Author’s response to reviews

Title: When a parent dies - a systematic review of the effects of support programs for parentally bereaved children and their caregivers

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Author’s response to reviews:

Response letter 2

”When a parent dies – a systematic review of the effects of support programs for parentally bereaved children and their caregivers”

Thank you very much for the valuable comments!

In the following text you will find our responses to the comments in the manuscript (1-49):

Comment 1: (Abstract, Methods section) The inclusion criteria is still not clear, you need to add what types of study designs you included. For example, you could state ‘The review’s inclusion criteria were comparative studies with samples of parentally bereaved children. The focus of these studies were assessments of effect on children of a bereavement support intervention’.

Response: We have tried to make the inclusion criteria clearer and according to the recommendation we have duly added information about what types of study designs are included: “The review’s inclusion criteria were comparative studies with samples of parentally bereaved children. The focus of these studies were assessments of effect on children of a bereavement support intervention.”
Comment 2: (Abstract, Results section) The number of citations (references and abstracts) in this opening sentence should correspond with figure 1, please amend. In the next sentence please change 'references' to 17 'studies' were included. In the next sentence please state the number of RCTs rather than 'mainly'. From the abstract the reader does not know whether ‘strong evidence’ means strong in regards to the intervention being effective or strong in regards to the quality of the study? Please clarify, I have suggested a way.

Response: We have rewritten the text so that it corresponds with Figure 1. We have changed “references” to “studies”. We have added information about the number of RCTs: “The included studies were 15 randomized controlled studies, while one study employed a quasi-experimental and one study a pre-post-test design.” We have also added information about what we mean with “strong evidence”: “Thirteen studies provided strong evidence in regards to the quality of the studies due to the grade criteria; three studies provided fairly strong evidence and one study provided weaker evidence.”

Comment 3: (Abstract, Results section) “This sentence needs to correspond with the first box in figure 1.”

Response: The sentence is changed: “1706 abstracts were examined.”

Comment 4: (Abstract, Results section) ’References' is not clear as a study could have several references. If references refer to individual studies please change this here and in figure 1.”

Response: We have changed to “studies”: “17 studies were included”.

Comment 5: (Abstract, Results section) ”It would be more informative if you said the actual number of RCTs.”

Response: We have added the following about the study design: “The included studies were 15 randomized controlled studies, while one study employed a quasi-experimental and one study a pre-post-test design.”
Comment 6: (Abstract, Results section) “This sentence needs more clarification: is strong relating to the robustness of the study in regards to its design and conduct or does it relate to strength of evidence that this interventions work or don’t.”

Response: We have added information about what we mean with “strong evidence”: “Thirteen studies provided strong evidence with regards to the quality of the studies due to the grade criteria; three studies provided fairly strong evidence and one study provided weaker evidence.”

Comment 7: (Abstract, Results section) “Give number” (in the majority of included studies…)

Response: We have changed the sentence to “In fourteen studies, the interventions were directed at both children and their remaining parents.”

Comment 8: (Abstract, Results section) “You were earlier referring to this group as parents, it is best at abstract stage to describe it as in the title and earlier in the abstract as ‘parent’. Please change, as in the rest of the abstract.”

Response: We have changed “caregivers” to “parents”.

Comment 9: (Abstract, Results section) “The final sentence is not clear enough. Could you provide data on some of the outcomes you present, perhaps those which are of your primary interest, those with the largest effects or the two outcomes which were most commonly evaluated. You have not stated if any of the results showed no effect or negative effects? Also did the most robust studies in design (the trials) and in conduct (from your quality assessment) find the positive effects you refer to?”

Response: We have tried to make the sentence clearer in relation to the results. “The results showed positive between group effects both for children and caregivers in several areas, namely large effects for children’s traumatic grief and parent’s feelings of being supported; medium effects for parental warmth, positive parenting, parent’s mental health, grief discussions in the family, and children’s health. There were small effects on several outcomes for example children’s PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression, self-esteem and behaviour problems. There
were studies that did not show effects on some measures, namely depression, present grief, and for the subgroup boys on anxiety, depression, internalization and externalization.”

Comment 10: (Abstract, Conclusions) “Such as?” (severe problems)

Response: We have added: “The results indicate that relatively brief interventions can prevent children from developing more severe problems after the loss of a parent, such as traumatic grief and mental health problems.”

