yes or no” Thurstone scale to help them evaluate and assess the children’s artwork (see appendix 7). A description of characteristics for which they were to look was also supplied (see appendix 8). These characteristics were not meant as a theological treatise nor was there a biblical basis for these characteristics. These specific characteristics were chosen since as they have consistently shown up in academic research focused on children’s perceptions of God who were between the ages of 6 and 12.7 I met with panel members in person to go over the directions for how to use the scale, read the characteristics, and answer any questions. This scale was validated before this process began (see appendix 9).

Instrument Validation

A field test of the Thurstone scale was conducted prior to use in order for it to be validated (see appendix 10). The field test was conducted on a sample of children’s artwork. This sample group consisted of ten children between the ages of 6 and 12 who attended Sunday school classes at First Baptist Church of Gastonia in Gastonia, North Carolina. Parental permission was requested and obtained before these children were allowed to participate.

During Sunday school, I met with children outside of the classroom, one at a time and asked them to draw what they imagined God to look like. Each child was

provided with a sheet of 8 ½ x 11-inch white paper and an 8-pack of Crayola markers. The children were also interviewed individually about their drawings and asked to explain them. Each child’s answers were written down verbatim and attached to the drawing. Both sets of data were passed along to a panel of six raters.

The panel of six raters was comprised entirely of graduate students. These students were chosen because they were obtaining their master’s degrees in counseling and participating in a human growth and development course. Their academic and professional backgrounds provided them with a working knowledge of the developmental stages of children and a familiarization with how children draw in those stages.

The function of these raters was primarily two-fold. Their observations were used to establish inter-rater reliability for the instrument. Establishing inter-rater reliability is necessary as it shows consistency among a panel of raters when they are assessing the same body of work.8 The other primary purpose of this panel was to help establish the overall validity of the instrument in both content and construct. Multiple raters with “experience in the field” were used in effort to improve the reliability of the scale.9 The panel received the “yes or no” Thurstone scale (see appendix 10) and description of characteristics (see appendix 11) for evaluation as well as to see how it held up as a measuring tool for the panel of raters. Following suggestions from research literature, I met with the panel to provide instructions and training on how to use the scale to ensure understanding, prevent confusion, and help create a more precise instrument.10


10Steven E. Stemler, “A Comparison of Consensus, Consistency, and Measurement Approaches to Estimating Interrater Reliability,” Practical Assessment,
Though six raters were asked to participate, only five of the six raters were utilized. The sixth rater was selected in case an alternate was needed. The panel rated each of the sixteen characteristics in each of the ten drawings. Characteristics were to be marked “yes” if the raters noted them present in either the drawn or verbal response of the child. A Cronbach’s alpha was run on the ratings provided by the panel in efforts to determine the inter-rater reliability. The alpha scores ranged among the characteristics from a -5.5 to a .99 with a standard deviation of 8.40 and a final \( \alpha = .80 \). A Cronbach alpha score of .70 or higher is the accepted standard for inter-rater reliability according to research literature.\(^{11}\)

To test the Thurstone scale for content validity, a threshold of consensus was set at 70 percent where four out of the five raters agreed on either the presence or absence of the stated characteristic on the scale. According to Stemler, 70 percent or higher is the general criterion offered in the literature for a standard of consensus. Results that did not satisfy these criteria were discarded.\(^{12}\) The original scale contained sixteen characteristics (see appendix 10). After all the data were collected from the raters, two of the original sixteen characteristics did not satisfy the 70 percent consensus. The characteristics identified as “distant God” and “intimate God” were both dropped from the Thurstone scale. A new Thurstone scale was then developed omitting both the “distant God” and “intimate God” characteristics (see appendix 7).

**Research Procedures**

Upon approval of the Research and Ethics Committee at Southern Seminary, the first step in this study was to contact accredited Christian counselors. I used various

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\(^{11}\)Stemler, “A Comparison.”

Christian counseling databases to obtain contact information, including American Academy of Biblical Counseling, American Association of Christian Counselors, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, Association of Biblical Counseling, International Association of Biblical Counseling, and the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors. Attempts were made to enlist help from other Christian-based counseling organizations such as CareNet, a North Carolina pastoral counseling network, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation, GriefShare, and the Society of Christian Psychologists.

Each counselor was contacted via email, mail, or telephone. All were provided with a description of the research purpose and asked for their cooperation in participation if they had a client who could possibly participate in the project (see appendix 12). If counselors acknowledged they had a potential client who might participate and they agreed to participate, they were mailed a packet of materials. This packet contained a demographic chart (see appendix 6), directions for the study (see appendix 9), three interview questions for the study (see appendix 4), follow-up questions for the drawn responses (see appendix 5), parental permission slips (see appendix 3), and materials for the study including six sheets of white 8 ½ by 11 inch paper and an eight pack of original color Crayola markers. Only three pieces of paper were necessary for the study, but extra paper was supplied.

Counselors were then asked to contact parents and obtain both a verbal commitment and written parental permission for their children to participate in the study, as well as for their answers to be used. Once permission was received, counselors were instructed to begin. Counselors were asked to lead the drawing exercises at the beginning of their sessions so that the session itself would not impact the child’s answer. As the first session began, children were asked to close their eyes and imagine what God is like. Next, the counselors instructed the children to think about their answer for thirty seconds. After the waiting period, counselors then distributed the art materials and asked children
to draw their answers. Children were given ten minutes to complete their drawing. Counselors were instructed to encourage the children as they drew.

Once children finished drawing their responses, counselors asked the children about their drawings (see appendix 5). Their answers were recorded in writing. Children were asked to draw two additional pictures following the same procedures as above. Children were asked to draw what they think God was doing during the death of the parent or sibling and then how God felt about the death (see appendix 4). Upon completion of each of the drawings, follow-up questions were asked by the counselors and the children’s answers transcribed verbatim. These other two drawings took place during two additional visits, with one occurring during each visit.

Simultaneous to counselors collecting their data, teachers collected data from the control group. The teachers interviewed the children who volunteered and had permission from their parents to participate after school. The teachers employed the same procedures as the counselors in order to collect the data; however, the questions were worded differently. Children were interviewed on an individual basis over the course of three different days, with one question being asked on each day (see appendix 4).

As the first session began with the control group, children were asked to close their eyes and imagine what God is like. Next, the teachers instructed the children to think about their answer for thirty seconds. After the waiting period, teachers distributed the art materials and asked children to draw their answers. Children were given ten minutes to complete their drawing. Teachers were instructed to encourage the children as they drew.

Once children finished drawing their responses to the first question, teachers utilized the follow up questions to ask the children in the control group to explain their drawings. The verbal explanations of the children were written down verbatim. Children were next asked to draw what they thought God was doing when someone died and then how God felt about the death (see appendix 4). Upon completion of each of the drawings,
follow-up questions were asked by the teachers and the children’s answers documented. When data collection was complete, the counselors and teachers entered information in the demographic chart and transferred the code on to the drawn and verbal responses of the children (see appendix 6). The counselors and teachers then returned all the data via mail.

Prior to receiving the data, I enlisted a new panel of raters. This panel consisted of three individuals who work with children professionally including an elementary school art teacher, an elementary school guidance counselor, and an elementary school librarian. Upon their agreement to serve, I met with the panel of raters, providing them with the descriptions of characteristics for which to look, an explanation of the descriptions, and instructions on how to use the Thurstone scale. They were then given the description sheet (see appendix 8) and 105 copies of the Thurstone scale (see appendix 7).

Once the panel of raters codified the patterns present in the children’s drawn and verbal responses, they sent their assessments along with the data to me, via mail. At this point, I organized the data by utilizing spreadsheets and having a statistician run a Mann-Whitney and multiple ANOVA tests for statistical analysis. These nonparametric and parametric tests were completed using the data provided by the raters, and the demographic data provided by the teachers and counselors with the significance set at the .05 alpha level; however, alpha levels up to .1 were considered approaching significance.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The focus of this study was to identify the relationship between a child’s perception of God and grief. Children were interviewed and their demographic information collected in an effort to determine the correlation, if any, between children’s grief and their perceptions of God. Compilation and analysis of this data is presented in this chapter and is reported through the use of figures, tables, and summations. The results are organized and detailed in conjunction with and in order of the research questions. This chapter also provides and analyzes the demographic information of both the experimental and control groups. An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the research design concludes the chapter.

Compilation Protocol

The data for this study was both qualitative and quantitative and was collected in phases. Phase 1 was qualitative and involved the counselors and teachers interviewing and collecting demographic information from both the experimental and control groups. Three open-ended interview questions were initially asked of each participant. Once answers were given, additional follow-up questions were asked in order to help clarify their responses. The children drew their responses to the first three questions, while the additional questions were answered verbally. Demographic information, including age, gender, and level of a child’s spiritual commitment were collected and recorded by the counselors and teachers. All of the data with the exception of the demographic information was disbursed to the panel of raters for assessment.
In phase 2, the panel of raters gathered the quantitative data as they individually assessed the children’s drawn and verbal responses using the Thurstone scale. Their assessment helped determine how a child’s perception of God changed as a result of grief. The findings also helped identify the similarities and differences of perceptions of God held by bereaved and non-bereaved children. All of these findings were compiled using spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel, analyzed statistically, and displayed in the form of tables and figures.

The data amassed by the panel was analyzed statistically. These findings along with the demographic data helped determine the relationship, if any, between certain demographics and children’s perceptions of God. Spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel were used to compile and organize the demographic data such as age, gender, spiritual commitment, as well as the results from the Thurstone scale. Further statistical analysis was run to determine if a relationship between and among the various groups and variables. The results of these findings were displayed in the form of tables.

