

2019 Evaluation: Summary Report

Seasons for Growth



2019 Evaluation: Summary Report

Andrew Day

James Cook University

Sharon Casey & Ashlen Francisco

James Cook University

Nina Watts-Carrier

Good Grief,

Mackillop Family Services

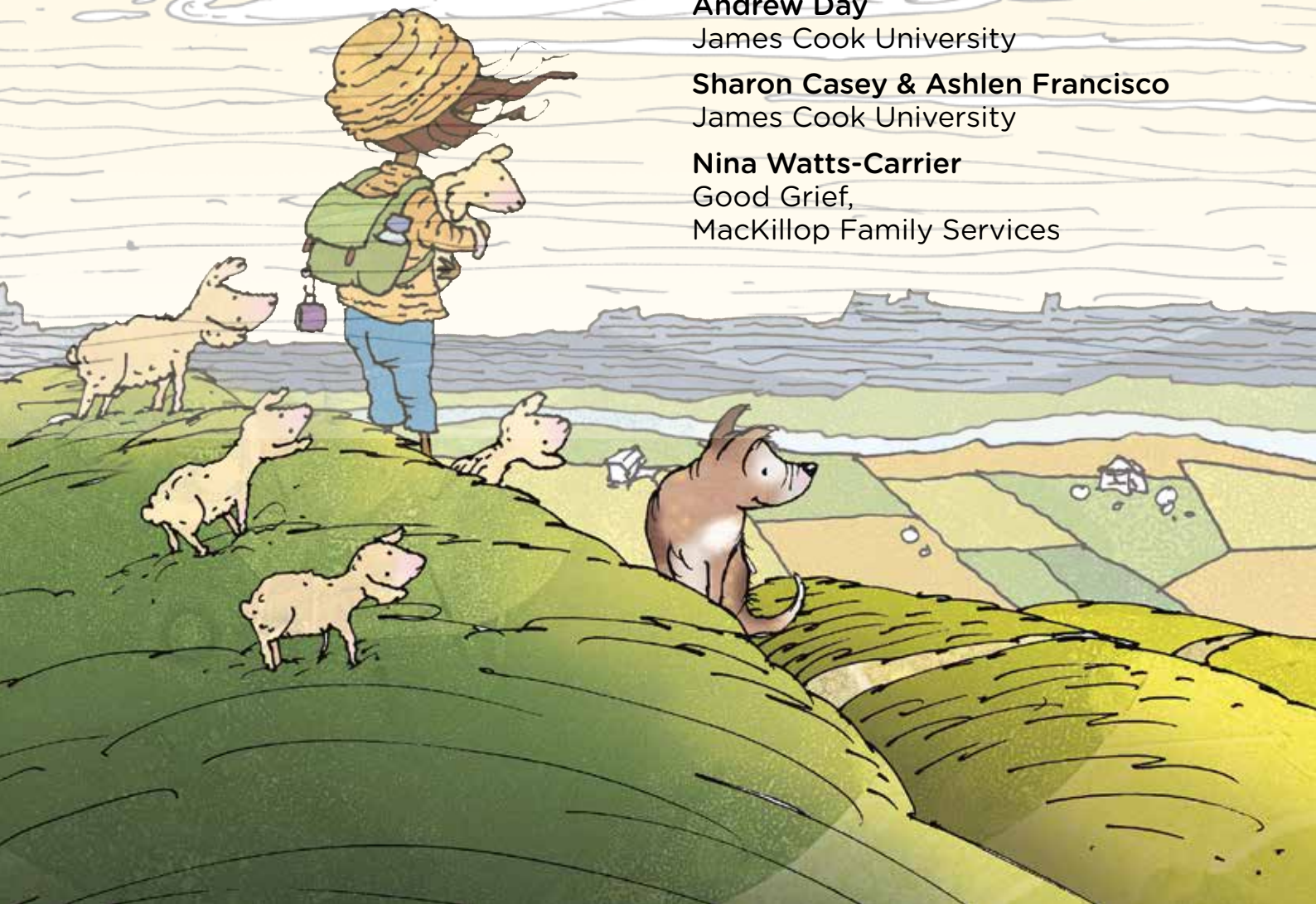




Table of Contents

The impact of a program to help children manage change and loss

Introduction	4
Program Description	6
Program Evaluation.....	8
Methodology.....	9
Measures	9
Procedures	10
Results	10
Need for the Program	11
Discussion.....	15
Change Over Time.....	12
Implications	16
References.....	17