Comment 11: (Abstract, Conclusions) “??” (following the loss of a parent)

Response: We have changed to: “after the loss of a parent”

Comment 12: (Abstract, Conclusions) “effects of what”

Response: We have changed the sentence to: “Studies have shown positive effects for both children’s and remaining caregiver’s health.”

Comment 13: (Background) “Please reconsider your use of the term ’western world’, Describing then as ’stable developed nations’ may be more appropriate”.

Response: We have changed as suggested to “stable developed nations”.

Comment 14: (Background) Could you put in brackets what you mean by suddenly, such as (e.g. unexpected death).

Response: We have added “suddenly (e.g. unexpected deaths) bereaved youths”.
Comment 15: Some of the references in this paragraph are relatively old, 2 are 20 years old. Please check there are no more recent references that are relevant.

Response: In the Background section we have added that “Parental death in childhood is also associated with an increased long-term risk of suicide” with a reference to Guldin et al. (2015). We have also added another reference about the increased risk for mental health problems: Gray et al. (2011).

Comment 16: (Background)

Response: The sentence is changed as suggested.

Comment 17: (Background) “Is this what traumatic grief is – if there are more characteristics on traumatic grief can you provide them.”

Response: We have developed the paragraph about traumatic grief: “The children can re-experience the traumatic event through intrusive memories, thoughts and feelings. The distress leads to avoidance of trauma and loss reminders. The child may avoid thinking or talking about the deceased parent, places and activities associated with the parent. The traumatic experience often complicates the children’s grieving process.”

Comment 18: (Background) “This statement disrupts the flow of your argument. This probably fits better in an acknowledgment?”

Response: The statement is moved to the Acknowledgements section.

Comment 19: (Background) Not certain if these questions should be swapped round, as one is on description of type of intervention (which should be first) and the other question is on evaluation of the types of interventions.
Response: We have changed the order of the research questions: “Our research questions are: Which support interventions have been evaluated that focus on effects for children? What is known about the effects of support interventions for the children? What are the needs for further research in the field?”

Comment 20: (Method) “Make sure this person is acknowledged in your acknowledgement section.”

Response: In the Acknowledgement section we have added the following: “We would like to thank Maja Fredriksson Kärrman, information specialist at the National Board of Health and Welfare Sweden (NBHWS), who conducted the initial literature search and Ann-Louise Larsson, librarian at Linnaeus University, for help with the updated literature search.”

Comment 21: (Method) “This is not clear – do you mean where no data on the fundings were provided.”

Response: We have deleted the sentence.

Comment 22: (Data analysis) “I am not certain I understand this? How are you generating a means and SD when it is not reported. What data are you deriving this from?”

Response: We have clarified this in the text and also given a reference:

For any ordinal or continuous variables, to be able to calculate effect size even when a means and standard deviation were not reported in studies, the standardized mean difference effect size for within-subjects design was used, which is referred to as Cohen’s dz. The effect size estimate Cohen’s dz can be calculated directly from the t-value using the formula $d_z = t/\sqrt{n}$.

Comment 23: (Data analysis) “This statement is key to your review, please reference it and provide some more description of what a small effect or otherwise effect may mean. Also can you reference this.”
Response: We have clarified and given a reference:

“A commonly used interpretation of Cohen’s d is that value of 0.2 can be considered a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect and 0.8 a large effect (ref.).”

Comment 24: (Results section) “It is not clear here if the excluded are those excluded at screening stage or at full text stage. If this is at screening stage, please delete. You only need to provide details on what was excluded at full text stage.”

Response: The text about excluded literature is deleted.

Comment 25: (Results, Included studies) “Statements like this are not findings they are often best left to the conclusion section. Please consider moving statement”.

Response: The statement is moved to the Discussion section, Implications for practice.

Comment 26: (Results, Included studies) “This would be better placed in the section on effects, please change table number to four”.

Response: We have moved this paragraph to the section about effects “Effectiveness of interventions”. The table is changed to “Table 4”.