Two different types of statistical analyses were performed on the data sets to ascertain statistical significance and determine answers to the three research questions. These tests were run by Keshav Jagannathan using R for Mac version 2.15.2, a data analysis software.¹ In an effort to arrive at an answer for research question 1, a Mann-Whitney test was conducted. This particular test was chosen for three reasons. The Mann-Whitney, a nonparametric test, is particularly useful when dealing with both small and unevenly distributed populations.² The total population of this study included twenty

¹Keshav Jagannathan, Associate Professor of Statistics for the Math and Statistics Department at Coastal Carolina University, ran all the statistics for this research utilizing the data analysis software. R. Jagannathan received his Ph.D. in Statistics at Bowling Green University in 2005.

children in the control group and fifteen children in the experimental group, for a total of thirty-five participants. Third, this test was chosen because the two populations in this study were independent of the other.\(^3\) One group of children had experienced the death of an immediate family member while the other had not.

The second research question explored the similarities and differences between the two populations. Several two-way ANOVAs with multiple comparisons were employed to recognize statistical differences between various groupings of the experimental and control populations and their specific perceptions of God. ANOVAs were run utilizing each of the fourteen characteristics on the Thurstone scale as dependent variables and the groupings as independent variables.

Research question 3 looked to identify how age, gender, and spiritual commitment influenced, if at all, the grieving child’s perception of God. Multiple ANOVAs were also conducted to answer the third research question. Primarily a multi-factor ANOVA, a parametric test, was used as it is able to consider the means of more than two variables at once.\(^4\) The ANOVA could take the aforementioned demographic factors and compare them. Additional ANOVAs were run including two-way ANOVAs and one-way ANOVAs to determine significance on any level.

**Demographics and Sample Data**

In order to obtain the demographic data for this study, the counselors and teachers were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire for each child. This questionnaire was presented in the form of a three-columned table which asked for the children’s age, gender, and whether they had made a spiritual commitment or not (see appendix 6). The


figures and tables in this section present the information collected from the questionnaires. The results are discussed in the order the questions were listed on the survey.

The gender distribution for both the control group and the experimental group were very similar. The control group ($N = 20$) consisted of more females than males. Of the twenty children in the control group, eleven (55 percent) were female and nine (45 percent) were male. Figure 1 shows the gender distribution of the control group.

![Figure 1. Gender distribution of the control group](image1.png)

Figure 2 displays the gender distribution for the experimental group. The experimental group ($N = 15$) was smaller in number than the control group. The population was equally divided with eight male participants (53 percent) and seven female (47 percent) participants.

![Figure 2. Gender distribution of the experimental group](image2.png)
In order to be eligible to participate in this study, children had to be between 6 and 12 years of age. For analysis purposes, the ages were sorted into three groupings. These groupings were developmentally based and founded on the work of various art therapists, developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, and clinical psychologist, David Heller. Table 1 displays the distribution of age groupings for the control group. The first column reflects the ages of the participants. The other columns display the frequency and percentages of the children according to the age groupings. The results show of the twenty participants, only one (5 percent) child was in the first grouping, ten children (50 percent) in the second grouping, and nine children (45 percent) in the last grouping.

Table 1. Age distribution for control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid %</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 displays the distribution of ages and the frequency in which they occur among the experimental group.

Table 2. Age distribution for experimental group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid %</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the fifteen participants, the smallest percentage of the sample (N = 3, 20 percent) was in the first grouping. Similar to the age distribution of the control group, the majority of the experimental population (80 percent) fell into the second and third age groupings. The second and third groupings each consisted of six children.
Figure 3 displays the distribution of the spiritual commitment in the control group. The majority of the control population \((N = 17, 85\%\) indicated they had made a spiritual commitment while only a few \((N = 3, 15\%\) had not.

![Figure 3. Spiritual commitment for control group](image1)

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the spiritual commitment in the experimental group.

![Figure 4. Spiritual distribution for experimental group](image2)

Similar to the control group, the majority of participants in the experimental group \((N = 13, 87\%\) had made a spiritual commitment while only a couple \((N = 2, 13\%\) had not.
Findings and Displays by Research Questions

The three interview questions and follow-up questions sought to discover how children perceive God in the midst of grief. The children’s drawn and verbal responses to the questions as well as the children’s demographic information were used to determine the complete answers for the three research questions. Tables are used to display the quantitative values gathered from the children’s responses and demographic data.

The first question posed to the children during the interview process was perhaps the most critical in providing an overall answer to how children perceive God. The comparison between the control group’s and experimental group’s answers are important to note as is the role spiritual commitment played in their answers. The use of the panel of raters and Thurstone scale were instrumental in determining and coding the answers.

Research and data from the existing literature base on children’s perceptions of God, as well as the information collected from the control group, provided a baseline of comparison for any similarities and differences that appeared in the experimental group’s responses.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked, “How does the death of an immediate family member affect a child’s perception of God, if at all?”

This question was posed to the children in the form of three separate interview questions (see appendix 4) and several follow up questions (see appendix 5). Their respective counselor or teachers asked these of them. The characteristics that appeared or the absence of characteristics that appeared in their drawings and verbal responses determined the answer to this question. The Thurstone scale was the tool used to identify the appearance or absence of specific characteristics.

A Thurstone scale was completed by each of the three raters for each of the three answers provided by each child. Each answer consisted of the child’s drawn and verbal responses to the interview question. The raters were given a total of fourteen
specified characteristics as well as the option to write in other characteristics they noticed for each of the three answers. I averaged the scores of the raters for each child and for each of the three questions. Three Mann-Whitney tests were run, one for each of the three interview questions, utilizing the average number of specified characteristics that appeared in the children’s answers in an effort to determine statistical significance. A p-value of less than .05 was determined to be statistically significant and used to decide whether to accept or reject the null hypothesis.

While the p-value (p-value = 0.2770) from the Mann-Whitney results from interview question 1 (see table 3) was too high to reject the null hypothesis, the mean rankings of the groups imply notable phenomena. The mean rank compared the number of characteristics that appeared in each of the groups drawing. Groups with lower mean ranks had the lowest scores while groups with higher mean ranks had a “greater number of high scores.”5 The control group had a mean rank score of 19.625, compared to the experimental group whose mean rank score was 15.833. Though not statistically significant, the difference in the mean rank suggests that members of the control group seem to exhibit more characteristics associated with how children draw God in their drawings than the children who had experienced the death of an immediate family member.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney for interview question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mann-Whitney U’ = 182.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank sum group 1 = 392.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank sum group 2 = 237.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance estimated using the z statistic. Z = 1.087 p-value = 0.2770

The Mann-Whitney test performed on interview question 2 (see table 4) seemed to reveal that children’s perceptions of God in the control group did not differ significantly from children’s perception of God in the experimental group (p-value = 0.4220). Similar to the results in interview question 1, the mean rankings showed that children in the control group (mean rank = 19.2) appeared to draw God differently than those in the experimental group (mean rank = 16.4). Those in the control group seemingly drew God with more of the characteristics described in previous studies detailing children’s perceptions of God than did the children in the experimental group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mann-Whitney U’ = 174</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank sum group 1 = 384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank sum group 2 = 246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance estimated using the z statistic. $Z = 0.803$  p-value = 0.4220

While according to the Mann-Whitney (see table 5) the p-value (p=0.0930) was not low enough to reject the null hypothesis for interview question 3, in social science circles a p-value up to .1 is considered to be “suggestive” of significance, but “inconclusive.”6 The difference between the mean rankings of the control group (mean rank = 20.5) and the experimental group (mean rank 14.667) for question 3 was greater than those of the previous two interview questions. The mean ranking for the control group was higher than the previous two questions and conversely the mean ranking for the experimental group was lower than in the previous two questions. As exhibited in the other two questions, children in the control group appeared to perceive God slightly differently than those in the experimental group.

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Table 5. Mann-Whitney for interview question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rank sum group 1 = 410</th>
<th>N = 20</th>
<th>Mean Rank = 20.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank sum group 2 = 220</td>
<td>N = 15</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Rank = 14.667</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance estimated using the z statistic. Z = 1.6799  p value = 0.0930

The results of the Mann-Whitney tests performed on all three interview questions implied that there was no statistical difference in how children who have not experienced a parental or sibling death perceived God versus those who have experienced such. While the mean rankings of all three interview questions suggest that overall perceptions were different between the two groups, the differences in the perceptions were not significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis was accepted, and it was concluded that there was no statistical difference in how children who have lost a parent or sibling to death perceive God than those who have not. Death does not appear to affect a child’s perception of God.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, “What are the similarities and differences in perceptions of God among children who have experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who have not?”

This question was very similar to question 1 in that it involved children’s perceptions of God, however, this question looked for the actual similarities and differences between children who lost a parent or sibling and those who did not, and their perceptions of God. The same three interview questions and the children’s responses both drawn and verbal that were used to arrive at an answer in question 1 were used again, as were the results provided by the panel of raters and their use of the Thurstone scale.

By looking at each child’s answer to each interview question, the raters either marked the presence or absence of each of the characteristics listed on the Thurstone scale.
Two out of the three raters had to identify the characteristic as present in order for the characteristic to be considered present. Three spreadsheets recorded the yes and no responses for each of the characteristics in each of the three interview questions. The yes and no responses were then coded with the binary variable of “1” for a yes response and “0” for a no response. A composite score was then calculated for each of the fourteen characteristics listed on the scale based on the responses from the three interview questions. Several two-way ANOVAs with multiple comparisons were performed with the dependent variables being the characteristics and the independent variables being the various groupings of the two populations. Significance was set at the .05 alpha level.

Each grouping compared a section of the experimental population with a section of the control population. A total of nine groupings were considered. The groupings included the experimental group versus the control group, the male experimental group versus the control male group, the experimental female group versus the female control group, the spiritually committed experimental group versus the spiritually committed control group, the non-spiritually committed experimental group, versus the non-spiritually committed control group, the experimental 6 year old group versus the control 6 year old control group, the experimental 7-9 year old group versus the control 7-9 year old group, and the experimental 10-12 year old group versus the control 10-12 year old group. An additional grouping of experimental 6-9 year olds versus control 6-9 year olds was added after the initial ANOVAs were run because of a small frequency within the 6 year old grouping. Statistically significant findings will be discussed one characteristic at a time. Non-significant findings will be listed in the appendix.