List of Tables

Table 1: Worden's Tasks and SfG Content	7
Table 2: Challenges for Children and Young People Following Change	11
Table 3: Beliefs about Change	12
Table 4: Short Term Outcomes.....	13
Table 5: Individual Quality of Life Items.....	14
Table 6: Changes in Scores of Quality of Life over Time.....	15

Note: The authors would like to acknowledge the support of: Good Grief MacKillop Family Services personnel; program managers, Fiona McCallum, Kerry Stirling and Justine Richardson. Nina Watts-Carrier is a named author of this report but was independent from the analysis and interpretation of results given her association with the organisation. Not least, thanks are due to the efforts of the *Seasons for Growth* Companions in collecting survey data as well as for the generosity and sincerity of children and young people and their parents and carers who participated in the evaluation. This is an independent evaluation of the Seasons for Growth Program. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of Good Grief, MacKillop Family Services or any other organisation or person.

Illustrations: Cover page Stephen Michael King and inside cover Jacob Logos.

Seasons for Growth

The impact of a program to help children manage change and loss

Introduction

The *Seasons for Growth* program was written by Anne Graham in 1996 and developed in conjunction with the Sisters of St Joseph to address the lack of resources that were available at the time to support children who were adjusting to death, separation and divorce in their families (Graham, 1996a,b). Largely in response to community concerns about the implications of a burgeoning divorce rate, the program was subsequently revised to have a broader focus that included children and young people (aged 6 to 18 years) who had experienced any type of significant change in their lives (Graham, 2002a,b; Graham, 2004). The program was updated in 2015 with the launch of a third edition designed to reflect developments in research evidence and practice wisdom, including an increased knowledge about the long-term adverse effects of change and loss on children (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013) and awareness of the high numbers of young people who face significant change. For example, Ribbens-McCarthy and Jessop (2005) have reported that, by the age of 16, five per cent of all secondary school pupils will have suffered the bereavement of a

parent or close friend, with these figures rising significantly when the loss of a grandparent is considered. Over half of the participants in a qualitative study by Webster et al. (2004) also disclosed the death of a parent, sibling, partner, child, or friend (loss of grandparents was not included), with many describing multiple bereavements in the extended family. In addition, Hewitt (2008) has observed that one in three Australian marriages are now expected to end in divorce, noting the wide-ranging and far-reaching consequences for family life. Such studies draw attention to the public health ramifications of adverse childhood life events that are associated with decreased levels of child wellbeing and threats to their healthy transition into adulthood. And yet there are few examples of programs that have been designed specifically to help children and young people adapt to change, and even fewer that have been subject to evaluation efforts and meet the criteria to be considered evidence-based (see <https://www.blueprintsprograms.org>). The aim of this study then is to assess the short-term impact of participation in the *Seasons for Growth* program.





Seasons for Growth caters for ages 6-18 years.

The program consists of four levels:

- **Level 1** (ages 6-8 years) (40 minute sessions)
- **Level 2** (ages 9-10 years) (40 minute sessions)
- **Level 3** (ages 11-12 years) (45 minute sessions)
- **Level 4** (ages 13-18 years) (50 minute sessions)

The nominated ages are indicative only so as to provide flexibility for allocation of children into the program level most suited to their needs.

Each level of *Seasons for Growth* comprises:

- 8 Formal Sessions
- 1 Celebration Session
- 2 Reconnector Sessions (optional).



About Seasons for Growth

Program Description

The *Seasons for Growth* program is delivered over an eight-week group period, with a ninth week dedicated to a 'celebration' of achievement. Each session lasts from 40 to 50 minutes, depending on participant ages and incorporates a wide range of age-appropriate creative learning activities including art, mime, role-play, stories, discussion, playdough, music, and journaling. The content is highly visual and makes extensive use of illustrations, thought to be particularly effective in engaging younger participants. The first two editions of the program included five 'levels': three for primary school-aged children (6-8 years, 9-10 years and 11-12 years) and two for secondary school-aged young people (13-15 years and 16-18 years). The current edition refines 'level 4' of the program to cater for the needs and interests of young people 13 to 18 years of age.

The program itself relies on a small group, 'like-to-like' peer learning processes intended to create a space for children and young people to 'have a say' and to learn and practice new ways of thinking and responding to change. The emphasis is on understanding the effects of change, loss, and grief, whilst developing skills in communication, decision-making, and problem-solving. The program activities have been designed to pair J. William Worden's (1991) four 'Tasks of Grief' with a metaphor of the four seasons which is used to assist young people to comprehend the cyclical, rather than linear, process of working through loss and grief. Worden's model is used to help participants make sense of their emotional turmoil and normalise their experience (Table 1).