Comment 27: (Results, Included studies) Your tables need to be in order of your text,

Table 1 Grade Criteria
Table 2 Outcome measures (currently labeled as table 3)
Table 3 Intervention description
Table 4 Study effects within and between treatment groups (please relabeled to this title and table number)
Response: We have changed the order of the tables:

Table 1 Grade Criteria

Table 2 The most common outcome measures employed in the included studies

Table 3 Intervention description

Table 4 Study effects within and between treatment Groups

Comment 28: (Results, Quality of included studies) “Give details on this ’such as there were all randomised controlled trials, involving validated measures etc…”

Response: We have added the following sentence: “According to our quality grading criteria (Table 1) thirteen studies provided strong evidence. These studies were randomized controlled trials involving validated measures. Three studies provided fairly strong evidence and one study provided weaker evidence.”

Comment 29: (Results, Study design) “most commonly”

Response: The sentence is changed as suggested: “We present the most commonly reported outcomes in the included studies…”

Comment 30: (Results, Interventions) “What were the other interventions based on. As this is presenting detail on developing the intervention I have moved it above your description on who the intervention was directed at”.

Response: The paragraph is moved as suggested. We have added information about what all interventions are based on, i.e. all studies are mentioned.

Comment 31: (Results, Interventions) “This statement is not a finding either place in the background as a reason for a type of supportive intervention or put it in your discussion.”
Response: The statement is moved to the Discussion section, Implications for practice.

Comment 32: (Results, Interventions) “What were the other interventions based on. As this is presenting detail on developing the intervention I have moved it above your description on who the intervention was directed at”.

Response: The paragraph is moved as suggested. We have added information about what all interventions are based on, i.e. all studies are mentioned.

Comment 33: (Results, Interventions) “present tense – please change”.

Response: The sentence is changed: “The shortest program was ‘Writing for recovery’…”

Comment 34: (Results, Study population) “past tense, please be consistent with your tenses”.

Response: We have worked through the whole article to be consistent with tenses.

Comment 35: (Results, Study population) “I don’t think you need this statement, please delete”

Response: We have deleted the statement.

Comment 36: (Results, Study population) “give examples” (ethnicity)

Response: We have added that the refugee children were from Afghanistan and added the following about samples that were diverse in ethnicity: “Except for this evaluation directed at refugee children from Afghanistan, the majority of included studies had samples that were diverse in ethnicity, including for example Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, Native American, Asian/Pacific and other ethnicities (ref.)”
Comment 37: (Results, Study population)”This statement fits the discussion section better when you are discussing how representative your studies are.”

Response: The statement is moved to the Discussion section.

Comment 38: (Results, Study population)”give an example of what you mean by over-represented?”

Response: We have added the following sentence: “In one study the deceased parents were 86 percent fathers and 14 percent mothers (ref.). In another study fathers as remaining caregivers were only five percent (ref.).”

Comment 39: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “Please clearly reference your effect table in this section”.

Response: Table 4 is referenced in the first paragraph in the section “Effectiveness of interventions”: “Another key research question for this review was: What is known about the effects of support interventions that are targeted at/or include support for parentally bereaved children? The included studies were analysed and summarized in a matrix. The results are presented in table form (see Table 4 below).”

Comment 40: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “Since you do not discuss in your text any results within groups although you label your table on effects as providing them. Please consider removing them from your table. This will make it clear to the reader. Alternatively if you feel they are important provide text on these results”.

Response: We have clarified and given a reference:

“Our focus is on comparing differences between groups, but we have also chosen to present results within groups in table 4, as this may be relevant from a benchmarking perspective, both for researchers and clinicians (ref.).”
Comment 41: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions)

Response: Sorry, but we do not understand this comment.

Comment 42: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “Please add another section on ’no effects, negative effects and harm’. From what you present it looks like you may be only telling half the story, as in ignoring any effects that are not positive. As I assume all the ones listed on large, medium and small are effects that the intervention works.”

Response: We have added a section where we present results about “No effects and negative effects”:

“There were a few studies that failed to reveal any effect on measures at any of the post-test or subsequent follow-up test periods. With “No effect” we mean studies where the between group effect size were on Cohen’s d between 0.00 and 0.19 and the effect seize calculated as Phi between 0.00 and 0.09. The following studies with strong evidence showed no effects on depression (ref.) and present grief (ref.). One study did not show effects for the subgroup boys on the measures anxiety, depression, internalizing and externalizing (ref.).”

