

**Grief is a Family Affair: Exploring the Role of Time Since Loss on the Relationship  
Between Parent's Grief and Parent's Perception of Child's Grief.**

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### **Abstract**

Grief is a naturally occurring reaction following the loss of a loved one. Although most people adapt to loss after some time, some people can experience prolonged symptoms even after a long time. Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) can apply to these people. Even though grieving is a personal process, parents can perceive how their child grieves. The intensity of parent's grief can shape their perception of their child's grief. Time since loss may negatively moderate the relationship between parent's grief and their perception of their child's grief as prolonged periods allow for emotional adjustment and adjusted perception of grief. Using data from an online grief monitor, this study examined the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief, as well as the potential moderating role of time since loss. Results show that time since loss significantly positively moderates the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief between the period of 12.51 to 25.54 months. These results highlight the dynamic nature of grief and aim to deepen our understanding of grief dynamics over time and their implications for support during the bereavement process.

*Keywords:* Prolonged grief, time since loss, parent-child dyads, bereavement

## Introduction

The death of a loved one is an inevitable event in one's life. Following the loss, people often experience a range of grief symptoms, which can be described as the primary emotional process which occurs after the loss of a loved one (Pop-Jordanova, 2021). Although grief is unique for everyone (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Bonanno et al., 2002), common symptoms include reactions such as identity disruption, disbelief of the loss and emotional pain (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). These symptoms are usually strongest immediately after the death of a loved one. Although most people can resolve their grief without major complaints, some individuals experience intense symptoms after the death of a loved one for a long time (Prigerson et al., 2021). When symptoms of grieving are prolonged, bereaved people might be experiencing Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD).

PGD can be defined as a mental health condition characterised by intense and persistent grief that affects everyday functioning (American Psychiatric Organization, 2022). Related, yet distinct terms include: Complicated Grief, Traumatic Grief and Persistent Complex Grief Disorder (Maciejewski et al., 2016). PGD was first officially recognised by the World Health Organization in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11) in 2018 (World Health Organization, 2021), and subsequently added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR) in 2022 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

To diagnose PGD according to DSM-5-TR criteria, the death of a person close to the bereaved has happened at least 12 months ago for adults and 6 months for adolescents and children (Prigerson et al., 2021). Additionally, symptoms should be experienced nearly every day for at least the past month before the diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Furthermore, these symptoms must significantly disrupt daily functioning, including work-related, social or other essential aspects of life.

Although PGD is typically diagnosed through clinical interviews, parent reports can also be used as an alternative indicator of their child's grief levels. However, the findings in other mental-health-related fields regarding the accuracy of parent assessment are inconsistent. One study about anxiety showed that younger children especially might have problems understanding questionnaire items affecting the quality of their responses (Grills & Ollendick, 2003), potentially resulting in inaccurate assessment of child self-reports. Additionally, as children age, they develop abilities to understand and describe their feelings adequately, potentially resulting in parents of older children being more understanding of their issues (Reich et al., 1982, as cited in Klein, 1991).

Furthermore, parents experiencing grief may project their emotions onto their children. Projection entails that parents transmit their emotional problems onto their children (Huang & Pryor, 2018). Parents might thus assume through projection that their children feel and experience the same emotions they do. This phenomenon can cause parental assessment to be inaccurate, potentially leading to overestimation or underestimation of the child's emotional experience. Moreover, one study showed that for married couples, significant evidence was found for the projection of perceivers' own emotions onto their partners (Clark et al., 2016). This suggests a possible positive relationship between parent's grief and their perception of their child's grief.

Conversely, the theory of Disenfranchised Grief (Doka, 1999) can explain how parent's perception of child's grief can be misinterpreted. It can be defined as grief that either cannot be openly accepted, mourned in public or supported through social means (Bento, 1994). For example, a parent might downplay or believe that their child is too young to fully experience grief. Additionally, one study found that parental suppression led to a worse interaction quality between parents and children, with key factors like guidance, warmth and responsiveness being negatively impacted by emotional suppression (Karnilowicz et al.,

2018). Because of this, a distortion might arise in their perception of the emotional needs of the child. These effects might cause the perception of child's grief to be misinterpreted or inaccurate.