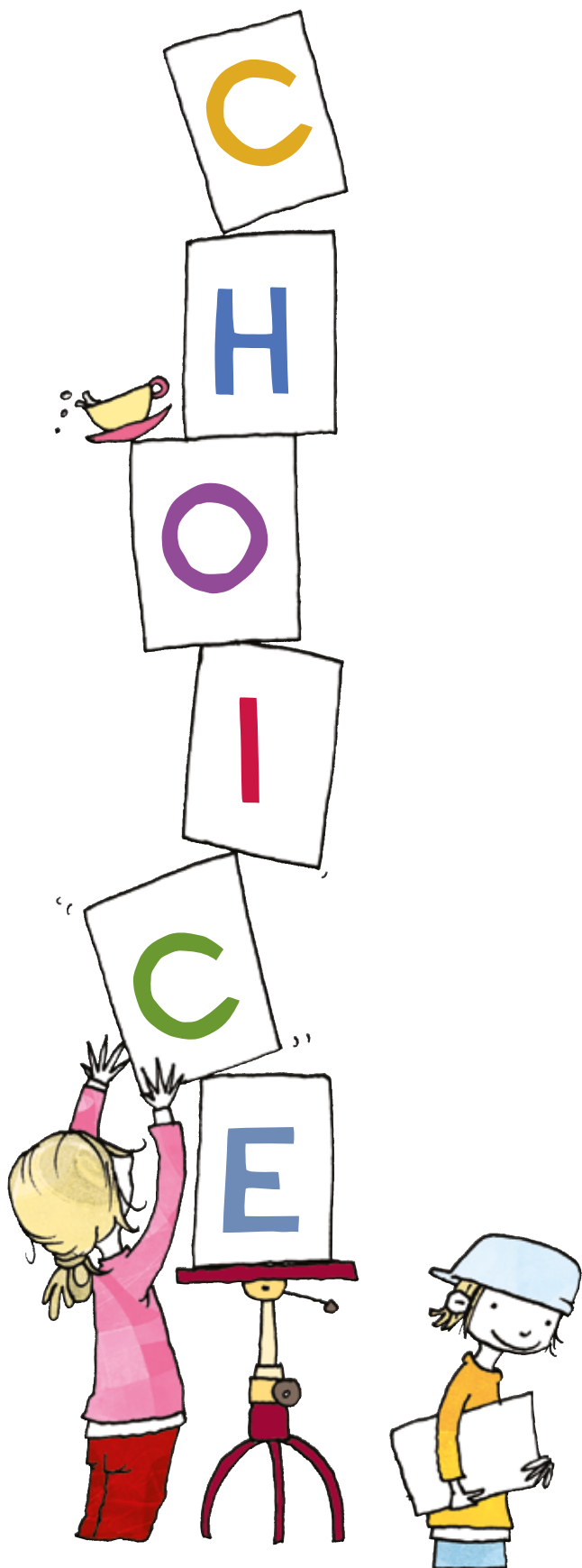




Table 1: Program Conceptualisation.

Worden's Tasks	Seasons for Growth Tasks		Session Content
To accept the reality of the loss	Learn that change and loss are part of life	AUTUMN	Session 1: Life is like the seasons Session 2: Change is part of life
To process the pain of grief	Learn about different ways people experience change and loss	WINTER	Session 3: Valuing my story Session 4: Naming my feelings
To adjust to a changed world after the loss	Learn skills to assist with adapting to change and loss	SPRING	Session 5: Caring for my feelings Session 6: Remembering the good times
To find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life	Learn about ways that help in moving forward with life	SUMMER	Session 7: Making good choices Session 8: Moving forward

Each program is facilitated by a group leader (a 'Companion') who is supported with a comprehensive set of materials including Companion manuals and participant journals and access to an online portal containing a wide range of resources. Companions are trained program facilitators, often from professional backgrounds such

as teaching, social work/counselling, nursing and mental health, youth work, pastoral care or chaplaincy backgrounds (Newell & Moss, 2011). They typically deliver the program in school settings across Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, England and Wales, but are increasingly offering it in a variety of welfare and other community settings.