**Face of God.** The “face of God” characteristic was defined on this Thurstone scale as God being perceived as just a face without a body.\(^7\) While the neck and shoulders

\(^7\)Helmut Hanisch, “Children’s and Young People’s Drawings of God” (lecture
may be included in the perception of God, the lower extremities are not.  

Table 6 displays a summary of the ANOVA interactions with the “Face of God” characteristic with consideration to the groupings. Out of the nine possible groupings, three of the groupings seemed to show a significant statistical difference. These differences occurred between the control versus the experimental grouping, the female control versus the female experimental grouping, and the spiritually committed control versus the spiritually committed experimental grouping.

Table 6. ANOVA interactions with face of God with considerations of groupings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>0.688</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.688</td>
<td>9.57</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>0.649</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.649</td>
<td>11.46</td>
<td>0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually Committed</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>8.58</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 displays the levels of the groupings that showed a statistical difference. This table also reflects the number of children in each level, their mean perception of God as only a face, and the standard deviation between the groupings. These results indicate that children who have not experienced a parental or sibling death are more likely to perceive God as only a face. They also suggest that girls who have not experienced a parental or sibling death are more likely to perceive God as only a face. A final implication that can be drawn from these findings are that children who are spiritually committed and have not experienced a parental or sibling death are more likely to perceive God as only a face.

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*8Coles, The Spiritual Life of Children, 40.*
Table 7. ANOVA procedure with face of God with considerations of groupings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>0.2836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>0.2108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Control Group</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.484</td>
<td>0.2734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Experimental Group</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.1626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually Committed Control Group</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.450</td>
<td>0.3104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually Committed Experimental Group</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>0.2207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Levitation.** In this study, levitation is described as God being envisioned in the air or sky, but not on the ground.9

Table 8 shows the significant statistical difference that seemed to emerge when considering children’s perceptions of God levitating. Out of nine groupings, the only significant difference that seemed to occur was between the non-spiritually committed children in the control group and the non-spiritually committed children experimental group.

Table 8. ANOVA interactions with levitation with considerations of groupings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-spiritually committed</td>
<td>0.533</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.533</td>
<td>Infty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 reflects these two levels, the number of children in each level, their mean perception of God as levitating, and the standard deviation between them. These results indicate that children who have not experienced a parental or sibling death are less likely to perceive God levitating. However, it is imperative to note that though these findings indicate significance, they are highly probable for a type I error due to the small numbers within this particular grouping.

Similarities and differences seemed to exist in perceptions of God among children who have experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who have not. However, in only two out of the fourteen categories on the Thurstone scale did significant statistical differences actually occur. The majority of the ANOVAs performed suggested that there was no statistical difference between the various groupings of the control and experimental populations and their perceptions of God. These findings indicate that while death may influence certain perceptions children hold of God, this does not appear to be true the majority of the time. Thus suggesting that children, regardless of an experience with death, perceive God in many similar ways.

**Research Question 3**

Research question 3 asked, “How is a child’s perception of God after experiencing the death of an immediate family member affected, if at all, by age, gender, or spiritual commitment?”

This question sought to determine if select demographics, after a child has experienced a parental or sibling death, affected children’s perceptions of God. Research has been conducted on the relationship between select demographics and a child’s perception of God who is not grieving. The results from these prior studies helped provide a baseline and served as a reference point for comparison.

In efforts to answer this last question regarding the experimental group and the relationship, if any, between and among select demographics, a four-way analysis of variance test (ANOVA) was initially performed (see table 10). Significance was set at the .05 alpha level. All three of the demographic variables and their interactions were included. Both the control group and the experimental group were considered together as
a fourth variable. The ANOVA results revealed no significant differences among any of the variables. All of the p-values exceeded the .05 level of significance ranging from 0.104 to 0.990. The null hypothesis was therefore accepted, and it was concluded that the select demographic variables appeared to have no affect on a child’s perception of God, after the child has experienced the death of an immediate family member.

Table 10. ANOVA results with interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.825</td>
<td>0.715</td>
<td>0.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.352</td>
<td>2.882</td>
<td>0.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Commitment</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.776</td>
<td>1.088</td>
<td>0.309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group:Gender</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group:Age</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:Age</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.829</td>
<td>0.325</td>
<td>0.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group:Spirit</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.812</td>
<td>1.886</td>
<td>0.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:Spirit</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.923</td>
<td>1.146</td>
<td>0.297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group:Gender:Age</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residuals</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53.57</td>
<td>2.551</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To test for statistical significance on any level, the ANOVA was conducted again in an effort to control sources of variability. For the second analysis, the interactions were removed and only the variables were considered (see table 11). These p-values ranged from 0.0784 to 0.9016. Results from table 11 also seem to indicate that the select demographic variables do not appear to affect children’s perceptions of God; however, gender (p=0.0784) would be considered to be suggestive of significance in the realm of the social science community.10

10 Ramsey and Schafer, *The Statistical Sleuth*, 47.
Table 11. ANOVA results without interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.825</td>
<td>0.826</td>
<td>0.3709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.328</td>
<td>3.328</td>
<td>0.0784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.9016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Commitment</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.776</td>
<td>1.257</td>
<td>0.2715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residuals</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>64.06</td>
<td>2.209</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender

Noting that gender was approaching significance when the ANOVA was run without interactions, a one-way ANOVA was run considering only gender. Males and females were divided into two groups without any regard to their placement in the experimental or control group. Table 12 shows the results when gender was the only variable. A statistical significance was discovered, indicating that boys and girls perceive God differently.

Table 12. ANOVA results considering “gender”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>15.61</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.61</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.0563</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age

When age was originally run as one of the demographic variables in the four-way ANOVA, it consisted of three subgroups including a 6 year old group, a 7 to 9 year old group, and a 10 to 12 year old group. The results of the four-way ANOVA indicated that no statistical difference was present when the children were categorized in this manner (see table 10). With the frequencies being low in the two 6 year old groups, it was decided to eliminate the subgroupings, creating an all-inclusive 6 to 12 year old group, a 6 to 9 year old group, and a 10-12 year old group and test for significance again.

Tables 13 through 15 reveal the ANOVA outcomes when age group is the independent variable and the perception of children who have experienced a death is the
dependent variable. Table 13 reveals the finding when all children are considered together regardless of age. In this instance, no statistical difference seemed to appear. Table 14 displays the results of the 6 to 9 age group. Though results revealed that age did not exert a significant effect on children’s perceptions of God, the outcome does suggest that the difference between the 6 to 9 year olds in the experimental and control groups is approaching statistical significance. Table 15 presents the ANOVA results of the 10 to 12 age group, which comparison yielded an insignificant difference between the two groups. Thus, one can deduce once again that age did not seemingly influence a child’s perception of God after experiencing the death of a parent or sibling.

### Table 13. ANOVA results with an age inclusive group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 to 12 year olds</td>
<td>1.825</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.825</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.3756</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 14. ANOVA results considering 6 to 9 year olds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 to 9 year olds</td>
<td>4.225</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.225</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.0709</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 15. ANOVA results considering 10 to 12 year olds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum Sq</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 to 12 year olds</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.8765</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Evaluation of Research Design

This research design attempted to identify the relationship, if any, between children’s perceptions of God and grief, specifically parental or sibling grief. Though utilizing a mixed methods design provided particular strengths, certain weaknesses were also present. The following paragraphs discuss the strengths and weaknesses that were uncovered during the process of this study.
Strengths of the Research Design

The use of counselors, teachers, and the panel of raters. The strengths of this design included the use of Christian counselors. These counselors and teachers ensured the safety of the children and provided their expertise in dealing with children and conducting interviews with them. Their involvement also helped ensure the anonymity of the children. An additional strength of this study was the use of the panel of raters. Using an outside group and having each of them assess the child’s answers provided an added strength and validity to the research findings.

Drawn and verbal responses. Research has shown that children do not have the cognitive ability to express their emotions or thoughts verbally. A particular strength of this research design was the use of both drawn and verbal responses. Questions were posed to children, and children were asked to draw their answers. Drawn responses enable children to more fully answer a question more than merely words. Additional research has shown that drawn responses help a child answer emotionally difficult questions.

After the drawing was complete, children were asked to verbally explain their drawings. These verbal explanations were beneficial in clarifying the various aspects present in their drawings. These conversations allowed the child to identify why particular colors and certain objects were used as well as why things were placed where they were. The verbal response used alongside the drawn response provided more thorough answers to the various interview questions.

Relevancy of the topic. Perhaps the most noted strength of this research design is the relevancy of the topic. With so many children experiencing the death of an immediate family member this topic is extremely significant. Findings from this project could benefit children who are grieving, as well as their counselors and caretakers. This research has information regarding how both bereaved children and non-bereaved children perceive God. Children’s caregivers could use this information to help facilitate
discussions about children’s perceptions of God and help children through the grieving process.

**Weaknesses of the Research Design**

**Use of counselors, teachers, and raters.** Weaknesses of this design also included the use of counselors; many did not wish to participate or did not have clients that met the parameters of this study. Several counselors stated that children who experience the death of a family member do not typically see a counselor. Counselors also mentioned that grieving children may participate in a GriefShare program or other bereavement program offered by a local church instead of seeing a counselor. Further study could include partnering with churches that use the GriefShare program or other bereavement programs.

While both the counselors and teachers brought strength to the study, it is probable that some did not follow the stated interview protocol. If the counselors or teachers deviated from the interview questions or follow-up questions, responses may have been altered or influenced. The information could also possibly be incomplete if the counselors and teachers did not allow the appropriate wait time between follow-up questions, allow the child time to think through their answers, or provide them with enough time to fully answer the questions. Counselors and teachers could have also made mistakes in transcribing the children’s verbal responses. Perhaps instead of the counselors and teachers writing, children could write their own answers or use a speech to text device in efforts to answer the follow-up questions.

The raters also proved to be a potential weakness. Even though I personally met with each rater individually and provided instructions, there seemed to be some misunderstanding of the definitions of the various items on the Thurstone scale. Instead of holding individual meetings, one group meeting should have been held and examples of the categories discussed. If a group meeting had taken place, questions could have
also been asked and discussed that potentially could have ensured consensus on the meanings and nuances of the items on the Thurstone scale.

