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**Consuming childhood grief**  
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**Introduction**

Within the literature in childhood studies and marketing/consumer research, there is much debate around the vulnerability of children in their dealings with the market (Marshall 2010; Buckingham et al 2009). There is little doubt, however, that in general bereaved children are vulnerable. Even for adults, bereavement is a devastating, disorienting and traumatic life event; the loss of beloved family members or friends brings in its wake ruptures in social routines and social networks, as well as destroying the assumptive world that sustains our daily lives (Parkes 2010). For children in particular, bereavement poses distinctive risks to mental health, social integration and academic performance (Nguyen & Scott 2013; Penny & Stubbs 2015).

Bereaved children do not exist outside consumer culture, so in that sense they are vulnerable consumers, with their experience of vulnerability shaped by 'the interaction of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions' (Baker et al, 2005, p. 134). Like any children, they are exposed to a range of marketing practices and messages. It is not clear, however, that their particular experience of consumer vulnerability is best characterised as 'a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products' (Baker et al 2005, p.134).

This chapter, then, does not engage with debates about children as vulnerable to particular marketing practices or unscrupulous marketers; these important issues are addressed elsewhere in this book. Instead, the focus here is on how bereaved children's vulnerability is played out through consumption and in consumer culture— how what they have and use helps shape their experiences and relationships at this particularly difficult time in their lives. The chapter begins by outlining distinctive aspects of childhood grief, particularly among very young children. Taking a case study approach, it then examines a detailed account of one bereaved toddler's grief through the lens of consumption, and considers the implications for parents and others seeking to support young children through grief.

**Childhood grief**

While grief is universal and may be experienced throughout the lifecourse, it has a particular inflection among children. The extent to which contemporary Western society is death-denying is debatable (Walter, 1999), but even if death features prominently in news reports, films, and electronic games, it tends to be an unfamiliar, invisible presence in children's immediate surroundings. Children's direct encounters with death and dying are limited by factors including lower mortality rates, geographic distance between extended family members, the removal of the elderly and seriously ill to hospitals or nursing homes, and the desire to preserve childhood innocence (Walter, 1999).

The urge to protect children from exposure to death is understandable. Complex, shocking and disorienting as it often is for adults, it can be especially difficult for children. This may be their first experience of overwhelming negative emotions such as anger, guilt, and fear, and the first time they see grown-ups cry or realise that they are not invincible (Stokes, 2004; Corr et al, 2009). The transition from survival mode to processing the loss can be particularly challenging for children, and

their behaviour may deteriorate or regress as a result (Gilbert 2014). They may also experience somatic symptoms such as headaches, loss of appetite, insomnia, restlessness, and fatigue (Penny & Stubbs 2013). There may be major changes to their daily routines, and grieving parents or carers may have less time, energy or patience to devote to their children (Wolchik et al 2008). Children may deal with their loss intermittently, creating respite from difficult thoughts and feelings by playing or immersing themselves in aspects of 'normal' life. As Van Horn (2006) notes, resilience in the face of bereavement involves growth as well as grieving, and even bereaved children have much to explore, enjoy and accomplish. Unfortunately, this can lead to their grief being misunderstood or disenfranchised (Walter and McCoyd 2009).

Many factors shape a child's response to bereavement, including the nature of the death and the child's particular relationship with the person who died; the character of individual children; their social support; and cultural, religious and family norms, and their developmental stage (Corr et al, 2009; Penny & Stubbs 2015). The relationship between bereavement and children's development is complex: bereavement disrupts children's developmental processes (Gilbert 2014), and their response to loss reflects their developmental stage. Focusing on the content and organisation of memories, for example, Buschbaum (1996:114) compares the 'fragmented, egocentric, and often contradictory images of the pre-schooler' with the 'consolidated, objective, and multidimensional recollections of the adolescent'.

Experiences at the youngest end of the age range are less well understood (Bugge et al 2014), although the enormity of parental loss experienced by infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers is evoked by Van Horn (2006, 971-2):

*Children discover who they are in the ways in which their parents look at them, hold them, soothe them, talk to them, and play with them. When parents die, children lose their mirror into their own souls and lose a piece of themselves.*

This loss may be experienced even before they understand the finality, irreversibility, inevitability and causality of death. Very young children may also struggle to verbalise their feelings or questions, and thus may be considered unaware of the death or 'too young to remember' (Wolchik et al 2008), although preschoolers seem to understand more than traditional theories of child development allow (Corr et al, 2009; Wolchik et al 2008). This suggests that careful attention needs to be paid to their nonverbal responses: bereaved Norwegian preschoolers struggled to sleep, or to sleep in their own bed; had nightmares; and frequently checked surviving family members for signs of illness (Bugge et al 2014).