“Finally one study showed a small but negative effect for boys’ externalizing behaviour (-0.22), which means that the reduction of externalizing behaviour in boys 11 months post intervention was less in the intervention group than in the control group (ref.).”

Comment 43: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “This should be in the conclusion section, not the results.”

Response: The paragraph is moved to the Discussion section.

Comment 44: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “If these are randomised controlled trials please state so”.
Response: We have changed this sentence: “The randomized controlled studies of ‘The Family Bereavement Program’…”

Comment 45: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions)

Response: Sorry, but we do not understand this comment.

Comment 46: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “Perhaps I missed this earlier or perhaps you need to highlight this more than some of the interventions were tested in several papers”.

Response: We have added a sentence in the Results section, Quality of included studies: “One of the interventions was tested in two papers (ref.) and one in as many as ten papers (ref.)”.

Comment 47: (Results, Effectiveness of interventions) “This is best stated in the discussion section also, please change”.

Response: The paragraph is moved to the Discussion section.

Comment 48: (Discussion) “Is this still the case?”

Response: We searched PubMed, PsycINFO, Cinahl, Social Services Abstracts (5 June, 2017) but did not find any later published systematic review about effects from interventions for parentally bereaved children.

Comment 49: (Conclusion) “These last two sentences don't flow. The key outcome in this review is on benefit of the intervention and research gaps. Can you instead provide a statement on the gaps.”
Response: The Conclusion section is changed to the following:

“The results of this systematic review of support interventions for parentally bereaved children indicate that relatively brief interventions may help prevent children from developing more severe problems, such as mental health problems and traumatic grief after the loss of a parent. Further research is required including how to best support younger bereaved children. There is also a need for more empirically rigorous studies in this area.”

In the following you will find our responses to the Editor comments in the e-mail (May 27, 2017):

Key points I would like you focus on are:

Comment: I note you have interchanged throughout the manuscript with past and present tenses. I have tried to standardise this but I am not certain I have corrected them all. Please check. I would recommend you get several native English speaker colleagues to check your English in this manuscript.

Response: We have worked through the whole article to be consistent with tenses. One of the authors is a native English speaker and she has checked the English in the manuscript.

Comment: Please consider your table numbering, you also need to refer more to your tables in the text. I suggest a different order in the table presentation.

Response: We have changed the table order as suggested. We have also added more references to the tables in the text.

Comment: I suggest moving some paragraphs to help the flow of the text. There are sections I suggest that you move out of your findings section (as they are more on presenting your conclusions of the results). These sections once placed in the discussion section may appear to repeat what is already stated there, so consider some amendments may be needed.
Response: We have moved the suggested paragraphs to the Discussion section. Repetition in the Discussion section has been duly deleted.

Comment: Choice of words, please refer as appropriate to the ‘items’ you include in this review as studies. This is as opposed to sometimes referring to them as references, studies or articles. Study is clearer as a study may have several references/articles published on it.

Response: We have changed to “studies”.

Comment: In the text for precision and transparency use more numbers/data when you discuss your findings. Instead of saying ‘few’ or ‘majority’ say the number. When you present the results as providing strong evidence give the statistics to support this and refer the reader to the appropriate table.

Response: We have added more information about numbers, for example the number of RCT’s.

Comment: You need to give more ‘signposting’ to the reader by what you mean by strong/weak/etc evidence. I know you describe this a couple of times but the reader needs to be reminded about this at several appropriate times in the manuscript.

Response: We have added information about what we mean with strong evidence. “According to our quality grading criteria (Table 1) (ref.) thirteen studies provided strong evidence. These studies were randomised controlled trials involving validated measures.”

Comment: You don’t discuss any adverse effects. It may seem silly to report this, especially as perhaps none of the studies did. However, reporting whether or not any of the studies sort to measure potential harm as well as benefit makes your review look more balanced and less potentially biased.
Response: In the Results section about Effectiveness of the interventions, we have added a paragraph about studies with “No effects and negative effects” on some measures.

“Finally one study showed a small but negative effect for boys’ externalizing behaviour (-0.22), which means that the reduction of externalizing behaviour in boys 11 months post intervention was less in the intervention group than in the control group (ref.)”