**Number of respondents.** The number of respondents willing to participate was also another weakness. The parameters for this study were very specific, and as a result, limited who could participate. Additionally, with the grave nature of this topic and the pain it causes children, any reflection about their grief may have been too painful for them to discuss, especially for research purposes. As a result, the possibility exists that parents did not provide consent for their children to participate.

Two possible alternatives that could be explored in future studies to broaden the population base would be to have parents and pastors conduct the interviews. If parents could conduct the interviews, they may be more apt for their child to participate. Also, pastors are among the first responders to families who have lost loved ones. Families are more likely to talk with a pastor than a counselor. If a pastor could and would agree to conduct interview sessions, then the population may become more accessible.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

The concentration of this study was to investigate how children perceived God during a parental or sibling death. A mixed methods research study was utilized to uncover any correlation between grief and a child’s perception of God. This study also examined how a parentally or sibling bereaved child perceived God differently or similarly than a non-bereaved child. The effect of select demographic data was also considered. Interviews consisting of three primary questions and several follow-up questions were conducted with children who had experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who had not. A Thurstone scale was used as the means to quantify both of the children’s drawn and verbal responses as to whether a death of an immediate family member affected their perception of God. A Mann-Whitney test was performed utilizing the information provided by the Thurstone scales. Data gathered from the children’s responses as well as demographic data were analyzed with analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests.

While this final chapter initially revisits the research purpose, time is also spent considering each of the three research questions that drove the project. Conclusions pertaining to these findings are offered as well as their implications. Some of the children’s verbal responses from the interview questions will be incorporated into the text where appropriate. This chapter concludes with a discussion of applications of the proposed research, its limitations, and areas for further research.
Research Purpose

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the relationship between children’s grief and their perceptions of God. The perception of God held by non-bereaved children was also an important consideration. Select demographic information was collected and analyzed in an effort to determine if they exerted any significant effect on children’s perception of God after they experienced a parental or sibling death.

As previously discussed in the precedent literature review, the research base pertaining to the effects of death on children is quite extensive as are the studies regarding non-bereaved children’s perceptions of God. These related studies served as a baseline of reference and to strengthen and explain the findings of this research. Some of the previous studies identified the most common characteristics that appear in children’s perceptions of God and did so by gender, age, or religious affiliation.

This exploration sought to extend the existing research by investigating children’s perceptions of God after they experience the death of an immediate family member. Did this population perceive God in a manner that was dissimilar from those who had not experienced a death? If so, exactly how were those perceptions different? The ultimate goal of this research was to equip counselors and caregivers with this information, to help them provide comfort and healing to those children who are grieving.

Research Questions

Three questions were used to direct the course of this research study as well as data collection:

1. How does the death of an immediate family member affect a child’s perception of God, if at all?
2. What are the similarities and differences in perceptions of God among children who have experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who have not?
3. How is a child’s perception of God after experiencing the death of an immediate family member affected, if at all, by age, gender, or spiritual commitment?
Research Implications

The discussion in this section is guided by the outcomes of the three research questions that directed this study. The research findings were resultant from the data gathered and analyzed as described in chapter 4. Subsequently, conclusions were drawn, implications made, and connections to the precedent literature offered based on the information gleaned from the statistical analysis. With one in five children experiencing parental death before they graduate from high school, the information this study could provide is not only relevant, but could have significance. The findings may possibly be used to console those at a most critical time in their development, and in turn impact them for the rest of their lives.

Research Question 1: Effects of Death on Child’s Perception of God

Research question 1 asks how the death of an immediate family member affects a child’s perception of God, if at all? The primary goal of the present study was to ascertain if a child’s perception of God was influenced by either a parental or sibling death. While previous studies have identified how children who have not experienced a death perceive God, the current study is the first to examine children’s perceptions of God after they experience a death. The prior studies, noted in chapter 2, discuss children’s perceptions of God in detail.

The primary finding of research question 1 was that a child’s perception of God is not seemingly affected after experiencing a parental or sibling death. The results of the three Mann-Whitney tests yielded no significant statistical difference between the responses of the children who were a part of the experimental group and the responses of those in the control group. Therefore, the findings suggest that a child’s spiritual life is not as susceptible to change in the midst of a tragedy, as are others areas of a child’s life.

Extensive research conducted by children’s psychologist Alan Wolfelt, referenced in chapter 2, identifies the ways in which death affects a child. His work
shows that children are affected emotionally, physically, and behaviorally.\textsuperscript{1} Within the emotional domain, children may demonstrate bouts of anger, hatred, terror, and fear.\textsuperscript{2} Physiologically, headaches, lethargy, insomnia, anxiety, and weight loss or gain may occur.\textsuperscript{3} Children who are affected behaviorally may show signs of regression, guilt, self-blame, and low self-esteem.\textsuperscript{4}

Since Wolfelt’s research strongly supports the impact death has on many areas of a child’s life, it seems death would also affect a child’s spiritual domain. This project set out to discover if this was the case by examining children’s perceptions of God. The findings that emerged suggest that death has no effect on the spiritual dimension of a child’s life. Though there were no relevant significant differences between the experimental and control group in this current study, additional studies are needed as the population size of this study was small.

However, it is possible that a child’s spiritual life provides comfort or solace in the midst of such a tragedy. Hence, instead of a child’s spiritual life faltering it remains constant. Studies conducted by Andrews and Marotta, Lines, and Worden and Silverman found that spirituality provides a coping mechanism for children who experience a death.\textsuperscript{5} Children are not only able to maintain a connection with the deceased but also connect meaning to the death.\textsuperscript{6} Perhaps this is exemplified through the words of one 11 year-old

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{1}Alan Wolfelt, \textit{Helping Children Cope with Grief} (Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development, 1983), 31.

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., 39-45.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 34.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., 38-46.


\textsuperscript{6}Therese A. Rando, \textit{Grief, Dying, and Death: Clinical Interventions for}
girl, a member of the experimental group, who said, “God feels happy that His child came home, that daddy came to heaven. He loves us so much that He wants us to live and have Jesus in our hearts so we can spend eternity with Him.” Spirituality could provide children with hope that helps them transition through the grief process.7

Yet another possibility for the outcome of the Mann-Whitney tests is that it takes time for the effects of grief to fully unveil themselves in individuals. This project only consisted of children who had experienced the death of an immediate family in the past eighteen months. Perhaps grief’s influence had not yet fully manifested. Studies conducted by Bowlby, Dowdney, Doyle, and Worden, all mentioned in the context of this work, allude to the long-term consequences of an early parental death. If a parent dies, children lose a critical attachment figure. This type of significant loss can possibly negatively influence the course of their development and their mental and physical health, as well as future relationships.8 The influence of death may not be seen until later in the child’s life.

A secondary finding of research question one comes from the mean rankings of the three Mann-Whitney tests. In each of the three groupings of the mean rankings, the participants who were part of the control group appeared to exhibit more of the characteristics associated with how children typically perceive God than those in the experimental group. While suggestive that death affects a child’s perception of God, the differences, as stated previously, were not significant in statistical terms. Since a relationship between death and a child’s perception of God could not be statistically established, it is within reason to proffer that if another study was conducted with a larger


experimental population, a relationship could possibly be established.

The two findings of research question 1 indicate that children, regardless of death, have certain perceptions of God. The mean rankings of the two groups in all three of the Mann-Whitney tests indicate that children incorporated characteristics listed on the Thurstone scale in their responses. The findings are consistent with the literature base constructed in part by the work of Harms, Heller, and Coles, all of whose research is described in detail in chapter 2. Their extensive work, spanning back to the early twentieth century, implies that certain themes are present in children’s perceptions of God and are strongly correlated with certain key factors including gender, age, and religious background.

Research Question 2: Similarities and Differences of Children’s Perceptions of God

Research question 2 asks what the similarities and differences are in perceptions of God among children who have experienced the death of an immediate family member and those who have not? The findings of this question could help identify specific similarities and differences that exist in the perceptions of God between the experimental and control populations in this study.

First, the results of this second research question indicate noticeable similarities between the experimental and control groups. Some of these likenesses were evidenced in the verbal responses of the children. Several of the children in this study envisioned God with similar physical characteristics. One 12 year-old non-bereaved boy described God as “tall, long hair, and a beard,” while a 10 year-old non-bereaved girl stated that God was “older than time, older than Earth. Has a beard because he is old.” A bereaved

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6 year-old girl said, “God has a grey beard, really long.” The results of most of the ANOVAs conducted to answer research question 2 suggest that there was no significant statistical difference between how the two populations perceived God. In only 4 out of 112 possible instances did a significant difference emerge between the control group and experimental group.

Since the children in both the control and experimental groups seemed to perceive God in such a similar manner it is important to consider why. A possible explanation is offered in a study conducted by Tamm. Tamm interviewed 425 children between the ages of 9 and 19 by asking them to draw an answer to the incomplete sentence, “When I hear the word God I think of . . .” Tamm posited that when a child uses a graphic medium to illustrate their perception of God, “it can force children and young people to express their conception of God concretely and give it an anthropomorphous form.”

Having children draw their perception of God can compel them to assign him human-like qualities because it is what they know at their age. Children may often use a pre-existing schema as a model for their illustrations. According to Tamms, children will “use a human model for perceiving and interpreting the deity.” Therefore, children may draw God with some of the characteristics identified on the Thurstone scale such as active, as a face, with gender, or as smiling simply because they are familiar concepts to children, ones that are possibly personified on a regular basis. According to a 10 year-old boy who was a part of the experimental group, “God is black. Got brown eyes. Got black

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 42.
13 Ibid., 43.
hair and his hair is like mine.” A 9 year-old girl who was in the control group responded, “God is a real person. He looks like a real person but different.” Tamm would attribute these children’s comments and the tendency to personalize God to a child’s cognitive development.  

