



Talking to Children About Death & Grieving

Resources by Childhood Matters

Death is a difficult topic to talk to kids about, but it's an important one. Below is a way to explain death and grieving to them.

Death of a Flower:

Do you remember those flowers we planted? We put seeds in the dirt, and it grew into a tall and beautiful flower. It was alive. We watered it and planted it where it had sunlight. Do you remember when it got brown? We tried everything, but it wouldn't grow anymore. That's because its body stopped working. Because of that, it died. Well, that's what happens when a person dies. Their body stops working. They can't do the things they used to do anymore.



Ice Cream Grief:

Remember when we got ice cream? Remember when it was so cold that you got a brain freeze? That brain freeze hurts so bad that you can focus on anything else. Then it gets a little bit better. You can lick again. When somebody dies, you grieve. Grieving feels like the ice cream brain freeze. You are so sad that you can't think about anything else. That grief slowly gets better.



Children express their thoughts and feelings. So, during activities is a good time to discuss this, what they've heard, any questions they have, and how they are coping. The activities below (P. 5,6) have a potential discussion starter with them.

Preschool

What Do They Understand?

They believe death is temporary and reversible. Preschoolers have a literal way of viewing the world. They are just starting to wonder if death happens to everyone. Some questions you may hear are: “When will they come back?”, “Will I die?”

Their Responses:

- Crying
- Anxiety (separation, general)
- Increased temper tantrums
- Repetitive questions
- Clinginess
- Irregular sleeping
- Wanting to tell the story to everyone, including strangers

Ways to Help:

- Keep routines consistent
- Offer choices whenever possible
- Give a short and concise explanation of the death
- Use actual words like “death” and “died”
- Avoid using abstract and euphemistic expressions such as “passed away,” “gone,” “taken by the angels,” or “gone to sleep.”
- Answer all questions honestly
- Provide opportunities for play and art
- Offer lots of physical reassurance
- Tell them that it is okay to feel any way they do, creating a safe place for their feelings to be heard and understood

Elementary



What do They Understand?

Elementary school children now know that death is final and irreversible. However, they don't think it can happen to them or their loved ones. It's during this stage that they begin to think about how the death will impact them. Some may fixate on the details of the death and the body. There is a lot of anger and guilt, leading them to blame themselves. An example would be: If I cleaned my room like I was supposed to, my mom would still be alive. Additionally, they will start to worry about themselves or their loved ones dying.