Various scholars and bereavement professionals have highlighted the importance of play in coping with grief, particularly among young children (Webb 2000). Indeed, 'play, fantasies, and any other references to the deceased parent should be accepted as part of the work of mourning' (Buschbaum 1996:123). The parents interviewed by Bugge et al (2014:41) described how their children wanted to look at pictures and videos of their dead parent or sibling, talked about them, asked to visit their grave, and included them in games and family rituals.

Between the ages of eight and twelve, children tend to develop a more sophisticated understanding of death, and to respond to loss with existential as well as practical concerns, although they may also regress to younger behaviours or ways of thinking (Corr et al, 2009). Adolescents' grief may be compounded by their general struggle to become independent and autonomous; they may not feel able to share their grief within the family or want to seem different from their peers (Corr et al, 2009; Gilbert 2014). Silverman and Nickman (1996a) traced the grief responses of 6-17 year-old parentally bereaved children over two years, noting that regardless of age, they were actively

involved in making sense of their loss and 'finding a way of carrying the deceased parent with them' (p. 71). Particular objects often played a role in these children's sense-making; in some cases they treasured particular things that their dead parents had given them, in other cases they took or were given something of theirs after the death. Over time, such objects often shifted from highly visible transitional objects to keepsakes, displayed and used less prominently (Normand et al 1996). The importance of ritual often involving objects such as candles, balloons, and memory boxes, has also been highlighted in scholarly and practitioner literature on child bereavement (Stokes 2004; Rolls 2008).

Several studies highlight the importance of parents and carers in supporting children's grief (Bugge et al 2014; Silverman & Nickman 1996b). This demands a great deal of grieving adults however, who may also be facing changes in financial circumstances, roles and relationships (Wolchik et al 2008). They may have less time, energy or patience for their children, even as they worry about being 'good enough' grieving parents (Bugge et al 2014). Although the bereaved Norwegian parents underestimated the influence of their own moods and actions on their preschoolers, they valued their children's concern for them, appreciating that 'sleeping together, sitting closer and giving each other hugs filled both parent's and children's needs' (p.39).

Overall, it appears that children of all ages are deeply engaged in ongoing processes of sense-making and renegotiating family relationships and practices in the aftermath of a death in the family, although less is known about the experiences of very young children. Previous studies also allude to the role of particular objects and consumption practices in children's response to loss, although there has been little elaboration on this theme. The remainder of this chapter, then, explores the role of consumption in the bereavement experiences of one very young child.

### **Consumption and consumer culture in a grieving toddler's life**

Thirty-three year old Desreen Brooks was killed by a car mounting the pavement as she, her husband Ben and their two-year-old son Jackson left a friends' London home one November evening in 2012. *It's Not Raining Daddy, It's Happy* (Brooks-Dutton 2014) is Ben's account of the year following her death. The book emerged from his influential and award-winning blog, *Life as a widower*, which he began just two months after Desreen's death. Frustrated by the lack of peer support available to young widowers, his blog offered regular dispatches from the alien territory he inhabited as a newly bereaved husband and father.

As Durrant (2014) notes, Ben's writing hit a nerve not only because of its honesty but also for its 'detailed anger, humility and self-scrutiny, his challenge to the common edict to "be strong" '. For the purposes of this chapter, his book is invaluable for its detailed account of a newly bereaved parent committed to understanding and supporting his toddler son through their grief; indeed, he resolved that

*I would never brush his loss under the carpet nor tell myself that his sea of grief was any shallower than mine just because of his age. Instead I would teach myself to better interpret his and I would become the person he could trust to share it without judgement, reservation or limits (p.151).*

Throughout the book's harrowing account of his own loss, Ben's commitment to understanding, respecting and supporting Jackson's grief is evident. He offers detailed observations of Jackson's response to his mother's absence, and he does not gloss over occasions where he saw his own response to Jackson as inadequate. He also 'read books...scoured the internet...spoke to child bereavement charities and...soaked up any advice I could get' (p 148).