¹ Worden's Tasks

Program Evaluation

There have been five previous program evaluations (conducted in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2010, and 2011), the most recent of which concluded that the most notable impact of *Seasons for Growth* was that it helped children realise that they were not alone in their loss and that it was 'ok to feel sad sometimes' (Newell & Moss, 2011; p.4). Newell and Moss (2011) estimated that, at the time of their evaluation, over 150,000 children and young people had completed the program, with their evaluation involving a total of 57 groups (with 334 program participants aged from 6 to 16 years, and 44 different Companions) across six different regions in three countries (Australia, New Zealand, and Scotland). Children and young people were asked to complete a survey at two points in time; before they started and following completion of the program, with corresponding surveys completed by both Companions and parents and/or carers. The parents and carers consistently reported that the program had helped their child's understanding and skills to learn to cope with grief, accept their situation, be more compassionate with others, and learn how to deal with issues (e.g., they identified significant improvement in their child's ability to 'recognise that they are not the only one' and to 'understand that families change'). The Companions similarly reported that they observed improvement in the children's ability to recognise that they are not alone, and that change is normal as well as helping them to develop a better understanding of their feelings and make good choices.

The current evaluation aims to collect a larger data set from participants who received the current edition of the program, as well as introducing new questions that relate directly to the underlying logic of the new program. In addition, a standardised measure of wellbeing, rated by both children and their parents/carers, will be used to assess change over time and, importantly, follow up data will be collected 3 months after completing the program.





Methodology

The first step of the evaluation was to conduct an independent review of all program documentation to articulate a program logic that was then used to guide the choice of evaluation questions. The articulation of the underlying program logic also provides clarity about the program's theoretical underpinnings, key assumptions and pathways towards the desired long-term outcomes as well as being regarded as a pre-requisite for evaluation¹. These reflected Worden's tasks of grief (To accept the reality of the loss - autumn; seasons/change; To process the pain of grief - winter; my story/reactions; To adjust to a changed world after the loss - spring; feelings/memory and forgiveness; and To find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life - summer; choices/moving forward).

Measures

A survey was developed which asked children and parents about the nature of the issues that led to their attendance and when the change or loss occurred. This was followed by a set of questions, answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale, that asked directly about the four hypothesised long-term outcomes documented in the logic model.

The Kidsafe generic health related quality of life measure for children and adolescents was used to provide a standardised measure of wellbeing. This is a measure systematically developed in a European Commission funded project (Screening and Promotion for Health-related Quality of Life in Children and Adolescents) which identified items from literature reviews, expert consultation, and children's focus groups. Finally, a series of questions from the Newell and Moss (2011) evaluation were retained that were relevant to overall satisfaction (How much did you like the following?) and participant knowledge about change. These questions were also included in a 3-month follow survey.



¹ At the centre of a program logic are, from left to right, sets of process markers (short-term), program impacts (medium-term) and outcomes (long-term). Program logic statements - across process, impact, and outcome - can be made at the program level (reflecting core program activities with children and young people) and systems level (objectives relating to the contribution of the program to enhance integrated systemic responses of which it is a part). Key assumptions underpin the ways in which the process markers are meant to result in program impacts, and a second set of assumptions underlay how program impacts contribute to long-term outcomes.



Procedure

The draft evaluation tools were provided to a project reference group for initial feedback and revisions made before piloting with 37 young people began which suggested that the length, wording and formatting of the survey were acceptable, although some additional support was identified as necessary for some younger children (especially in Level 1 for ages 6 to 8 years), the survey items were not changed and so pilot data were retained for use in the full study.

Following approval from a university ethics committee, every Companion who was registered to run a *Season for Growth* group was then invited to participate in the study, although participation was entirely voluntary. Each Companion was provided with the survey material and instructions regarding when and how they were to be administered. Completed surveys were placed in a sealed envelope and returned to the evaluators for entry into a statistical package (SPSS), with some having the opportunity to complete the survey online. The surveys were not personally identifiable, with each participant assigned a unique number so that pre- and post-program surveys could be linked.

Results



Descriptive Statistics

Over the period from May 2017 through to February 2019, 220 groups took part in the evaluation. Most of these were in Australia, with the majority in NSW (n=93) or Victoria (n=44), but with all areas of the country participating (and a small number in New Zealand and Scotland). The vast majority of programs (201 out of 220) were run in schools, with eleven offered in another agency and five in other locations. The majority of the groups were either Level 2 (n=76) or Level 3 (n=72), with Level 1 (n=38) and Level 4 (n=22)² programs less common.