Moreover, another study found poor agreement between the assessment of depression of parents and their children, stressing the underestimation of parental assessment of their child's symptoms (Orchard et al., 2019). This could potentially lead to mistreated individuals due to the underassessment of children's symptoms when relying on parental input alone (Orchard et al., 2019). These aforementioned inconsistencies highlight the importance of cautiousness when using parental assessment solely for grief assessment in children, but provide support for the potential existing relationship between parents' grief and their perception of their child's grief.

Although parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief seem to have a positive association, some factors might affect this relationship. One such factor is the amount of time that has passed since the loss of the loved one. Generally, most bereaved individuals express fewer grief symptoms over time (Djelantik et al., 2022). A theory that gives insight into the potential moderating effect of time since loss on the previously mentioned relationship is The Dual Process Model of Grief (Schut, 1999). This theory states that as people grieve, they oscillate between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented grieving, progressively shifting towards the latter (Schut, 1999). Loss-oriented grieving typically involves confronting and processing the emotional aspects of the loss, whilst restoration-oriented typically involves adapting to life after the loss and gradually rebuilding (Schut., 1999). Directly after the loss, parents may end up focusing on loss-oriented grieving, resulting in potential heightened emotional distress resulting in increased projecting of the parent's grief onto their child. Over time, as parents gradually shift towards restoration-oriented grief, they may begin to stabilize emotionally. This potentially results in a more accurate perception of child's grief,

distinguishing it from their grief. The direction of this potential moderation effect is expected to be negative due to the increase in accuracy of perceiving the child's grief over time, resulting in less projection. Thus, the Dual Process Model can provide insight into how time since loss can moderate the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief.

Taking all of this into account, this study aims to examine the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief, as well as the moderating role of time since loss on this relationship. Two hypotheses were formulated for this study. First, it was expected that parent's grief affected parent's perception of child's grief. The second hypothesis was that the connection between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief is negatively moderated by the time since the loss of the loved one.

## Methods

### Participants and Procedures

This study employed a quantitative research design using data gathered through the website [rouwbehandeling.nl](http://rouwbehandeling.nl). [Rouwbehandeling.nl](http://rouwbehandeling.nl) is a website created to provide information about grief treatment and to help people who lost someone. On this website, people can fill in a grief monitor called the TGI-SR+ that can assess whether someone is in need or can benefit from professional help.

Eligible participants were Dutch-speaking parents who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Participants are required to have access to a smartphone or computer to fill out the survey. Participants began the survey by providing information regarding their relationship with the deceased, as well as filling out general demographic information, the date the loved one passed away and the cause of death. They then filled out the demographic information

about their child. Hereafter, parents were instructed to assess their child's grief reactions and symptoms of the past month from their perspective. Subsequently, the parents are then asked to fill out a different survey for their grief reactions.

## **Measures**

### ***Background Demographics***

During the online questionnaire, participants were asked to enter their age, gender, relationship, date the loved one passed and cause of death.

### ***Parent's Grief Levels***

Parent's grief levels were tested using the Traumatic Grief Inventory – Self Report Plus (TGI-SR+). The TGI-SR+ is a 22-item self-report questionnaire developed by Lenferink et al., (2021), that assesses PGD according to DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 criteria and persistent complex bereavement disorder according to DSM-5 criteria. Items scaled from 1 (never) to 5 (always) with a maximum score of 110 and questions were asked in the Dutch language. For example, participants were asked to show their agreement on a statement such as: "I had difficulty accepting the loss of \_\_\_\_ ". The sum of all questions determines the grief level of the respondent. Lenferink and colleagues (2021) suggested that a sum score higher or equal to 71 can be an early indicator of probable PGD development. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 was observed for this sample.

### ***Time Since Loss***

Time since the loss of the loved one was calculated in months by subtracting the date of death which was provided by the participants, from the date the test was submitted.

