Reviewer's report

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

Version: 0 Date: 22 Mar 2017

Reviewer: Linda Oostendorp

Reviewer's report:

Thanks for inviting me to review this systematic review on bereavement interventions for parentally bereaved children. This review is generally well performed and the manuscript is well written, but could benefit from a more detailed description of study methods and a more insightful way of presenting the results. My detailed comments are listed below.

Abstract

The abstract does not follow PRISMA guidelines for reporting of systematic reviews, e.g. data sources, study appraisal and synthesis methods are not described in the abstract.

Methods:

Page 4: Search strategy

* It would be helpful if the authors could include the search strategy in an Appendix.

* It is unclear to me why the authors decided to use a different search strategy when updating the search in November 2015, rather than repeating the search strategy used in April 2013 to identify new publications.

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* Selection criteria: The authors excluded studies where the population was too small for the results to be generalisable. Could the authors please provide more details.
* Data analysis: it would be helpful if the authors could add an explanation of the Common Language Effect size, which readers may not be familiar with.

Results:

* Table 2: this Table presents details for 12 studies, where I would have expected 17 studies. Could you please clarify why 5 studies (references 29, 32, 40, 41, 43) are missing from this Table?

The Table shows that numbers were missing or could not be calculated from some of the original studies. Did the authors attempt to contact the authors of these studies to obtain these data?

* Table 3: The study of Kalantari et al. 2012 [30] seems out of place in this review. The population is quite different from the other studies included in this review, since the refugee children had lost both parents as well as other family, their home and school and were traumatized by war and living as a refugee in a foreign country.

* Page 8-9: Key results of the included interventions are presented by effect size which I find a bit confusing. I would suggest presenting results by type of outcome as presented in Table 4. Many of the studies showed non-significant differences between treatment and control groups (Table 2) and this is currently not reflected in the description of results.

For example, for Children's health and behaviour, the most common outcome measures were the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), Children's Depression Inventory (CDI), Youth Self-Report (YSR), and Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale-Revised (R-CMAS) as shown in Table 4. According to Table 2, 25 comparisons were available [28, 35, 39] (12 using the CBCL, 5 using the CDI, 4 using the YSR and 4 using the CMAS-R), of which only one showed a significant effect between groups.

In a similar vein, Table 2 shows that studies evaluating the Family Bereavement Program have showed many non-significant differences between the treatment and control groups, which is not reflected in the results section.
Discussion:

* An important gap in research identified in this review but not addressed by the authors is that all interventions, apart from 'Writing for Recovery' are English language interventions evaluated in the UK or USA.

* The authors' conclusion that bereavement interventions should be directed at both the child and the caregiver does not seem to follow logically from the data presented in the results section.

* The authors suggest conducting further studies among younger children, potentially using qualitative interviews to evaluate interventions. However, such studies would have been excluded from the current review as studies were required to offer quantitative outcome measures. Qualitative data from evaluations could also be helpful to identify opportunities to improve current bereavement interventions.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

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I recommend additional statistical review

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