The surveys were completed by a total of 1368 young people. They were, in equal numbers, both female and male, aged between 5 and 17 years, with the majority aged between 7 and 12 years (7 years, 8%; 8 years, 12%; 9 years, 17%; 10 years, 13%; 11 years, 14%; 12 years, 7%). Four percent of respondents were aged 5 or 6 years, and five percent aged between 13 and 17 years. Of these, 291 (20%) were attending the Level 1 program, 426 the Level 2 program (29%), 369 the Level 3 program (25%), and 72 the Level 4 program (5%) (missing n=301; 21%). The majority were from Australia, with a small minority of participants from New Zealand and Scotland. Of the total surveys completed there were 963 completed at pre-program, 1084 at post-program³, and 131 at the 3-month follow up. A total of 854 young people provided both pre- and post-surveys. There were 601 pre-program surveys completed by parents and carers (573 parents, 28 carers⁴), 442 post-program surveys, and 24 three-month follow up surveys. A total of 209 Companions also participated. They were experienced in program delivery, with forty-one people having previously delivered over 10 groups, thirty-four between 6 and 10 groups, and eighty between 2 and 5 groups. A total of sixty-three reported that they had run only one *Season for Growth* group. Nearly all the Companions were females and just over half were in the 41 to 50 years age bracket. The most common response when asked to describe their cultural background was Australian or Anglo-Saxon. The majority of the Companions described their professional backgrounds as teachers or chaplain/pastoral care workers, although multiple professions were recorded. A majority also reported that they held a bachelor's degree or higher qualification.

² Note: Some program levels were not recorded.

³ Note: Some groups only completed the post-program survey.

⁴ Note: Figures do not add up to 100% as a result of missing or incomplete responses.



Need for the Program

The Companions were asked to record their views on a series of statements about the challenges facing children and young people when they experience change in their families, with responses invited on a five-point Likert-type scale. The percentage responding for each possible response⁵ are reported in (Table 2), with each item rated, on average, above the midpoint of the scale indicating that each area of challenge is viewed by the Companions as relevant to the needs of their group.

Table 2: Challenges for Children and Young People Following Change (% responses)

Item	Not at all	A little bit	To some extent	Quite a bit	A great deal	2019 Survey mean rating	2011 Survey mean rating
Understanding and managing their feelings	1	7	17	44	30	3.97	4.30
Knowing there are things they can do (or choices they can make) that will help them feel better when life gets difficult	1	8	18	46	26	3.87	n/a
Understanding how emotions change over time	1	13	23	42	20	3.70	n/a
Knowing that there is someone they can talk to	2	11	26	38	22	3.67	4.14
Recognising they can't change what's happened	2	12	25	45	16	3.61	4.07
Recognising that sometimes change can be a good thing	1	14	31	34	18	3.55	3.86
Understanding they are not to blame	3	14	30	32	18	3.50	4.00
Understanding that not everything changes following change	4	13	29	39	13	3.45	n/a



⁵ Note: percentages do not always add up to 100 given the small amount of missing data.

Change Over Time

Parents and carers rated their level of agreement with a number of statements that reflected the desired changes from program attendance (on a 5-point Likert-type scale). As a group they rated their child more positively on all items at the end of the program than they did at the beginning, with one exception (“My child finds it hard to say how he or she feels”), where average scores decreased over time (Table 3).

Table 3: Beliefs about Change (item level).

Item	Pre-Program			Post-Program			Follow up		
	n	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
My child is ok talking about change	601	3.51	.92	422	3.70	.85	24	3.96	.81
I am confident that my child is able to adapt to change in the future	602	3.45	.84	421	3.79	.79	24	3.83	1.05
My child understands that our family is still special even though its changed	588	3.96	.85	420	4.13	.78	24	4.21	.88
My child can see a positive future for him or herself	599	3.74	.91	422	4.05	.77	24	4.09	.95
My child finds it hard to say how he or she feels	604	3.62	1.01	424	3.46	.95	24	3.54	1.06
My child knows that it's OK to feel angry	600	3.59	.80	420	3.90	.70	24	4.04	.62
My child can choose how s/he wants to act when s/he feel upset	597	3.12	.94	422	3.58	1.62	2	3.83	1.01
My child knows who s/he can talk to when s/he feels upset	602	3.80	.92	423	4.17	.75	42	4.13	.90





Of the eight questions relating to beliefs about change, two related to each of the intended short-term outcomes as identified in the program logic model. Mean responses from both children and parents are reported in Table 4. These show that ratings of each of the four areas of change did increase from pre-program to post-program, with the changes maintained the time of follow up.