### ***Parent's Perception of Child's Grief.***

Parent's perception of child's grief was tested using the Traumatic Grief Inventory – Kids – Clinician Administered (TGI-K-CA), assessed by their parent. The TGI-K-CA is a 16-item self-report questionnaire developed by van Dijk and colleagues (2023), that measures PGD levels for children and adolescents (8-18) according to DSM-5TR and ICD-11 criteria. Items scaled from 1 (never) to 5 (always) with a maximum score of 80 and were asked in the Dutch language. Compared to TGI-SR+, the language used is more comprehensible, to make it easier for children and their parents to correctly interpret each question. For example, the parents were asked to show their agreement on a statement such as: "Did your child miss \_\_\_\_\_ very much in the previous month?". A Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 was observed for this sample.

### **Data Analysis**

All analyses were performed using R Statistical Software (v4.4.2; R Core Team 2024). Statistical significance was set at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

After data preparation, the first research question about the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief was addressed by performing a linear regression analysis. Parent's grief was the independent variable and parent's perception of child's grief was the dependent variable. All assumptions for the reliability of linear regression have been assessed to confirm the validity of the results.

The second research question about the moderating role of time since loss on the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief was addressed by performing a multiple regression analysis. Parent's grief was the independent variable, time since loss was the moderator and parent's perception of child's grief was the dependent variable.



Following this, the Johnson-Neyman technique was used to further probe the significance and nature of this interaction. This technique allows for the identification of specific values of the moderator variable time since loss at which the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief is significant. This can determine the direction and time frame of this relationship.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Of the 146 participants who initially completed the survey, 5 participants were removed because the deceased was a pet. 85 participants were excluded from the dataset because they did not complete the survey for their child and themselves. Furthermore, 4 participants under the age of 18 years were removed, as well as 3 participants where the time since the loss of a loved one was longer than two standard deviations above the mean, which was 126 months.

Of the remaining 50 participants, 42 were female (84%). The children were divided fairly equally, with 27 males, 22 females and 1 non-disclosed. The age of the parents ranged from 34 to 65 ( $M = 46.0$ ;  $SD = 7.4$ ). The ages of the children ranged from 5 to 16 ( $M = 8.6$ ;  $SD = 3.9$ ). Parent's grief sum ranged from 26 to 97 ( $M = 61.7$ ;  $SD = 13.1$ ). Parent's perception of child's grief sum ranged from 17 to 75 ( $M = 41.0$ ;  $SD = 11.8$ ). 13 Parents (26%) fulfil the requirement of sum scores higher or equal to 71 for indication of PGD development risk. Time since loss ranged from 0 to 104 months ( $M = 18.4$ ;  $SD = 23.2$ ).

### The Relationship Between Parent's Grief and Parent's Perception of Child's Grief

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief. Results indicate a positive moderate relationship between parent's grief and child's grief,  $r(48) = .37, p = .008$ . Following this, a linear regression was conducted to examine the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief. Results show that parent's grief is significantly positively associated with parent's perception of child's grief  $F(1, 48) = 7.63, p = .008$ . The value of R-squared for this model is 0.13, suggesting that 13% of the variance in parent's perception of child's grief can be explained by parent's grief in this model. Although this model explains a relatively small portion of the variance, this is consistent with the complex nature of grief.

#### **The Possible Moderating Effect of Time Since Loss on the Relationship Between Parent's Grief and Parent's Perception of Child's Grief**