As discussed in the preceding literature chapter, children will progress through six stages of artistic development as they mature cognitively. Younger children will utilize examples from their experiences as models for how they draw figures and objects. Their drawings will contain aspects of realism despite what they are drawing. Older children will incorporate elements of symbolism into their drawings and begin to draw things more abstractly. Thus, conceivably explaining why children may draw God or any figure anthropomorphically, as just a face, or with symbolism exemplified by one 11 year boy who said, “I drew just an ear because God listens.” Children’s artistic development paired with their cognitive development would perhaps offer elucidation as to why children’s drawings are similar irrespective of circumstance.

Tamm, along with Heller and others, offers that gender may also influence how a child will conceptualize God. When boys and girls are given the opportunity to draw, distinctive differences often appear in what they choose to illustrate. Boys have a tendency to draw “verbs” and girls draw “nouns.” Boys may portray figures and objects in action

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16 Ibid.


and moving, such as good guys fighting bad guys and spaceships flying. Their drawings seem to contain more of the “scientific elements of life.” Girls tend to depict people like kings, queens, princes, and princesses and focus more on the aesthetics of life. Research indicates that boys’ and girls’ drawings will each contain certain images that could help explain why they may portray God the way they do, and do so in a similar manner.

Though in most instances no statistical differences seem to appear between the control and experimental groups, significant differences were noted in a few comparisons. When considering the characteristic “God as just a face” on the Thurstone scale, a significant difference seemed to appear on three occasions. Children who had experienced a death were less likely to perceive God as only a face. This phenomenon was particularly apparent among females and among those who had made some sort of spiritual commitment.

A statistical difference also occurred when considering the characteristic “levitation” on the Thurstone scale. Children who had experienced a death but had not made a spiritual commitment were more likely to envision God levitating than children who had not made a spiritual commitment but had not experienced the death of someone close to them. However, with this particular finding it is imperative to note that the population size of the non-spiritually committed groups was extremely small and is therefore highly probable for a type one error.

Though a few statistical differences appeared between the control and experimental groups in two of their perceptions, children for the most part seemed to


20 Ibid., 45.

21 Ibid., 45-46.
conceptualize God in the same way. These results indicate that children in both groups, regardless of a parental or sibling death, perceive God similarly.

**Research Question 3: Similarities and Differences of Children’s Perceptions of God**

Research question 3 asked, how is a child’s perception of God after experiencing the death of an immediate family member affected, if at all, by age, gender, or spiritual commitment? First and foremost this study sought to determine if any differences existed between how children belonging to the experimental group perceived God versus those in the control group. Another key aspect of this study was to identify the role, if any, of select demographic variables on a child’s perception of God after they experienced the death of an immediate family member.

Seemingly, age, gender, nor spiritual commitment swayed children’s perceptions of God after they lost a parent or sibling to death. A statistical difference was not found when the analysis of variance test (ANOVA) was conducted on the demographic variables and their interactions. Furthermore, the findings implicate that a child’s perception of God may be influenced by other factors. Perhaps the role of the parent in a child’s life supersedes demographic variables when it comes to children’s perceptions of God. Existing literature confirms that a child’s perception of God is heavily influenced by a child’s relationship with both the mother and father. The studies conducted at Hope College and by Kirkpatrick and Shaver, discussed in chapter 2, found that a child’s perception of God is directly correlated with the parent-child relationship.

The salience of the parental role could explain the findings; however, at this point, it is important to consider a particular limitation of this research. In efforts to broaden the parameters of the population base, this study not only included children who experienced a parental death but also a sibling death. All the data obtained by the experimental group were evaluated together. In efforts to make a true comparison
between the findings, the data for the parental loss and the sibling loss may need to be analyzed separately.

An ancillary finding appeared when the ANOVA was run again on just the variables without interaction. While neither age nor gender was significant compared to the .05 threshold, gender (p=0.0784) was considered suggestive of significance. This finding prompted the performance of an additional ANOVA to test for statistical differences between boys’ perceptions of God and girls’ perceptions of God without consideration of death. The results of this test seemed to indicate a variance does exist (p=0.0563).

These findings support an already large research base, established in part by Heller but also seen through the work of Slater, and Kay and Ray, as previously discussed. Their research suggests that children’s gender influences perceptions of God. Some of the boys’ and girls’ comments about their drawings in this study help illustrate these gender differences. While one of the boys asserted, “God is flying, like he is in the air, and he is creating the world,” another offered, “God is a giant and sits on a throne.” The girls’ responses appeared to vary portraying God in a royal manner. “God has a pink cape! Everything sparkles around Him, and He wears a crown. He sits on His throne!” exclaimed one girl. Still another girl suggested, “God is the king of everything . . . He is sitting on a throne.”

The demographic variable of gender is considered a significant influence on children’s perceptions of God in literature. This study, without interactions or without consideration of death, significantly indicates such as well. Thus, it can be concluded that boys and girls appear to perceive God differently.

Research Applications

One of the intentions of this body of work was to provide caregivers working with bereaved children information that may be beneficial during the grieving process. While content gleaned from the precedent literature chapter pertaining to children’s grief as well as findings from this study may provide such insight, additional potential applications for these results were found. People who care for bereaved or non-bereaved children in any capacity could utilize the findings in this body of work. This list would include but is not limited to ministers, counselors, and parents.

Ministers play a pivotal role in the lives of their congregants especially during instances of grief. For as Clinebell states, “Clergy have an unparalleled opportunity and responsibility to be effective guides and companions of the bereaved as they walk through their shadowed valley of loss.”23 Often they are the ones who walk with the bereaved through the various stages or tasks of grief from beginning to end. Many of the counselors contacted during this study acknowledged that children who experience the loss of a family member receive counsel from ministers, if they receive it all. The comfort and counsel ministers can provide to all family members, including children, may help facilitate the normal grieving process.

The results from this body of work may be used by ministers in several ways. Ministers could use information from the precedent literature to help educate parents about the various aspects of children experiencing grief, how it may look, and how to help children cope. Nagy and Worden posit that children grieve according to where they are developmentally.24 Parents and family members may assume that all children grieve the same or do so in the same manner as adults. Using Nagy’s and Piaget’s stages of

23 Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growing (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 221.

development, ministers could outline for parents their children’s understanding of and responses to death at various ages. Ministers could provide concrete illustrations for each age level. For example, children who are between the ages of 3 to 5 tend to believe that death is not final. Therefore, children may ask when the deceased is coming home. Parents could be encouraged to talk openly about the death, and to be patient if children ask questions repeatedly.

Ministers could also use the precedent research to describe to caregivers how grief will manifest itself in children behaviorally, emotionally, and physiologically. Just as adults grieve in a variety of ways, caregivers need to be mindful that children will also diversely exhibit and express grief. Some of the normal grief reactions in children are identified in appendix 1, and are based on the works of Worden and Wolfelt. They may show signs of anger, anxiety, guilt, loneliness, and sadness. Children may also present somatic symptoms, including stomach, distress, and tightness in chest and or throat. Their grief could even entail confusion, hallucinations, questioning of beliefs. If parents know what to expect, they may watch for behaviors that seem out of the ordinary.

Second, information contained in this body of work could possibly be useful to ministers as they counsel children. Findings in precedent literature are suggestive that a parental or sibling death may influence a child’s emotional or behavioral state. Therefore, ministers should spend time with children who are dealing with the loss by comforting


28 Ibid., 25.

29 Ibid., 27-30.
them, listening to them, and supporting them in the days, weeks, and months after the
death.\textsuperscript{30} Ministers could also potentially use the research in this study regarding the
influence of age on children’s perceptions of God and the findings in this study regarding
the influence of gender on children’s perceptions of God.\textsuperscript{31}

Knowing that these demographic variables may influence children’s perceptions,
ministers should attempt to help children perceive God as Scripture presents him.
Ministers could utilize the demographic information to help them communicate with
children. Boys, for instance, could possibly learn about God’s love and presence from
Exodus 13 when God leads the Israelites by a cloud during the day and pillar of fire at
night. Not only is God’s activity in the every day evidenced, but also God’s power is
seen through supernatural elements. Girls may learn about God’s abiding presence from
the story of Ruth (Ruth 1-3). Even in the midst of Ruth’s loss, God was with her and
provided for her. God’s providential care is demonstrated through Boaz’s love and care
for Ruth.

The findings of this study could assist in shaping a minister’s philosophy and
ministry with children. The goal of ministry with children should be to positively shape
their perception of God through the lens of Scripture. Effectively teaching children about
God requires thought about age appropriate methodologies and gender differences.
According to Piaget’s cognitive stages of development referenced in chapter 2, younger
children should be introduced to God through concrete biblical stories, and older children
could learn about the many aspects of God’s character through more abstract biblical
teachings. Since the results of this study suggest that boys and girls perceive God
differently, gender-specific learning groups may be utilized, as could thematic units to

\textsuperscript{30}Bowlby, \textit{Separation}, 22; Clinebell, \textit{Basic Types of Pastoral Care &
Counseling}, 221.

\textsuperscript{31}Heller, \textit{The Children’s God}; Slater, “The Development of Children’s
Concept”; Kay and Ray, “Concepts of God.”

118
enhance learning. Boys could learn about the “super” heroes of the Bible including David, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendnego (1 Sam 17; Dan 3, 6). Girls could learn about female leaders such as Deborah or Esther (Judg 4; Esth 2).

Ministers could use the results of this study to develop two different training programs for children’s ministry lay leaders. One workshop could center on children’s grief and be based on the results of the research pertaining to children’s grief described in chapter 2. Lay leaders should be educated on what children’s grief looks like and the responses children may have to it. Suggestions for ways lay leaders could possibly minister to children could also be provided.

The second workshop could be designed to teach lay leaders about gender and developmental differences in children. Findings from this study regarding gender differences and children’s perceptions of God could be the impetus for the second workshop coupled with Piaget’s stages of cognitive development referenced in chapter 2. Practical ideas and application of how this information should be used to structure lessons should also be presented.