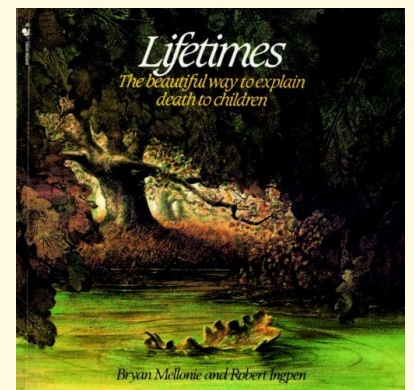
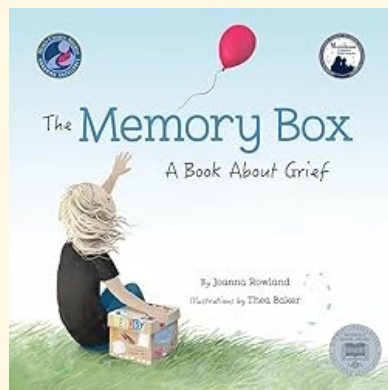
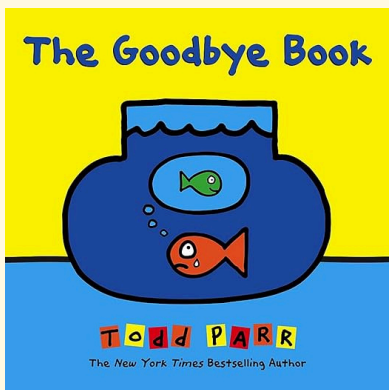
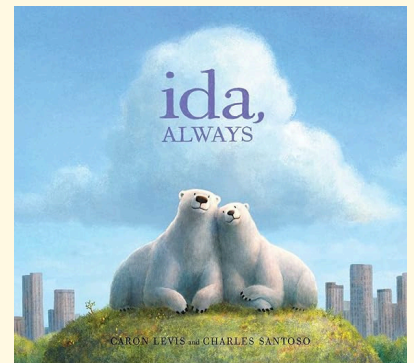
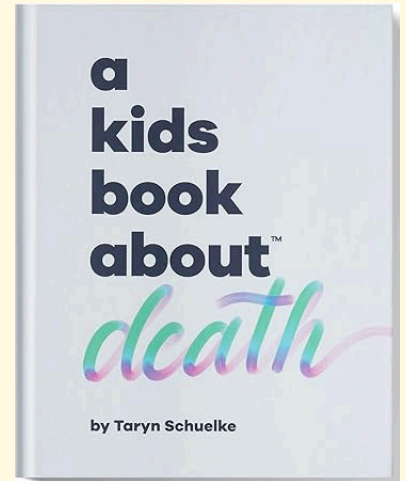
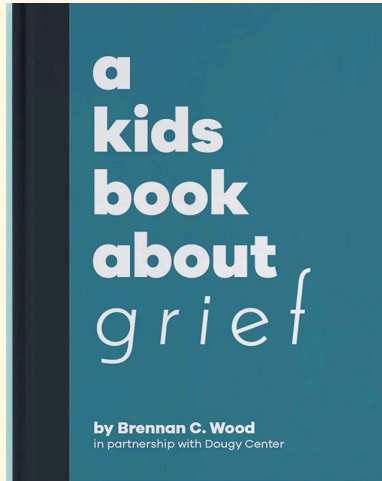
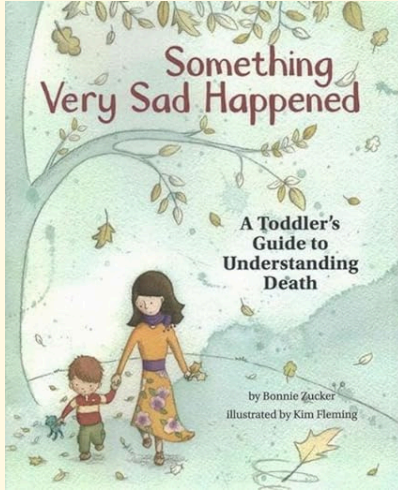
Their Responses:

- Expressing their big emotions in ways that looks like acting out
- A lot of anxiety and concern for safety
- Difficulty focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Withdrawal from social situations
- increased sensitivity to noise, light, movement, and change
- A wide and mixed range of emotions like sadness, anger, revenge, relief, etc.
- Detailed questions about the death
- Talking and playing to recreate the event
- Physical complaints like headaches, stomachaches, and body pain

Ways to Help

- Provide a huge range of activities to express themselves like art, music play, journaling and exercise
- Help them to identify people and activities that make them feel safe
- Try to keep up with regular routines
- Talk about your own emotions. Do a daily emotion check in with them
- Avoid giving them advice or telling them how they feel
- Answer their questions clearly and accurately
- Use words like "death" and "died"
- Avoid using abstract and euphemistic expressions such as "passed away," "gone," "taken by the angels," or "gone to sleep."

Books about Death and Grief



A Memory Bracelet Activity



Discussion: When a loved one dies, you remember them by the memories and love you share. Sometimes that can be hard to remember when you're sad. To remember you're still connected, having an object that reminds you of them helps. You're going to make a bracelet to remind you of someone you love.

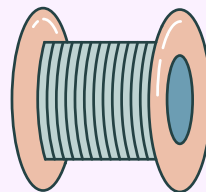
Supplies: A wide range of different beads, string/elastic cord, and scissors

Step 1: When you have all the supplies laid out, you can start putting on the beads. Choose beads that match these sentences:

- Place a bead on your bracelet that matches your loved one's favorite color
- Place a bead on your bracelet that represents their favorite season
- Place a bead on your bracelet you think they'd like
- Place a bead on your bracelet that reminds you of a happy memory with them
- Place a bead on your bracelet that matches what you love about them
- Place a letter bead on your bracelet of the first letter of their name
- Place a bead on your bracelet that shows your love for them

Step 2: When you're done, have an adult cut the cord and knot it

Now you have a bracelet full of things to remind you of your loved one every time you wear it!