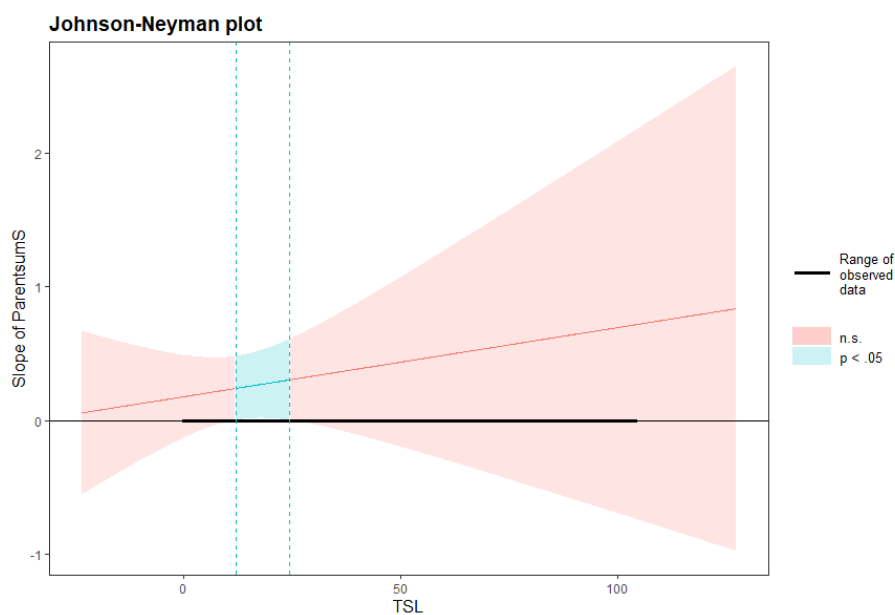
A moderation analysis was performed to examine the moderating role of time since loss on the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief. Results show that the interaction between parent's grief and time since loss was not statistically significant  $F(3, 46) = 9.66, p = .51$ , suggesting that time since loss does not significantly moderate the relationship between parent's grief and parent-assessed child's grief. The value of R-squared for this model is 0.39.

However, the Johnson-Neyman technique shows that the effect of parent's grief on parent's perception of child's grief was significant for values between 12.51 and 24.54. These findings indicate that the moderation effect of time since loss on the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief is dependent on specific values of time since loss. The relationship in question is positive, meaning that between the values of 12.51

and 24.54, the positive relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief is strengthened. These findings can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Jonhson-Neyman visualisation of the interaction between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief at different levels of time since loss*



*Note.* This figure depicts the Johnson-Neyman visualisation of the moderation effect. The y-axis, Slope of ParentSumS, refers to the slope of the sum of parent's grief, whereas TSL refers to the time since the loss of the loved one.

### Discussion

In this study, we examined the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief, as well as explored the potential moderating role of time since loss on this relationship. Results revealed that parent's grief was positively linked to parent's

perception of child's grief. Additionally, time since loss did not show a broad moderating effect. However, the Johnson-Neyman technique highlighted the significant moderating role of time since loss within a specific time frame, indicating that the positive relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief strengthens during this time frame.

The examined relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief was found to be significantly positively associated. This was in line with expectations from theoretical frameworks and prior research (Huang & Pryor, 2018; Lenferink & O'Connor, 2023). The theoretical framework of projection supports our findings as people tend to project their own emotions onto those of others (Huang & Pryor, 2018). Parents can assume that their children undergo the same emotions they do, as well as experiencing these emotions similarly. This results in projecting their own emotions onto their children (Huang & Pryor, 2018). Prior research done by Lenferink & O'Connor (2023) was in line with our findings. They found a positive relationship between parents' PGD levels and adult children's PGD levels (Lenferink & O'Connor, 2023). Although not entirely related, as they examined adult children's self-report values of grief instead of parental estimations, this relationship supports the occurrence of a relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief.

Conversely, the previously done research by Orchard and colleagues (2019) that suggests poor agreement between parental depression and parental assessment of child's depression, highlighting the underassessment of children's symptoms, is not in accordance with our findings. This could potentially be explained by the fact that this research examines parent and child agreement on the diagnosis. This does not take into account the occurrence of depression among the parents themselves. Compared to our study, in which the parents are affected by grief, parental grief influences the assessment of child symptoms through

projection (Huang & Pryor, 2018). This explains the discrepancy between the previous study and our own. These findings highlight the importance of addressing grief in bereaved families, as it has been shown that the emotional states of parents and children are connected (Lenferink & O'Connor, 2023).

The moderating role of time since loss on the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief was found to be non-significant. However, the Neyman-Johnson technique revealed a positive significant relationship between 12.51 and 24.54 months following the date of the deceased passing. These findings suggest that during this period, the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief was strengthened. These findings are not in line with the expectation of a negative moderation effect of time since loss on the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief. Contrary to prior research (Schut et al., 1999), which suggests that as time passes, restoration-oriented grieving results in parents becoming more emotionally stable, which could enhance the accuracy of the assessment of child grief, whilst also distinguishing it from their grief.