Counselors may find applications from the information contained in this study in their work with children. One theme that appeared to prevail through the precedent literature was that the death of an immediate family member is traumatic for a child and may have ramifications throughout a child’s life. This was presented in the work of Bowlby, Dowdney, and Doyle. Bowlby’s work identified specific consequences if the primary attachment was broken between a child and a parent. Perhaps counselors could help children establish a substitutionary attachment with God. Research conducted by Miner reports that “one’s relationship with God serves many of the functions of attachment, such as providing a safe haven and secure base.”

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33 Maureen Miner, “The Impact of Child-Parent Attachment, Attachment to
potentially help children grow in their understanding of God, his character, and his nature to strengthen that attachment.

Counselors could also possibly incorporate the findings of gender differences and children’s perceptions of God from this present study in their discussion of God and his character with all troubled children. The perceptions held by boys and girls about God could be used as a springboard for discussion. Using children’s perceptions of God, counselors could assess where children are in their spiritual development and possibly help them progress using Scripture as their guide. While times of crises can provide opportunities for growth, they can also be detrimental. Bereavement, in particular, can be a catalyst for some to “gain greater faith” and still others to “lose faith.” Therefore, counselors may engage children in conversations about their faith, and listen intently to their answers.

The information contained in this study could be used as a guide to parents with bereaved children. When a child loses a parent or sibling, the child is going to look to the surviving parent for comfort and guidance. Therefore, parents need to be ready to help their children face and deal with their grief. Parents could use the findings of Worden’s work referenced in chapter 2 to help equip themselves with information that could ease their children’s transition through the loss. They need to know how children grieve and how that grief will be expressed. In the event that parents are unable to help their children with their grief, they need to seek the help of a minister or counselor.

Parents could also use the results of this research to engage both bereaved and non-bereaved children in conversations about God. The findings of this research indicated that gender influences a child’s perception of God. Using this potential information, parents could initiate intentional conversations with their children about how they perceive 

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God and in turn share their own perceptions with them. These answers could be drawn or written in a journal. Once parents know how children perceive God, they could lead their children in a biblical study of God’s character. As a part of the study, parents and children could continue the journal, drawing or writing what they learned about God. Research shows that a parent has a substantial influence on children’s perceptions of God.35 In this way, children can also learn more about their parent’s faith in the face of tragedy. These conversations can prepare children to rely on their faith to handle all situations that may arise in life. Children would also have a journal they could keep and reference throughout their lives.

**Research Limitations**

This study focused on a very specific and select population, children between the ages of 6 and 12 who had experienced a parental or sibling death in the last eighteen months, and were under the care of a Christian counselor. Working with such a particular and specialized population creates delimitations on the scope of the research and limits the generalizability of these findings.

Perhaps the most important limitation of this study was the small sample size. With only fifteen children as part of the experimental group, the study was more exploratory in nature. Since no prior studies could be found pertaining to the effects of death on children’s perceptions of God, the findings of this study had no baseline with which to compare. Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted cautiously until replicated with a larger sample.

In efforts to safeguard the children, counselors and teachers were used to interview the children. While this protocol was deemed necessary, it also presented

additional limitations for this study. The results of this study were dependent on the counselors and teachers following the exact directions given to them. Any deviation from these directions or alternation of interview or follow-up questions could greatly influence the children’s responses. Though utilizing one counselor and one teacher to conduct all interviews could have helped eliminate this issue, it was not practical as children from the experimental group were located across the United States and each seeing their own counselors.

This study was also limited by the objectiveness of the children in the experimental and control groups. Children had to share their honest opinions about the questions asked, which may have been particularly hard for the children who were grieving. Often times children will give answers they think adults want to hear in order to please them or keep themselves out of trouble. As a result, children may not answer honestly. Though follow-up questions were asked about the child’s initial drawn response, this study accepted answers at face value.

Additionally, this study did not distinguish between a parental and a sibling death, and analyzed all data together. In fact, it is not known how many children experienced a parental death versus a sibling death. Precedent literature identifies parental death as having more of a profound effect on children than a sibling death. It is within the realm of possibility that the results of the experimental population would differ if the study looked specifically at parental death or sibling death.

Another factor that could have influenced the children’s responses was the nature of the family member’s death.36 Was the death an accident? Was the death following a prolonged illness? Was the death a suicide? The type of death has been correlated with the child’s response to the death. So, it may also be possible that the nature of the death affects children’s perceptions of God in different ways. This study

36Wolfelt, Helping Children Cope, 21.
did not gather information regarding how the parent or sibling died, but analyzed all information together.

This study was limited to children who were spiritually committed or came from spiritually committed families. Regardless of their spiritual commitment and their families’ spiritual commitment, children were allowed to participate in the study. However, the assumption was made that if children were seeing a Christian counselor, then at the very least the families would be spiritually committed. Children that come from spiritually committed families, who have been exposed to Christian teachings, may have different perceptions of God than children who come from either no faith or other faith backgrounds. Findings of this study would then only directly apply to children from spiritually committed families.

**Further Research**

Since this research was limited to children attending sessions with a Christian counselor, a natural extension would be to repeat this study with children receiving help from other Christian entities, such as the local church or Christian support groups, such as GriefShare. This extension may provide a larger population base from which stronger conclusions can be drawn. Additionally, this study could be replicated with children who do not come from spiritually committed families. The findings from this follow up study could be compared with the results from this current study to determine the relationship, if any, between death, spiritual commitment, and children’s perceptions of God. These results may present a more accurate representation of the role spiritual commitment plays in regard to a child’s perception of God.

Future research could also include a longitudinal study that compares children’s perceptions of God after they experience the death of an immediate family member over a period of time, which would provide definitive answers of the effects of the death. Perhaps interviewing the same children in both the experimental group and control group over the course of several years would offer a more holistic picture. This
would also allow children time to develop cognitively, which in turn could help them more accurately express their feelings and opinions in regard to their perceptions of God.

A final consideration for further research would be to alter the Thurstone scale used. Many studies that sought to determine children’s perceptions of God identified various characteristics that frequently appear in children’s drawings of God. This current study compiled a list of characteristics based on the work of several previous studies. An alternative approach would be to use one precedent study’s list and create a Thurstone scale to reflect those same characteristics. The results could then be directly compared to those of the previous study.
Table A1. Normal grief reactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadness, Anger, Guilt and Self-</td>
<td>Stomach Distress, Tightness in chest and or</td>
<td>Disbelief, Confusion, Preoccupation, Sense of</td>
<td>Sleep Disturbance, Appetite</td>
<td>Questioning Beliefs, Anger at God, Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>Weakness in Muscles, Dry Mouth, Oversensitivity to Noise, Hollowness in Stomach²</td>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal, Dreams of Deceased, Crying,</td>
<td>with Self, Change in Church Habits, Reevaluating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness, Shock, Yearning,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Auditory or Visual Hallucinations of Deceased,</td>
<td>Life⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation, Relief, Numbness¹</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Restless Overactivity, Searching and Calling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Out, Carrying Reminders of Deceased⁴</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


²Ibid., 25.


⁵Carrington and Bogetz, “Normal Grief and Bereavement,” 311.
# APPENDIX 2
## TYPES OF GRIEF

Table A2. Types of grief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Grief</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abnormal or Complicated Grief</td>
<td>Any one symptom or combination of symptoms that is prolonged and is not becoming less pronounced.</td>
<td>Can lead to clinical depression, anxiety, hostility, or other morbidity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicated Grief includes:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic Grief</td>
<td>When the mourner is stuck in the grief process, which never comes to a satisfactory conclusion.</td>
<td>Prolonged regressive behavior, urge to search for deceased, sadness, angry protest, yearning and searching, preoccupation with deceased, depression, disorganization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Grief</td>
<td>Inhibited, suppressed or postponed grief reaction which occurs when a loss is insufficiently mourned. Full or partial mourning eventually occurs once triggered.</td>
<td>Full or partial mourning eventually occurs once triggered. Response may seem intense, but in reality it is occurring later than anticipated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 72.

12Carrington and Bogetz, “Normal Grief and Bereavement,” 311.


14Ibid., 159.

15Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 72.
| Exaggerated Grief | When a normal grief reaction goes beyond normal grief to a clinical level of depression or anxiety.\(^9\) Maladaptive behavior results as the person feels overwhelmed.\(^10\) | The person exhibiting exaggerated grief is aware of the symptoms and behaviors and seek help. Major psychiatric disorders are a part of this response.\(^16\) The individual is unaware that the somatic symptoms or aberrant or maladaptive behavior he or she is now experiencing is related to the loss.\(^17\) |
| Masked Grief | Grief that is not present following a loss but emerges sometimes later masked as a medical or psychiatric problem.\(^11\) | |
| Anticipatory Grief | Process by which family and friends come to terms with the potential loss of a significant person.\(^18\) | Anger, Feelings of Loss, Guilt, Inability to perform daily tasks, Irritability, Sadness, Worry\(^19\) |
| Acute Grief | Grief exhibited through somatic or psychological symptoms.\(^20\) | Choking, Fatigue, Mental Pain, Shortness of Breath, Tightness of Throat\(^21\) |
| Disenfranchised Grief | Grief related to a loss that carries some type of stigma in which people cannot openly discuss and or express their feelings.\(^22\) | Neither the loss or the mourner is recognized\(^23\) |
| Normal Grief or Uncomplicated Grief | Typical reactions to loss in individuals the grief process. Which is influenced by cultural, personal, and societal expectations as well as the mourner’s perception of the loss.\(^24\) | Affects all facets of one’s being including: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual (see appendix 1). |

\(^9\)Walsh-Burke, *Grief and Loss*, 49.

\(^10\)Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 72.

\(^11\)Walsh-Burke, *Grief and Loss*, 49.

\(^16\)Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 73.

\(^17\)Ibid., 74.


\(^19\)Ibid.


\(^21\)Ibid.

\(^22\)Walsh-Burke, *Grief and Loss*, 50.

\(^23\)Rando, *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*, 498.