Table 4: Short Term Outcomes.

Item	Pre-Program			Post-Program			Follow up		
	n	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Children and Young People's Ratings									
Accepting the reality of the loss	855	3.42	1.08	1084	3.91	1.08	131	4.24	.71
Making the connection between past and future	953	4.07	.78	1067	4.33	.71	131	3.97	.72
Processing negative emotion	942	3.80	.90	1057	4.01	.82	130	3.89	.79
Making positive choices	943	3.87	.90	1068	4.17	.82	130	4.03	.85
Parent and Carer Ratings									
Accepting the reality of the loss	598	3.49	.72	420	3.75	.71	24	3.90	.87
Making the connection between past and future	584	3.85	.77	418	4.10	.70	23	4.15	.80
Processing negative emotion	599	3.60	.63	420	3.68	.56	24	3.79	.64
Making positive choices	596	3.46	.78	421	3.87	.97	24	3.97	.83

Note: Higher means post-program responses are in the expected direction.



The next questions were from a psychometrically validated scale, the Kidsafe scale, which reliably assesses quality of life in children and young people. Responses are also rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 'not at all' (1) to 'extremely' (5). These questions asked specifically about how the young person has felt over the last week (Table 5) and all item scores are summed to provide a total wellbeing score (Table 6). Finally, a single item asked 'In general, how good would you say your health is?', rated from 'poor' (1) to 'excellent' (5). These scores show improvement across each item from pre-program to post-program, with changes generally maintained at time of follow-up. It was then possible to compare scores on the Kidsafe scale using the total score for the scale (sum of all 10 items) and a final single item rating which asks respondents to provide a global rating of their health over the previous week.

Table 5: Individual Quality of Life Items.

Item (k-10)	Pre-Program			Post-Program			Follow up		
	n	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Have you felt fit and well	855	3.82	1.09	1093	4.28	1.80	130	4.17	.94
Have you felt full of energy	965	3.87	1.18	1078	4.10	1.09	130	3.98	.89
Have you felt sad	960	3.28	1.52	1072	3.25	1.49	130	3.94	.91
Have you felt lonely	959	3.60	1.49	1062	3.64	1.49	127	4.13	.89
Have you had enough time for yourself	959	3.26	1.38	1072	3.36	1.42	129	4.07	1.06
Have you been able to do the things that you want to do in your free time	956	3.39	1.38	1068	3.63	1.31	128	4.14	.91
Have your parent(s) or carer(s) treated you fairly	945	4.00	1.20	1077	4.08	1.18	130	4.24	.91
Have you had fun with your friends	947	4.23	1.12	1070	4.36	.96	131	4.12	.98
Have you got on well at school	952	3.87	1.18	1069	4.17	1.05	131	3.91	.99
Have you been able to pay attention	948	3.66	1.19	1069	3.96	1.11	130	3.58	1.17

Note: Items 3 and 4 reverse coded.

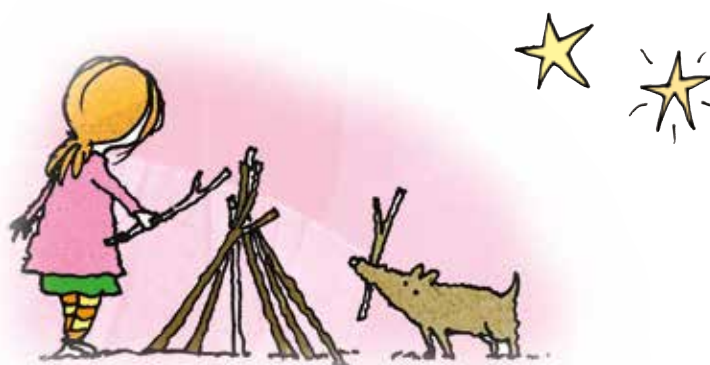




Table 6: Changes in Scores of Quality of Life over Time.

Scale	Pre-Program			Post-Program			Follow up		
	n	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Total K-10 score	795	3.72	.67	1012	3.89	.62	124	4.00	.64
Single item global health	833	3.93	1.05	1056	4.04	1.03	131	4.13	1.04

Table 6 shows that the total quality of life scores for children and young people did improve from the pre-program assessment to post-program and at time of follow-up. The changes on the total quality of life scores were statistically significant from both pre-program to post-program ($t=-2.75$, $p<.00$) and from pre-program to follow up ($t=-3.11$, $p<.00$). For parents and carers, scores were also higher at the time of follow up than at the pre-program assessment. These changes were statistically significant ($t=-2.22$, $p<.05$) for both the single item global rating of quality of life and for the total scale score ($t=-3.87$, $p<.001$).