A potential explanation for the reversal of moderation direction could be explained by the participants of our study. Expected participants of our study include parents who want to fill out a grief measurement to find out whether they would benefit from professional help or counselling. As such, parents are more likely to experience greater grief than the average parent who lost a loved one. This increase in emotional distress could result in increased projection of parental grief onto their child (Schut et al., 1999). This would explain the positive moderation effect of time since loss that was found.

An explanation for this specific time frame at which moderation occurs is the criteria for PGD. For adults, one of the requirements of PGD is that the time since the loss of a loved one must be twelve months (American Psychiatric Organization, 2022). Interestingly, the time

frame at which our moderation effect strengthens the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief starts at 12.51 months after loss. As discussed earlier, the positive moderation effect occurring could concur with the participants who are likely to fill out a grief monitor. The time frame beginning at 12.51 months post-loss may cause a period where increased grief occurs, resulting in increased projection of grief onto their children after this point, rather than before it. Moreover, the anniversary of the loss could also explain the time frame of moderation to take place. The anniversary reaction can be explained as a specific time point at which the individual experiences psychological reactions related to previous trauma (Hammett et al., 1979). As the time frame starts at 12.51 months post-loss, anniversary reactions occurring might induce more grief symptoms than before, possibly resulting in heightened emotional distress and intensified grief responses during this time frame.

Possible implications for the findings of this research are generally directed at further increasing the effectiveness of bereavement therapy for bereaved families. As time since loss seems to strengthen the relationship between parent's grief and parent perception of child's grief within a certain time frame, bereavement therapy in the future should potentially focus more on the family context within bereavement therapy due to emotional interdependence that occurs after the loss of a loved one (Schut, 1999; Jiao et al., 2020).

A notable strength of this study is the data collection. Participants who participated in the grief measurement are likely to be concerned about their own and their child's grief. The research performed as such is directly relevant for participants. Additionally, the examination of how parental grief influences the perception of their child's grief adds to the complexity of grief dynamics within families. Moreover, the research done on grief dynamics is relevant to current research and may serve as a foundation for potential future research on parental and child grief.

However, some limitations should be noted. First, the sample group might be inadequate to fully explain the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief. For example, 84% of the participants were female. Prior research has shown that women are more likely to develop PGD symptoms following bereavement (Kersting et al., 2010). Secondly, additional variability in terms of kinship, cause of death and other possible influences of grief were not accounted for in this study. This leaves much to be desired, as certain variables might increase or decrease the moderation effect of time since loss on the relationship between parental grief and child grief. Finally, the relatively small sample size of 50 participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. To strengthen the external validity of our findings, a larger and more diverse sample size should aid in generalizing our findings to a larger population.

Future research could investigate the accuracy of parent's perception of child's grief by comparing parent-reported and child-self-reported measures. This would be of significant importance to further validate the current findings. Additionally, establishing the reliability and validity of parent-reported data could aid future research by warranting the use of parent reports, which is more accessible to obtain compared to self-reported data from children. Moreover, future studies should aim to collect data from self-reports rather than parent assessments. This would provide a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of family grief dynamics.

In conclusion, this research investigated the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief, as well as explored the potential moderating role of time since loss on this relationship. In line with theoretical frameworks and prior research, we found a significant positive relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief. Contrary to theoretical frameworks and prior research, we found that the relationship between parent's grief and parent's perception of child's grief was positively

influenced during the period between 12.51 and 24.54 months after the loss. These results emphasize the importance of future studies to address limitations to further validate current findings, as well as further investigation of the accuracy of parent-reported data. By highlighting the interconnected grief dynamics of bereaved families, this study hopes to contribute to future research aimed at providing a deeper understanding of grief dynamics within families.



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### **Appendix**

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT / OpenAI in order to brainstorm, summarise and clarify additional information, format references and perform minor revisions for academic conciseness and clarity of writing. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of work.