\(^24\)Carrington and Bogetz, “Normal Grief and Bereavement,” 309.
APPENDIX 3

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

You are being requested to give permission for a minor or member of a vulnerable population under your legal supervision to participate in a study designed to determine if grief may affect how one perceives God. This research is being conducted by JoLynn Prochaska for the purposes of helping counselors, ministers, and parents with children during their time of grief. In this research, a person will be asked three questions in which they will be asked to draw his/her answers. Any information provided will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will a person’s name be reported or a person’s name identified with his or her responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and the person you are giving approval to participate in this study is free to withdraw at any time.

By signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a vulnerable population to participate in this research if he or she desires.

Participant Name _________________________________________
Parent/Guardian Name _________________________________________
Parent/Guardian Signature _________________________________________
Date _________________________________________
APPENDIX 4

INITIAL QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED TO THE CONTROL GROUP AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

The questions that will be asked to the control group are as follows:

1. Can you draw a picture for me that shows what God looks like?
2. Can you draw a picture that shows what God does after someone dies?
3. Can you draw a picture that shows how God feels after someone dies?

The questions that will be asked to the experimental group will be as follows:

1. Can you draw a picture for me that shows what God looks like?
2. Can you draw a picture that shows what God was doing after your parent/sibling died?
3. Can you draw a picture that shows how God felt after your parent/sibling died?
APPENDIX 5
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR THE CONTROL GROUP
AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Follow-up Questions for the Control Group:

Follow-up questions for session 1 in which children will be asked to draw how they imagine God.

1. So tell me about your drawing, how do you imagine God?
2. Let’s look at your drawing together
   a. Tell me about each object in your drawing.
   b. Tell me about why you put this in this place.
   c. Tell me why you chose this specific color for each object.

Follow-up questions for session 2 in which children will be asked to draw what they think God does after someone dies?

1. So tell me about your drawing, what do you think God does after someone dies?
2. Let’s look at your drawing together
   a. Tell me about each object in your drawing.
   b. Tell me about why you put this in this place.
   c. Tell me why you chose this specific color for each object.

Follow-up questions for session 2 in which children will be asked to draw how they think God feels when people die?

1. So tell me about your drawing, how do you think God feels when people die.
2. Let’s look at your drawing together
   a. Tell me about each object in your drawing.
   b. Tell me about why you put this in this place.
   c. Tell me why you chose this specific color for each object.
Follow-up Questions for the Experimental group:

Follow-up questions for session 1 in which children will be asked to draw how they imagine God.
1. So tell me about your drawing, how do you imagine God?
2. Let’s look at your drawing together
   a. Tell me about each object in your drawing.
   b. Tell me about why you put this in this place.
   c. Tell me why you chose this specific color for each object.

Follow-up questions for session 2 in which children will be asked to draw what they think God was doing after their parent or sibling died?
1. So tell me about your drawing, what do you think God was doing after your parent or sibling died?
2. Let’s look at your drawing together
   a. Tell me about each object in your drawing.
   b. Tell me about why you put this in this place.
   c. Tell me why you chose this specific color for each object.

Follow-up questions for session 3 in which children will be asked to draw what they think God feels about what happened when your parent or sibling died?
1. So tell me about your drawing, how do you think God felt when your parent or sibling died?
2. Let’s look at your drawing together
   a. Tell me about each object in your drawing.
   b. Tell me about why you put this in this place.
   c. Tell me why you chose this specific color for each object.
APPENDIX 6
DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

Table A3. Demographic sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Spiritual commitment (yes or no)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 7
THURSTONE SCALE

Directions: A Thurstone scale will be used to detect the presence or absence of certain elements in each child’s artwork. Please check yes in the chart below if the element is present in the child’s drawing and no if it is absent. A detailed description for each element is attached. If an unlisted element is present in the drawing, please write that in the “other” space.

Table A4. Thurstone scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Active God</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropomorphism</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clouds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face of God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy tale or magical imagery/representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly Ghost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiling/Happy God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supernatural Elements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Lights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scale will be used for each child’s artwork in tandem with the interview explanation of the drawings.
APPENDIX 8

CHARACTERISTICS

Active God—God is depicted as working in the world and on behalf of individuals. He may be drawn as creating, helping, protecting in efforts to “extend himself to man” and improve the quality of life.

Anthropomorphism—God is depicted with human qualities such as with a beard, long hair or wearing shoes. God may also be depicted as embodying human characteristics such as “gentleness or kindness.”

Cloud—God is depicted as residing in the clouds, and may been drawn as sitting on or in the clouds observing earthly activity. Not only is God depicted as watching earthly happenings, but also participating in them by doing such things as listening to prayers.

Face of God—God is depicted as just a face without a body. While the neck and


6Hanisch, “Children’s and Young People’s Drawings of God,” 11.

shoulders may be present, the lower extremities are not drawn.  

Fairy tale or magical imagery as a representation of God—God is depicted as a “fairy-tale conception.” Some examples present in artwork may include God drawn as a king or living in some type of fantasy or whimsical house. God maybe depicted as magical or as a magician and Jesus as the apprentice.

Friendly Ghost—God is depicted as a type of friendly apparition. God may be smiling and appear as a cloud with a face or as human drawn with dotted lines.

Gender—God is depicted either as a male, female or as androgynous.

Halo—God is depicted as having a halo around his head.

Levitation—God is depicted as being in the air or sky, and not on the ground.

Smiling/Happy God—God is depicted as smiling and happy.

Symbolism—God may be depicted abstractly through the use of various symbols such a church, crucifix, hands, Jewish star, a light, nature, sun, sunrise, or triangle.

---


Supernatural Elements—God is depicted as a super hero having supernatural elements or dimensions that supplied special powers such as an invisibility belt, power sash, ring or shoes.\textsuperscript{18}

Use of Light—God maybe depicted as emitting light, being enveloped by light, or maybe a “type of glow within a child.”\textsuperscript{19} Light may be used to symbolize God, as an “accoutrement of the deity,” or the means by which he “communicates to or heals people.”\textsuperscript{20}

Wings—God is depicted as having wings.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{20}Heller, \textit{The Children’s God}, 126.

APPENDIX 9

DIRECTIONS FOR THE COUNSELORS AND TEACHERS

1. Secure verbal permission from parents for children who qualify to participate in the study. Qualifiers used by counselors and teacher: children between the ages of 6 and 12 who have lost either a parent or sibling in the past 18 months. Qualifier used by counselors in addition to the above: an established client who has completed an initial assessment.

2. Contact the researcher and notify her with the number of participants. If no one agrees, please let her know this as well.

3. The researcher will be back in immediate contact with you, providing you with a packet of materials including written permission slip as well as the art supplies. The art supplies will consist of 10 pieces of white 8 ½ x 11 paper and an 8 pack of original color Crayola markers. After the final question is asked and the interview is completed, please give all extra paper and markers to the child.

4. Please ask the children only one question at each session, ask the question at the beginning of the session, and ask them in order in the order provided on the next page.

5. For each of the sessions, please ask the children to close their eyes and then ask them the question. Ask the children to think about their answer. Allow them 30 seconds, and then provide them with the art supplies. Please make sure the children have a clear table or desk at which to work. Allow the children 10 minutes to draw his or her answer.

6. Upon completion, please take up to 15 minutes asking the children the follow-up questions also provided on the next page. Please write down what the child says verbatim in their answers on the follow-up question page.

7. After the sessions are complete, please fill out the demographic sheet for the children and transfer the code located on the top of the demographic table to the back of each piece of artwork. Please also place this code on the top of the follow-up question page that contains the children’s explanations of their drawings.

8. Once the children have finished all three sessions, please return the data in the self-addressed stamped envelope.
APPENDIX 10

INITIAL THURSTONE SCALE

Directions: A Thurstone scale will be used to detect the presence or absence of certain elements in each child’s artwork. Please check yes in the chart below if the element is present in the child’s drawing and no if it is absent. A detailed description for each element is attached. If an unlisted element is present in the drawing, please write that in the “other” space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Active God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthropomorphism</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clouds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant God</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face of God</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate God</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiling/Happy God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolism</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supernatural Elements</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scale will be used for each child’s artwork in tandem with the interview explanation of the drawings.
APPENDIX 11

INITIAL LIST OF CHARACTERISTICS

Active God—God is depicted as working in the world and on behalf of individuals.\(^1\) He may be drawn as creating, helping, protecting in efforts to “extend himself to man” and improve the quality of life.\(^2\)

Anthropomorphism—God is depicted with human qualities such as with a beard, long hair or wearing shoes.\(^3\) God may also be depicted as embodying human characteristics such as “gentleness or kindness.”\(^4\)

Cloud—God is depicted as residing in the clouds, and may been drawn as sitting on or in the clouds observing earthly activity.\(^5\) Not only is God depicted as watching earthly happenings, but also participating in them by doing such things as listening to prayers.\(^6\)

Distant God—God is depicted as being distant at least periodically. This distance refers most commonly to a felt emotional distance; however, can also refer to a geographical


\(^6\)Hanisch, “Children’s and Young People’s Drawings of God,” 11.
distance. Despite the feeling of absence, God is perceived as still being actively involved in the individual’s life.

Face of God—God is depicted as just a face without a body. While the neck and shoulders may be present, the lower extremities are not drawn.

Fairy tale or magical imagery as a representation of God—God is depicted as a “fairy-tale conception.” Some examples present in artwork may include God drawn as a king or living in some type of fantasy or whimsical house. God may be depicted as magical or as a magician and Jesus as the apprentice.

Friendly Ghost—God is depicted as a type of friendly apparition. God may be smiling and appear as a cloud with a face or as human drawn with dotted lines.

Gender—God is depicted either as a male, female or as androgynous.

Halo—God is depicted as having a halo around his head.


Intimate God—God is depicted as being intimately present emotionally and often times geographically. God may be drawn as having conversations with individuals or sharing an emotional connection.

Levitation—God is depicted as being in the air or sky, and not on the ground.

Smiling/Happy God—God is depicted as smiling and happy.

Symbolism—God may be depicted abstractly through the use of various symbols such as a church, crucifix, hands, Jewish star, a light, nature, sun, sunrise, or triangle.

Supernatural Elements—God is depicted as a super hero having supernatural elements or dimensions that supplied special powers such as an invisibility belt, power sash, ring or shoes.