Just as realism and fantasy jostled around in Jackson's experience, so did mixed emotions and inconsistent reactions; as Ben notes, '[s]omething that he responded to positively one day might leave him reeling the next' p.(149), and dancing and singing could be followed by outpourings of upset or anger. Two key triggers for anger and frustration were seeing other children with their mothers, and when things he wanted couldn't be found or were taken away from him; missing Lego pieces, or having the lid of a saucepan or a scooter he was going too fast on taken away would leave him incensed and lashing out:

*Had each outburst not ended in him exhaustedly crying out or whimpering for his mummy, I might even have accepted that, as everyone was keen to reassure me, he was just throwing paddies, like any other kid his age... to me it went without saying that his loss had affected his behaviour and ability to feel sure that those around him wouldn't suddenly disappear, too (p.328).*

Although it was not always easy to distinguish between 'normal tantrums' and 'toddler grief', Ben resolved to give him the benefit of the doubt, and to comfort rather than punish him after outbursts. Such comfort often took the form of 'a nice lie-down and a cuddle'. Reflecting his emotional upheaval, Jackson would lie beside his father combining smiles and angry roars. For a while he became hostile to women, especially those resembling Desreen somehow. A general sense of malaise was also evident at times; one day, he suddenly announced 'It hurts, Daddy', and when asked what hurt, he said 'Jackson' (p.309).

As Buschbaum (1996) notes, children are always changing, and as Jackson's language and understanding developed, he needed to know more about his mother's absence. One day, as well as repeating what he had been told about his mother's absence and saying how much he missed her, he added "Mummy wanted to go away", which prompted Ben to explain that she was hit by a car. Jackson gradually absorbed this new information, and could become very agitated by speeding cars. Again however, reality and fantasy were juxtaposed in his sense-making: questions clarifying what had actually happened ("Did Mummy bang her head, Daddy"?) could be followed by imaginative solutions ("Don't worry, Daddy!" he squealed enthusiastically. "I'll make it better" ') (p 339).

### **Expressing grief**

In the early days following Desreen's death, even before being told what had happened, Jackson's unease was articulated in his protective attitude towards her things:

*... he grew increasingly irritable about certain things that concerned her. One day...I started throwing things into one of her holdalls, just because it was the closest thing to hand. 'Don't touch it, Daddy!' he yelled. 'It Mummy's!' (p.59)*

As mentioned above, his loss was sometimes played out through anger and tantrums. One weekend, things came to a head when they passed a bus shelter and he saw a woman who reminded him of Desreen:

*He started kicking the shutters on a shop window...I let his infant size fives give the shutters a good whack to help release his frustration, knowing that he was too small to do any damage to himself or to the shop. Then I gave him a hug and together we went and bought him his first ever croissant. He wasn't himself for the rest of the day – he was quiet and short-tempered – but at least he had been able to show me how he felt, even if he couldn't put it into words (p.121-2)*

Ben's sensitivity to how Jackson treated toys and things was heightened by advice from a play therapist. Playing trains with his son, on Jackson's terms, became an important part of their routine:

*Being the leader in our games allowed my son to more freely express his own feelings. Sometimes this meant he got angry and I would have to duck when carriages flew at my head. Other times, however, he would show nothing but love (p. 223).*

One day, at a toddler football class, Jackson was more interested in using the gym floor's markings as tracks for his train. At some point the calm was disrupted:

*He picked up the ball and threw it at the wall over and over. He was in a mini-rage. I joined in and we took out our pent-up aggression on an innocent pile of bricks and released some of our at-the-surface-grief-induced-anger. Then we carried on playing with the trains as if nothing had happened (p. 180).*

Playing together also created opportunities for conversations about Desreen to develop, especially as Jackson's understanding matured. Playing with things also created space for playing with ideas. On one occasion, for example, Ben and Jackson were playing with modelling clay:

*Chatting as we went, I brought up Mummy and explained once more what had happened. 'Mummy gone!' he confirmed. 'Not come back!' he went on. 'Mummy!' he shouted towards the hall, a direction that would once have been met with a certain reply. 'Not coming!' he reaffirmed with a shrug. And so we continued to play and chat (pp.180-1).*

In the spring after Desreen's death, when Ben praised some butterflies he had made from the clay, Jackson remarked 'Mummy would be very proud of me' (p. 224). The use of the conditional here is striking, and not only as evidence of a toddler's linguistic development; articulating how his mother *would* react suggests that Jackson, like the older children in Silverman and Nickman's (1996a) study, was 'finding a way of carrying the deceased parent with them'; he appears to be extrapolating from his memories and knowledge of Desreen to imagine how she would feel about something she could not see him do.

