



2023  
**GRIEF  
TALKS**  
CONFERENCE

To Confirm Your Attendance,  
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**Little Ones Have  
Voices Too**

*How To Engage Children 0-5 in Grief Work*

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*When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.*

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# Introductions

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# Welcome Everyone

-  **Connect with each other over chat**
-  **Make yourself comfortable/move**
-  **Use the Q&A function for specific questions**
-  **Share your experiences, you're the experts**
-  **Share who are you to little ones**



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**Self-care isn't selfish.  
It is an ethical  
responsibility to  
ourselves and others.**



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## Hopes for the Day



You will be able to describe cognitive, emotional and social impacts young children experience after the death of a loved one.



You will be able to recall 2-3 considerations that need to be made in order to appropriately engage young children in grief work.



You will be able to identify 2-3 activities that can be implemented with young children to encourage grief work.



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# Question Time



**What do you believe (or others believe) babies, toddlers and preschoolers know about death?**



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# What is Grief?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is natural.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is complex.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is nonpathological.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is unique.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is dynamic.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is contextual.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is disruptive.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Grief is nonfinite.
- \_\_\_\_\_



*Schuuman, D. L., & Mitchell, M. B. (2020). Becoming grief-informed: A call to action. Dougy Center: National Grief Center for Children & Families. www.dougy.org*

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# Ripples of Loss

Primary loss event

Secondary losses (Resulting from the primary loss event):

- Sense of Security
- Sense of Self
- Sense of Meaning
- Sense of the Future

Secondary adversities as a result of the loss

Other types losses



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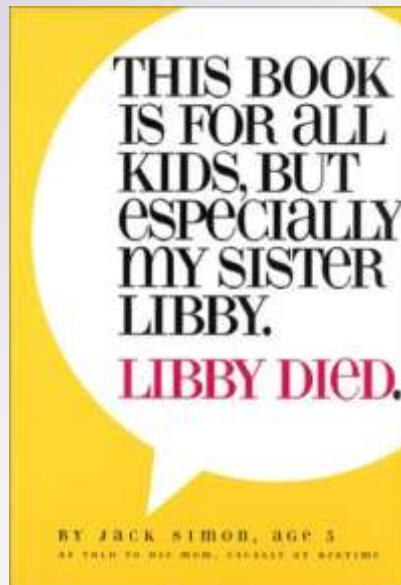
## Grief and Mourning



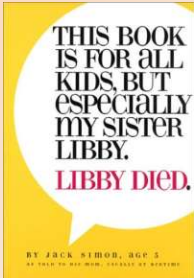
- Grief is the **internal** experience of loss
- Mourning is the **external** expression of loss
- These experience can seem congruent or not
- Because there is no “right” way to grieve and mourn, we must remain curious as to what a child is experiencing
  - This is especially important for little ones who do not yet have the words to express themselves
  - This is why grief support focused on attachment and attunement are important during these years



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*Did you hear me? She died. And when you die, you don't even have to get chicken pox. And when you die, you don't even have food, you don't need food. I'm hungry.*

*Libby was just so sick, no doctors could help her. So she had to die. So she did. She's the first one in our family to die. She's the first to be with the angels.*

*Mom, what if Libby was your first baby, and I was your middle kid? Would it have been me? Would I be dead now?*

*Well, when I die, just put my superhero action figures on my chest so I can bring them up to heaven with me and we can play with them. Maybe someone else will bring a Mighty Max Playset.*

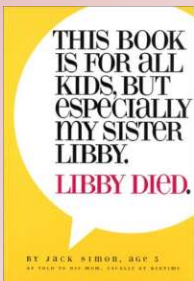
*Yeah, if I could ask Libby about Heaven... You're dead, so how exactly do you live?*



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Simon, J., & Simon, A. (2001). *This book is for all kids, but especially my sister, Libby: Libby died.* GSD & M. Idea University Press.