Use of Light—God maybe depicted as emitting light, being enveloped by light, or maybe a “type of glow within a child.” Light may be used to symbolize God, as an “accoutrement of the deity,” or the means by which he “communicates to or heals people.”

Wings—God is depicted as having wings.

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18 Ibid.


APPENDIX 12

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO COUNSELORS

Good Morning,

My name is JoLynn Prochaska and I am a PhD candidate at Southern Seminary. I am in the process of working on my dissertation project and would like to study/learn more about children and their perceptions of God during times of grief. Due to the ethical considerations regarding children, I am in need of Christian certified counselors to help.

What I need from counselors willing to participate is simply for them to ask children who are between the ages of 6 and 12 and have lost an immediate family member (parent or sibling) to death in the past 18 months three questions and have them draw their answers. The questions are as follows.

Questions:
1. Can you draw a picture for me that shows what God looks like?
2. Can you draw a picture that shows what God does after someone dies?
3. Can you draw a picture that shows how God feels after someone dies?

The ultimate goal of this project is to discover if and how children’s perceptions of God change during the loss of an immediate family member. This information will in turn be used to help counselors, ministers, and parents provide children with an accurate perception of God during death and grief.

If you are willing to help, or know of anyone I might could contact, would you please let me know and I will provide you with more information and details?

JoLynn Prochaska
Minister to Children and Families
FBC Gastonia
704-865-8576
APPENDIX 13
EXPERIMENTAL GROUP RESPONSES

Figure A1. Question 1, female 1, 6 years old

Figure A2. Question 2, female 1, 6 years old

Figure A3. Question 3, female 1, 6 years old
Figure A4. Question 1, female 2, 6 years old

Figure A5. Question 2, female 2, 6 years old

Figure A6. Question 3, female 2, 6 years old
Figure A7. Question 1, female 3, 8 years old

Figure A8. Question 2, female 3, 8 years old

Figure A9. Question 3, female 3, 8 years old
Figure A10. Question 1, female 4, 10 years old

Figure A11. Question 2, female 4, 10 years old

Figure A12. Question 3, female 4, 10 years old
Figure A13. Question 1, female 5, 10 years old

Figure A14. Question 2, female 5, 10 years old

Figure A15. Question 3, female 5, 10 years old
Figure A16. Question 1, female 6, 11 years old

Figure A17. Question 2, female 6, 11 years old

Figure A18. Question 3, female 6, 11 years old
Figure A19. Question 1, female 7, 11 years old

Figure A20. Question 2, female 7, 11 years old

Figure A21. Question 3, female 7, 11 years old
Figure A22. Question 1, male 1, 6 years old

Figure A23. Question 2, male 1, 6 years old

Figure A24. Question 3, male 1, 6 years old
Figure A25. Question 1, male 2, 7 years old

Figure A26. Question 2, male 2, 7 years old

Figure A27. Question 3, male 2, 7 years old
Figure A28. Question 1, male 3, 7 years old

Figure A29. Question 2, male 3, 7 years old

Figure A30. Question 3, male 3, 7 years old
Figure A31. Question 1, male 4, 7 years old

Figure A32. Question 2, male 4, 7 years old

Figure A33. Question 3, male 4, 7 years old
Figure A34. Question 1, male 5, 8 years old

Figure A35. Question 2, male 5, 8 years old

Figure A36. Question 3, male 5, 8 years old
Figure A37. Question 1, male 6, 9 years old

Figure A38. Question 2, male 6, 9 years old

Figure A39. Question 3, male 6, 9 years old
Figure A40. Question 1, male 7, 10 years old

Figure A41. Question 2, male 7, 10 years old

Figure A42. Question 3, male 7, 10 years old
Figure A43. Question 1, male 8, 10 years old

Figure A44. Question 2, male 8, 10 years old

Figure A45. Question 3, male 8, 10 years old
APPENDIX 14
CONTROL GROUP RESPONSES

Figure A46. Question 1, female 1, 8 years old

Figure A47. Question 2, female 1, 8 years old

Figure A48. Question 3, female 1, 8 years old
Figure A49. Question 1, female 2, 8 years old

Figure A50. Question 2, female 2, 8 years old

Figure A51. Question 3, female 2, 8 years old
Figure A52. Question 1, female 3, 8 years old

Figure A53. Question 2, female 3, 8 years old

Figure A54. Question 3, female 3, 8 years old
Figure A55. 1, female 4, 8 years old

Figure A56. Question 2, female 4, 8 years old

Figure A57. Question 3, female 4, 8 years old
Figure A58. Question 1, female 5, 9 years old

Figure A59. Question 2, female 5, 9 years old

Figure A60. Question 3, female 5, 9 years old
Figure A61. Question 1, female 6, 9 years old

Figure A62. Question 2, female 6, 9 years old

Figure A63. Question 3, female 6, 9 years old
Figure A64. Question 1, female 7, 9 years old

Figure A65. Question 2, female 7, 9 years old

Figure A66. Question 3, female 7, 9 years old
Figure A67. Question 1, female 8, 9 years old

I see God as a person right beside someone who is dying. I also see him healing what they are feeling.

Figure A68. Question 2, female 8, 9 years old

Figure A69. Question 3, female 8, 9 years old
Figure A70. Question 1, female 9, 10 years old

Figure A71. Question 2, female 9, 10 years old

Figure A72. Question 3, female 9, 10 years old
Figure A73. Question 1, female 10, 10 years old

Figure A74. Question 2, female 10, 10 years old

Figure A75. Question 3, female 10, 10 years old
Figure A76. Question 1, female 11, 11 years old

Figure A77. Question 2, female 11, 11 years old

Figure A78. Question 3, female 11, 11 years old
Figure A79. Question 1, male 1, 6 years old

Figure A80. Question 2, male 12, 6 years old

Figure A81. Question 3, male 1, 6 years old
Figure A82. Question 1, male 2, 7 years old

Figure A83. Question 2, male 2, 7 years old

Figure A84. Question 3, male 2, 7 years old
Figure A85. Question 1, male 3, 7 years old

Figure A86. Question 2, male 3, 7 years old

Figure A87. Question 3, male 3, 7 years old
Figure A88. Question 1, male 4, 10 years old

Figure A89. Question 2, male 4, 10 years old

Figure A90. Question 3, male 4, 10 years old
Figure A91. Question 1, male 5, 10 years old

Figure A92. Question 2, male 5, 10 years old

Figure A93. Question 3, male 5, 10 years old
Figure A94. Question 1, male 6, 11 years old

Figure A95. Question 2, male 6, 11 years old

Figure A96. Question 3, male 6, 11 years old
Figure A97. Question 1, male 7, 11 years old

Figure A98. Question 2, male 7, 11 years old

Figure A99. Question 3, male 7, 11 years old
Figure A100. Question 1, male 8, 12 years old

Figure A101. Question 2, male 8, 12 years old

Figure A102. Question 3, male 8, 12 years old
Figure A103. Question 1, male 9, 12 years old

Figure A104. Question 2, male 9, 12 years old

Figure A105. Question 3, male 9, 12 years old
APPENDIX 15

ANOVA RESULTS OF RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Table A6. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God as active

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<tr>
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Table A7. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with anthropomorphism

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<td>Control 7-9 year old-Experimental 7-9 year old</td>
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<td>Control 10-12 year old-Experimental 10-12 year old</td>
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</table>
### Table A8. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with clouds

<table>
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### Table A9. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God as just a face

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### Table A10. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with fairy tale elements

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### Table A11. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God as a friendly ghost

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Table A12. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with gender

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Table A13. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with halo

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Table A14. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God levitating

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Table A15. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with light

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Table A16. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God smiling

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Table A17. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with supernatural elements

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Table A18. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with symbolism

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Table A19. ANOVA interactions with consideration to groupings and God with wings

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Nguyen, Hong T., and Amy N. Scott. “Self-Concept and Depression among Children Who Experienced the Death of a Family Member.” *Death Studies* 37 (2013): 197-211.


**Dissertations and Projects**


ABSTRACT

THE EFFECT OF THE DEATH OF AN IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER ON A CHILD’S PERCEPTION OF GOD: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

JoLynn Prochaska, Ph.D.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016
Chair: Dr. Timothy Paul Jones

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between children’s grief and their perceptions of God by utilizing children’s drawings. This research was conducted by partnering with Christian counselors and teachers who interviewed two groups of children to collect data. Counselors interviewed the experimental group of children who were between the ages of 6-12 and had experienced the death of an immediate family member. Teachers interviewed the control group of children who were between the ages of 6-12 and had not experienced the death of an immediate family member. Both groups were asked specific questions in efforts to ascertain if children in the midst of grief perceived God differently.

A multilevel triangulation design was used in this study with the first phase being qualitative and the second quantitative. In phase one, both the experimental group and control group of children were each interviewed and asked to respond to these questions by drawing their answers. Upon completion of the drawings, each child was asked a series of follow-up questions in efforts to provide explanations for their drawings. Select demographic information was also collected as a part of the interview process. Phase 2 utilized a quantitative approach. A panel of raters was assigned with the task of looking for specified, coded patterns or images in each child’s drawn or verbal response. Each panel member received a description of characteristics for which to look, as well as
a Thurstone scale to assess the frequency of the characteristics. Upon evaluation, this data was sent back to the researcher for anecdotal analysis.

The qualitative data was collected and the results were analyzed utilizing two statistical analyses methods including a Mann-Whitney test and a four-way ANOVA. While the Mann-Whitney was used to determine the correlation between death and a child’s perception of God, the ANOVA was performed to analyze the role demographics played in children’s perception of God after they experienced a parental or sibling death. Findings from the analyses are discussed in terms of implications for future research as well as possible applications for the research.

KEYWORDS: art therapy, bereavement, grief, mourning, perception, spiritual commitment.
VITA
JoLynn Prochaska

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  B.S., Winthrop University, 1997
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  Children and Student Minister, Hyde Park Baptist Church, Lancaster, South Carolina, 2002-2006
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