Invisible String Activity

Discussion: In the book, you learned that even when your loved one dies, all your love and memories will stay in your heart. There will always be that invisible string connecting you. Now you can make your own string!

Supplies: Construction paper, string/yarn/ribbon, hole punch, pencils/markers/crayons, and scissors

Step 1: Read the Invisible Invisible String book

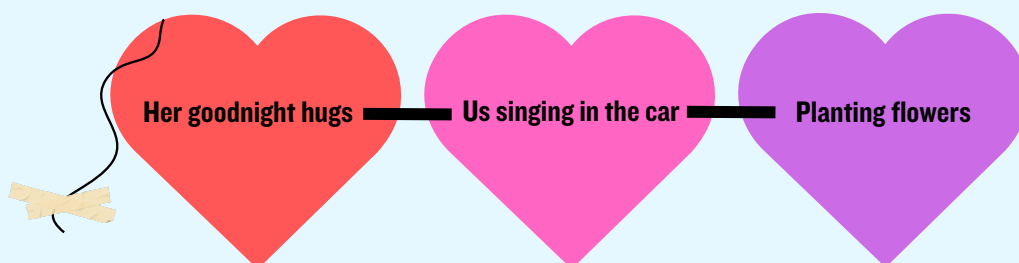
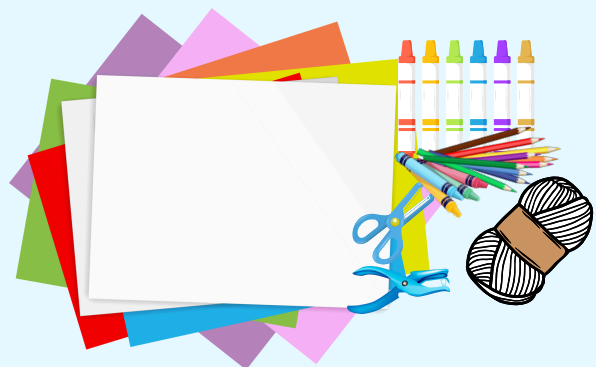
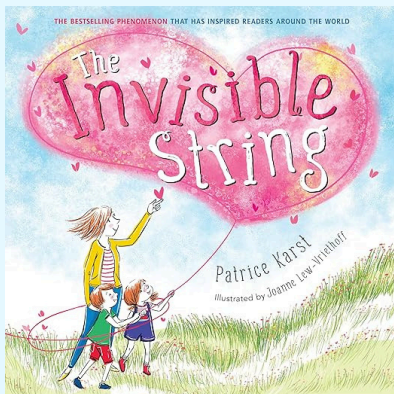
Step 2: Draw 3 or more hearts on the construction paper. Then use the scissors to cut them out

Step 3: Pick a person in your life that you love. Then write or draw your happiest memories with that person on each heart

Step 4: Use the hole punch to create a hole on each heart

Step 5: Attach all the hearts onto the string/yarn/ribbon

Now you can see your invisible string that will always connect you to them. Display it somewhere so you can remember this when you feel sad or are separated from them!



Fill Up The Heart With Your Feelings

Color the heart with all the colors that match how you feel.