Discussion

This study was completed seven years after the publication of the last evaluation (Newell & Moss, 2011) and, in many ways, builds on the findings of this initial work. Whilst the evaluation adopted a similar pre- and post- program self-report design involving children and young people and their parents and carers (with contributions from Companions), the surveys used in this study included new items based on the articulation of a program logic that describes the process by which change is intended to occur. In addition, a new scale was introduced that provided a standardised measure of quality of life in terms of their subjective health.

The Companions were asked a series of questions that are relevant to understanding the mechanism by which change occurs over the course of the program. Their responses suggest that they have a high level of confidence in the program logic underpinning the *Seasons for Growth* program, with ratings consistently indicating agreement with statements designed to reflect the mechanisms through which program activities translate into meaningful improvements for children and young people.

A key component of the design of this study was the collection of data that allowed comparisons to be made at the start and

at the end of the program and again at three-month follow up. For the children and young people, there was evidence of improvement on all the items that measured the four outcomes of the program (accepting the reality of the loss, making the connection between past and future, processing negative emotion, and making positive choices). There was also improvement in self-reported and parent-rated quality of life as measured by a scale which assessed wellbeing over the previous week. Parent and carer ratings also reflected the view that their children were better at talking about change, had more confidence, could adapt to change in the future, understand that their family is still special, and knows who to talk to when upset. Overall, this pattern of results can be interpreted as evidence that participation in a *Seasons for Growth* group is associated with positive change in those areas that are targeted throughout the program. However, an important caveat to this conclusion is the uncontrolled nature of the study; the pre- and post-design means that it is not possible to conclude that change is caused by program attendance as children and young people may simply improve over time in the absence of any intervention.





Implications

There are a number of possibilities for ongoing efforts to establish the effectiveness of this program. The first of these would be to consider the feasibility of a controlled trial to establish that change does occur as a result of program participation rather than simply from maturation or other changes that occur naturally over time. Further work could also develop the routine administration of evaluation materials using an online methodology to reduce the administrative demands on Companions and amount of missing or incomplete data. There may also be a need to extend the reach of the program to include more participants in the older age groups, as well as to consider more qualitative methods of data collection for groups involving the youngest participants. Nonetheless, this study provides evidence that *Seasons for Growth* is a well-designed and well-delivered program that attracts high levels of stakeholder satisfaction. It appears to be associated with positive change in children and young people who have experienced loss and change in their lives and may be a useful program in efforts to reduce the negative impacts of change, loss and separation in families.

References

- Graham A. (2004) Life is like the seasons: responding to change, loss, and grief through a peer- based education program. *Childhood Education*, 80, 317.
- Graham A. P. (1996a). *Seasons for Growth: Primary School Series*. Mary McKillop Foundation, North Sydney.
- Graham A. P. (1996b). *Seasons for Growth: Secondary School Series*. Mary McKillop Foundation, North Sydney.
- Graham A. P. (2002a). *Seasons for Growth: Secondary School Series*. 2nd ed. Mary McKillop Foundation, North Sydney.
- Graham A. P. (2002b). *Seasons for Growth: Primary School Series*. 2nd ed. Mary McKillop Foundation, North Sydney.
- Harrison, L. & Harrington, R. (2001). Adolescents' bereavement experiences. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 159-69.
- Hewitt, B. (2008). *Marriage Breakdown in Australia: Social Correlates, Gender and Initiator Status*. University of Queensland Social Policy Research Paper No. 35.
- MacDonald, R., & Shildrick, T. (2013). Youth and wellbeing: Experiencing bereavement and ill health in marginalised young people's transitions. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 35, 147-161. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9566.2012.01488.x
- Newell, S. & Moss, A. (2011). *Supporting Children and Young People Through Change, Loss and Grief: An Evaluation of the Seasons for Growth Program*. Prepared for Good Grief (Australia): Sydney.
- Ribbens McCarthy, J., & Jessop, J. (2005) *Young People, Bereavement and Loss: Disruptive Transitions?* London: National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Webster, C., Simpson, D., MacDonald, R., Abbas, A., et al. (2004) *Poor Transitions*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Worden J. W. (1991). *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy (2nd Edition)*. Springer, New York.