### **Escaping grief**

Immediately after Desreen's death, Jackson's train collection grew considerably as visitors came to the house bearing gifts. The book refers to many occasions where things and consumption experiences were used – with varying degrees of success - to obtain some brief respite from grief. There was for example the miserable experience of joining friends on holiday three months after Desreen had died; putting himself in Jackson's shoes, Ben reflects:

*So there we were, sharing a sun lounger, recently bereaved of the one person who meant most to us in the whole wide world and you reckon a swimming pool and a scoop of ice cream is going to sort it out. Did it make you feel any better? That's what I thought (p.159).*

Shortly before her death, Jackson's love for Thomas the Tank Engine had led Desreen to book a family outing to a Thomas theme park. The date she had chosen fell a week after the accident, and Ben felt compelled to honour her plan. Unfortunately Jackson fell asleep before they arrived, leaving Ben to endure the spectacle of happy families and Christmas scenes alone.

*Eventually I decided I could take no more. I positioned him in front of his favourite train...and gave him a nudge. He pulled a grumpy face and slowly opened one eye. In a split second both were wide open and he leapt from his pushchair, elated (p.58)*

Another family outing planned before Desreen's death was to Crystal Palace Park. When Ben eventually took Jackson there, they both enjoyed Jackson's first experience of various childhood treats:

*...soft ice cream in a cone from an old-school ice cream van; building sandcastles despite not being on a beach; sculptures of prehistoric creatures; and his first joyous jump on a bouncy castle. (p.270)*

Similarly, when Jackson turned three, '...he filled his face with birthday treats and reached dizzy new heights of locomotive bliss. We played and he was happy' (p. 353). Seeing Jackson's pleasure in the moment, Ben dropped his plans for an action-packed day, realising that spending time playing with his son mattered infinitely more than 'showering a child with material things and overblown gestures' (p. 353). It is easy for parents, bereaved or otherwise, to forget the value of giving their children time rather than things. Following a major loss, parents may resort to 'retail therapy', seeking to brighten certain days or moments for their grieving children. Treats, gifts, and the care they represent may make a difference, but as Ben highlights, spending time rather than money may matter much more.

### **Sharing grief**

Although Ben initially tried to hide his grief from his son, Jackson picked up on the sadness and distress around him. More fundamentally, Ben began to ask himself

*...what kind of husband and father would I look like to him if I showed no signs of hurt about his mother's sudden disappearance from our little world?...was I protecting my child by not showing emotion around him, or teaching him that feelings are best hidden? (p. 169)*

It soon became clear that Jackson was watching out for his father as well as observing him closely. A few weeks after the accident, he was playing trains when he noticed Ben crying on the sofa.

*He weighed up all the people in the room....to try to establish whether any of them had upset me, gave them all a dirty look just in case, and then tenderly wiped my eyes with his soft little hands. (p.168)*

Other attempts at consoling his father involved sharing the things that mattered to him.

*'Want dummy, Daddy? he asked, offering his favourite form of comfort to me freely. 'Take Thomas, Daddy', he also commanded, thrusting his beloved toy into my hands (p.182)*

Jackson's care and concern for his father resonates with the accounts provided by adolescents in Gilbert's (2014) study of 'parenting the surviving parent'. Reflecting the mercurial nature of toddlers, however, there were other times where seeing Ben cry led him to throw himself around the room in mock despair, saying 'oh boo hoo hoo Daddy', and wiping away pretend tears. While this sometimes made Ben feel even worse, he also saw it as Jackson's attempt to cheer him up; essentially, they were 'two guys trying to make each other feel better – one of us two years old and the other thirty-three' (p.115).



## Continuing bonds

Over the past two decades, 'new wave' theories of bereavement have focused on how death changes rather than ends relationships between the living and the dead (Klass et al, 1996; Walter, 1999). Bereaved children as well as adults have been found to proceed in this way; various patterns of ongoing relationships have been identified among 6-17 year-olds (Silverman and Nickman 1996b; Normand et al, 1996), while preschool children included dead parents and siblings in conversations, games and family rituals (Bugge et al, 2014).

Ben offers a detailed insight into the energy that even a toddler can invest in continuing bonds. Of course, he modelled and nurtured such behaviour, talking about Desreen every day, having many photographs of her on display in the house, and even changing his and Jackson's last name from Dutton to Brooks-Dutton to highlight her ongoing role in their lives and identities. Nonetheless, it was clear that Jackson himself saw the bond with his mother as persisting beyond death. Some, but not all of this could be attributed to a toddler's limited understanding of death's finality.

Examples of Jackson's sense of an ongoing relationship with his mother included his announcement that 'Mummy likes this one [a shirt bought after her death]. She's coming to see me later'. (p. 304). Eight months after Desreen's death, when a nursery worker asked who his best friend was, he replied 'Mummy' (p. 304), and even a year on, whenever Jackson was hurt or upset, he would still call out for her first. Photographs played a role in his ongoing relationship with Desreen. For example, one day he pointed at family pictures on the wall and was lifted up to take one down.