Happy



Sad



Nervous



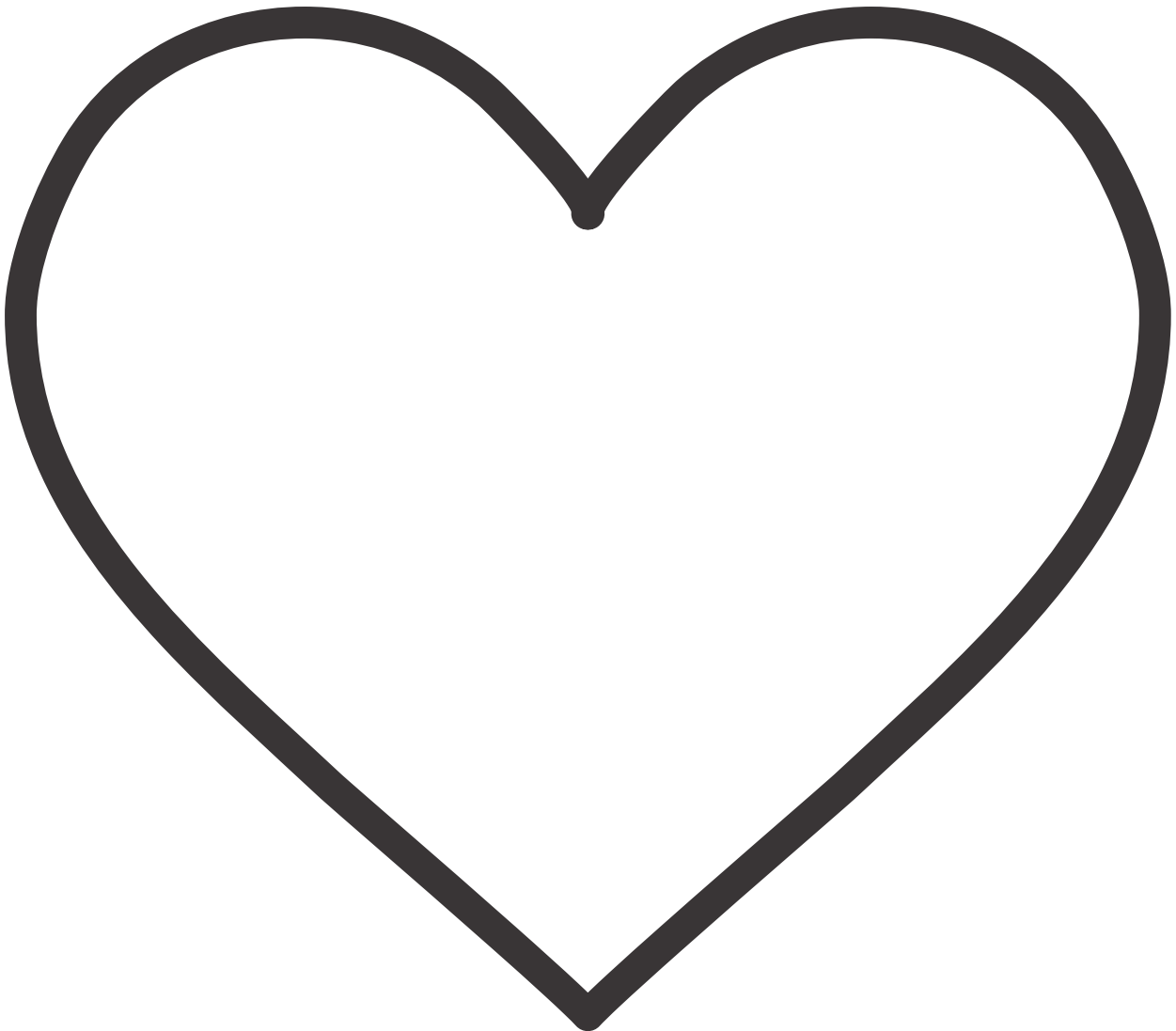
Anxious



Worried



Angry



My Worry Cup

Show how full your cup is with worry. Draw big water drops for big worries and little water drops for little worries

Big Worries



Little Worries



Coping With Grief During The Holidays

Acknowledge that the holidays may be different



Plant some bulbs or a shrub in a place that holds special memories

Write a letter or a poem for the loved one



Prepare memory foods/recipes



Decorate a special table centerpiece in honor of the loved one



Set up a place setting for the loved one at the table

Grief Services

1-Our House

Grief Support Center

21860 Burbank Blvd. North Building, Suite 195

Woodland Hills, CA 91367

(310)473-1511

<https://www.ourhouse-grief.org/>

2- Grieving Assistance Centers (First 5 LA)

<https://www.first5la.org/article/grieving-assistance-centers-los-angeles-county/>

3- Grief Share

<https://www.griefshare.org/>

4- The Compassionate Friends

Supporting Family after a Child Dies

<https://www.compassionatefriends.org/>

Thousand Oaks: (805) 579-7065

or (805) 443-1905