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*And how do angels grow those wings out of their backs? How do you move them? Do they come with wing instructions? Wouldn't it be funny if you had wings coming out of your eyeballs? Or on your butt? Hahahaha.*

*And if you don't need your body anymore are there just heads floating around?*

*Mom, will Libby have the same face and clothes on when we see her as an angel? Will we have to ask all the angels which ones are named Libby? How will we recognize her?*

*Do angels ever go to sleep? Do they stay awake every day and every night?*

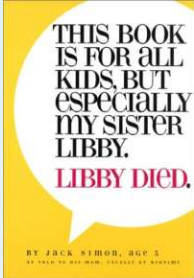
*I would like to ask a sad question, too... like how much does she love us and miss us.*



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*Hey, Libby... did you get the balloons we flew up for your birthday?*

*In heaven, are you as big as you were on earth?*

*Wow. Now you know what God looks like.*

*When you die, you can float through walls and doors and stuff that you can't do now. Even Libby. When she was alive, her bones were mixed up. She couldn't even hug anyone or crawl anywhere, but now she can even float through walls.*

*I know! It's like Aladdin's gene. When you're on earth, your body's like your master. And when you die, you're set free.*

*Right, Libby? And since you can now... give God a hug for me, too*



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## Question Time



**What are your thoughts and reactions to Jack's understanding of death?**



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## The Caregiving Relationship



**Attachment** refers to a relationship bond between a child and their primary caregiver which is formed in the early years and has a long-term impact on a child's sense of self, development, growth and future relationships with others.



**Attunement** refers to the caregiver's ability to be aware of and respond to a child's needs. Attunement starts with meeting an infant's basic needs for warmth, food, sleep, safety and love and progresses to helping them understand their own emotions.



**A secure base** is provided through a relationship with one or more caregivers who offer a reliable base from which to explore and a safe haven for reassurance when there are difficulties. A secure base promotes security, confidence, competence and resilience.



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## Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis/Task	What Happens at This Stage?
1	Trust vs Mistrust	If needs are dependably met, infants develop a sense of basic trust.
2	Autonomy vs Shame/Doubt	Toddlers learn to exercise will and do things for themselves, or they doubt their abilities.
3	Initiative vs Guilt	Preschoolers learn to initiate tasks and carry out plans, or they feel guilty about efforts to be independent.



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The Psychology Notes  
Headquarters:  
<https://www.psychologynoteshq.com>

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## Infants and Toddlers

- Have not yet developed the cognitive the components to fully understand death
- While they do not understand 'death' they are sensitive to the changes in their relationships and routines with others
- Little ones are responding to the emotional cues of others during a loss
- Memories are integrated in senses not narrative
- You may generally see little ones be more irritable, changes in eating and sleeping and changes in developmental progress



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## Preschoolers



- Death is still temporary and reversible
- Death is experienced concretely
- Magical thinking and egocentrism result in misconceptions of will and the causality of death
- Emotional identification and expression is still in development, so words can be hard
- Learning occurs though experience and repetition so children may play out or ask questions frequently
- You may generally see regressive behaviors, externalizing behaviors, anxiety-based behaviors



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## How Death Impacts Little Ones Relationships

- Loss of the primary caregiving attachment (mother)
- Changes in caregiving dynamics
- It can alter a previously secure attachment by:
  - Limiting the physical and emotional availability of the caregiver to the child
  - Inducing in the caregiver and child emotionally overwhelming experiences
  - Creating affective and behavioral dysregulation between the two,
  - by reducing the child's trust in the caregiver as a reliable protector
- Creates a multitude changes in the family system



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## What We Can Do To Support Little Ones



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**It's all about connection.  
And relationships.**



## Well Caregivers : Well Children



**“You can’t give cookies if you have no cookies in your jar. Caregivers with empty cookie jars need help baking cookies.”**





## Regaining a Sense of Safety and Security

- As early loss may disrupt several domains – it can lead to changes in their internal narrative about self, others and the world:
  - Increases a sense of distrust about the world and care (“if mommy died, anyone could die, and I need to protect myself and others from that”)
  - Become confused about the abilities of their will on the world (leading to shame, doubt, guilt)
- Help distinguish safety from shielding
- Reframe little one's disruptive behavior as safety seeking and support them in the context of their relationships



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## Becoming Fluent in the Language of Little Ones

