

A DIALOGUE TOOL SUPPORTING HEALTH PROFESSIONALS TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT LOSS AND GRIEF WITH CHILDREN.

Background

The diagnosis of a serious illness or death of a family member/relative has a deep impact on children and is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness and guilt¹. When a baby is admitted on neonatology, it is important to support and involve siblings during the hospitalization of their brother/sister². Being able to express emotions and doubts provide comfort and connectedness, which is essential in a child's grieving process. However, adults tend to protect children and experience difficulties to communicate about loss and grief³. Therefore, a dialogue tool was developed to support adults in their communication with children about existential themes.

Aim(s)

The objective of this study was to test and evaluate the dialogue tool among parents, teachers and healthcare professionals.

Methods

A descriptive, qualitative design was conducted, using convenience and snowball sampling to evaluate the tool among professionals, parents and teachers. Semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide, were performed online or by telephone and recorded. After transcribing, content analysis was performed. Reflexivity, researcher triangulation, peer review and member check were used to ensure validity and reliability of the research.

Results

In total 12 female adults participated in the study: one professional, four parents and seven teachers. The dialogue tool was positively evaluated. The manual and conversation cards were experienced as a safe, necessary handhold and guidance for adults. Siblings reacted positive and curious. The tool triggered spontaneous conversations, enabling children to share their experiences. Participants mentioned that the tool was best applied to children between 4-8 years. The toolbox was introduced differently by playing, before bedtime, after dinner or talking circles at school. Participants mentioned that children needed some action afterwards and made suggestions to optimize the tool.

Discussion

The dialogue tool has an added value by lowering the threshold to communicate with children about loss and grief, thereby breaking the existing taboo. Further research is needed to explore perceptions of male adults and caregivers towards the dialogue tool as well as the experience and input of children.

Implications and future perspectives

Further attention is needed to dissemination and implementation of the dialogue tool in schools and healthcare (e.g. in existing mourning boxes). It is recommended to train adults in the use of the dialogue tool in order to increase their emotional skills and self-confidence in having conversations about existential themes with children.

References

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