Authors note and acknowledgement: This is an independent evaluation of the *Seasons for Growth* program. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of Good Grief or any other organisation or person. Nina Watts-Carrier is a named author of this paper but was independent from the analysis and interpretation of results given her association with Good Grief. Thanks are due to the efforts of the *Seasons for Growth* Companions in collecting survey data as well as for the generosity and sincerity of children and young people and their parents and carers who participated in this study.



Seasons for Growth



2019 Evaluation: Summary Report

Andrew Day
James Cook University

Sharon Casey & Ashlen Francisco
James Cook University

Nina Watts-Carrier
Good Grief,
MacKillop Family Services

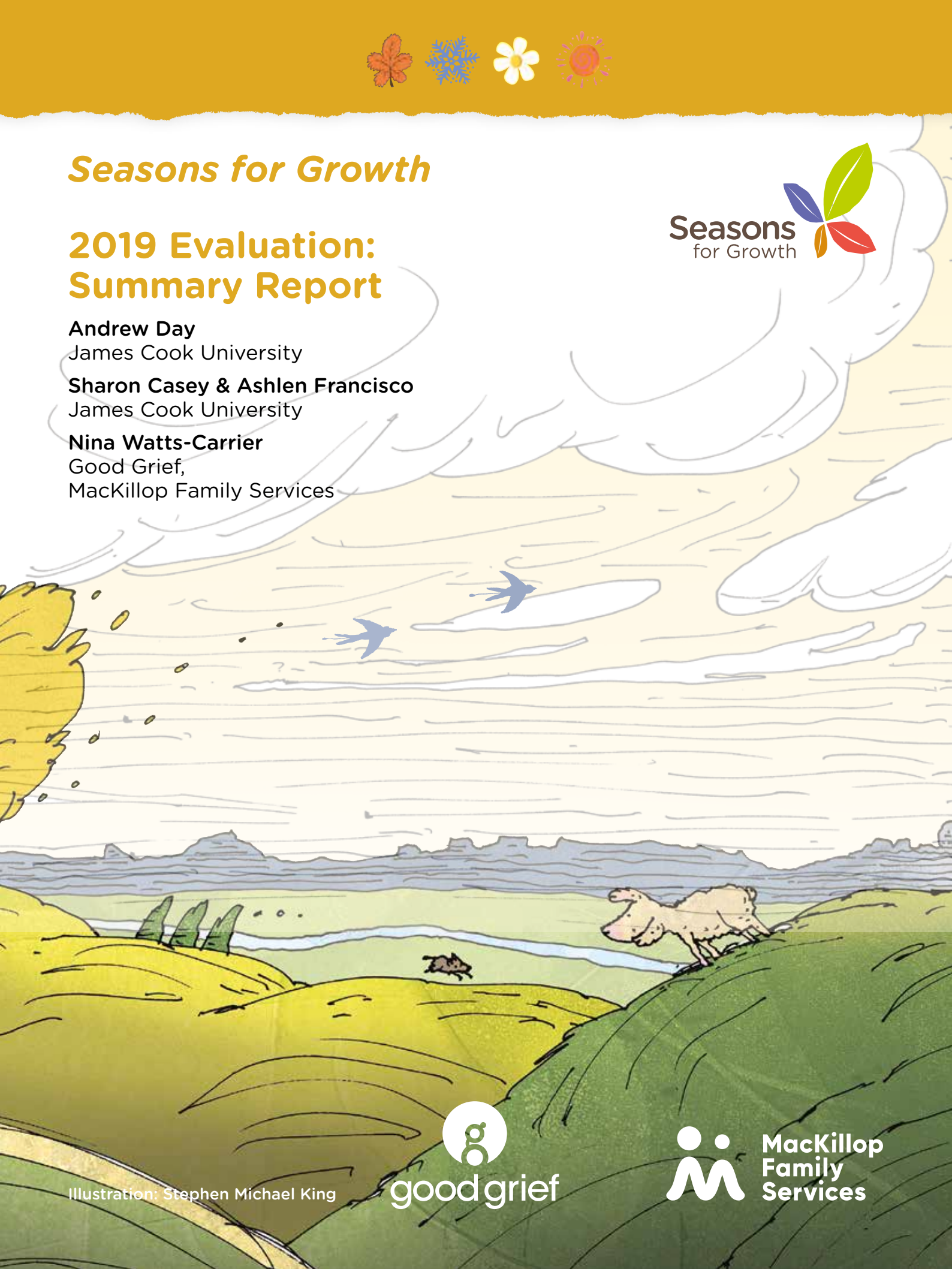


Illustration: Stephen Michael King