*...he brought the picture to his face and kissed it, saying 'Kiss Mummy!'. He wasn't letting go so I let him keep it and we stuck it to his little play kitchen station in the living room...As we turned out the lights and left the living room for bed, he said 'Night night, Mummy'. He knew she wasn't in the living room but her memory was. The two of us went up to bed and he began to sing the few words he knew from Alicia Keys' hit 'No One' [one of Desreen's favourites, played at her funeral] (p.122)*

On a train journey, he and Ben started chatting to some women.

*He picked up my iPhone and showed them the picture of Desreen I had as my screensaver. 'That's my mummy!' he shrieked adoringly, out of nowhere. And that's my boy, I thought, my breath taken away by the pride he confidently showed in the parent he had not seen for seven and a half months, the parent he was starting to understand that he would never see again. (p. 298)*

## Conclusions

*If a life ends then everyone, regardless of their age, has the right to mourn.*  
(Stokes, 2004, p. 12)

Brooks-Dutton (2014) bears witness to how his toddler son exercised that right. Jackson experienced, expressed, escaped and shared his grief in ways that were meaningful to him, and he was actively engaged in continuing bonds with his mother. His improvised grief responses transcended language, incorporating a wide range of material objects and consumption experiences: toy trains, dummies, photographs, footballs and even saucepan lids or shutters on shop windows were drawn upon, helping others to understand, acknowledge, and support his response to loss.

By drawing attention to a range of toddler-led, materially mediated responses to grief, this chapter seeks to further the book's agenda of exploring the varied conditions, contexts and characteristics of consumer vulnerability. Just as experiences of consumer vulnerability are often overlooked in marketing literature, very young children's experiences of loss are underrepresented in the bereavement literature. Jackson's story suggests that bereaved toddlers are also vulnerable consumers, actively engaged in vital meaning-making. Given their developmental stage, it is hardly surprising that they may voice their grief by showing as well as telling. Play therapists have long incorporated toys and creative arts into their work with bereaved children (Webb 2000), and many charities, such as those listed at the end of this chapter, emphasise the value of rituals, transitional objects and creative therapies to children who are grieving (Rolls 2008; Stokes 2004). Several charities have developed materials, such as Winston's Wish's memory boxes and Grief Encounter's sand bottle kits and Forever Journal, to harness children's creativity in the process of meaning-making. Recognising the decline in formal mourning rituals in the UK, they seek to create time and space for children and young people to build their life stories, incorporating missing family members into their past, present and future (Gilbert 2014).

Jackson's story suggests that paying careful attention to children's use of things more generally may also help adults to understand and support bereaved children. Sometimes, toys and things may simply provide children with a temporary escape from their grief, building their resilience through 'engagement in the pleasures that the world has to offer' (Van Horn 2006: 975). Rather than thinking this means young children have forgotten the dead or are unaffected by their absence, adults could perhaps try to accept even fleeting moments of pleasure themselves as they watch or join a child absorbed in play; indeed, such moments could be seen as part of the dead person's 'legacy of love and laughter' (Brooks-Dutton 2014: 153).

A key principle of child bereavement practice is that 'children must be seen, and can best be helped, embedded in their families' (Van Horn 2006:974). As Brooks-Dutton (2014) notes, although the British national health service offers significant post-natal family services, it provides no parallel 'post-fatal' support for families. Brooks-Dutton felt this lack keenly, despite having a strong network of family and friends and the educational and professional resources to access specialist advice from books, articles and experts. Policy makers may learn something from his frustration that bereaved parents rely on individual GPs with varying degrees of empathy and knowledge, rather than receiving dedicated guidance and support from the health service. Indeed, in the UK there are no official statistics on the number of bereaved children, and child bereavement support is unevenly distributed across the country and largely undertaken by voluntary organisations (Penny and Stubbs 2015).

Clearly, this chapter is based on one toddler's response to grief, as interpreted by his grieving father, and there is considerable need for further research on bereavement experiences among young children, including the role of consumption in those experiences. Despite the limitations of a single case study, there are important benefits to be gained from examining detailed accounts of bereavement or other experiences that may increase consumer vulnerability. In such contexts, as Turley and O'Donohoe (2013) note, references to goods and consumption experiences are not evoked in response to specific questions posed by consumer researchers; rather, they emerge organically as part of a story being told for other purposes, highlighting the seamless and salient nature of consumption in vulnerable people's lives.

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### **Useful links**

Winston's Wish: [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Childhood Bereavement Network: [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Grief Encounter: <http://www.griefencounter.org.uk>

Care for the Family: <http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/family-life/bereavement-support>