- Children and adults speak very different languages to get their needs met
- We must ourselves first become fluent and then support caregivers in understanding their little one's behaviors
- ***Remember the first time you were in a foreign country and didn't speak the language – what was it like?***
- When we're not heard (getting our needs met) we tend to say the same thing bigger, badder, bolder, louder... or just turn off



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## Say 'Hi' to Sammy – 4 Years Old

Sammy's dad had a heart attack in his home. Sammy found him and tried to call for help to his mom. By the time the ambulance arrived, his father had died. Every time Sammy's mom tries to leave, he begins to tantrum and hit his mother saying, "I hate you, I hate you." Sammy's mom who is always late to work begins to run out so she's on time.

- **What are Sammy's behaviors saying to us?**
- **What is his mother saying back to Sammy?**
- **How could Sammy's mom help him regain a sense of safety and security in their relationship?**



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## Say 'Hi' to Aura – 6 Months



Since Aura's mother died, she must be taken care of by multiple caregivers throughout the week so her father can go to work. These caregivers aren't consistent (sometimes its an Aunt, family friend, daycare). She refuses to eat and is extremely difficult to put down for a nap.

- **What are Aura's behaviors 'saying' to us?**
- **What is her father saying back to Aura?**
- **How could Aura's father help her regain a sense of safety and security?**



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## “The Girl in the Dress, Again!”



Think of one of the first memories you can recall.



Think of a story you were told by your family about you or someone close to you before you can ‘remember.’



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## “Your Daddy Was a Funny Guy”

- "People are hungry for stories. It's part of our very being. Storytelling is a form of history, of immortality too. It goes from one generation to another." -*Studs Terkel*
- Stories help us convert a relationship from one of presence to one of memory and in doing so maintain that relationship with the person
- We don't always need our own memories to have a relationship with another person, so stories become vital to that connection



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## Become a Wise Old Storyteller



**Plan and keep stories over time**



**Tell stories in different ways**



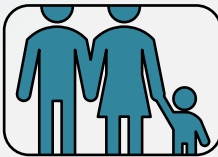
**Let stories happen naturally**



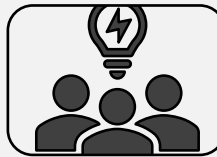
**Celebrate the whole person**



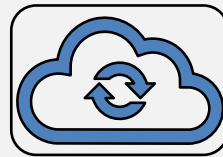
**Be prepared for questions**



**Validate their relationship**



**Encourage imagination**



**Pause, reflect and connect**



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## “This Was Grandpa’s Favorite Mug”

- The death of a family member creates many changes to our routines and many of our rituals, routines and traditions that naturally help us regulate
- Rituals, routines, traditions help children and families:
  - Develop a sense of rhythm
  - Create a sense of expectation
  - Moves people through time –sense of continuance
  - Help mark transitions
- Remember to continue to build or create rituals/routines, traditions in new and different ways
- Help keep the person honored during special times



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## “You Have Your Mom’s Crinkly Ears”



- Children have a pervasive fear that they are going to forget their person who died
- For children who don’t or who have very limited memories this could increase feelings of resentment, unfairness, feeling cheated
- Death only severs a physical connection, not an emotional one
- Foster interactions where caregivers make children feel connected to their loved ones
- Help children over time develop a “felt” sense that a part of who that person was lives with them



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## “Bury and Unbury”



- Play is the language of children – it is healing
- Play is how children gain understanding and mastery of concepts around death:
  - Concepts of loss, separation, control
  - Concepts of reality
- All types of play are important and encouraged
- Engage all the senses
- Have toys that represent the person who died
- Help de-pathologize play about death
- Promote caregiver's ability to let little one's play about death



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## “This Is My Daddy Pillow” ”You Do Have a Mommy”

- Engage little one’s other big people in their grief
- Keep in open communication with their systems
- Create a plan with others:
  - Transitional objects, keepsakes, gentle structure
  - Plan for holidays, milestones, anniversaries
- Discuss the need for the expression of grief in their other settings (school, daycare)
- Be an advocate for grief-informed communities to change antiquated practices and beliefs



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## Supporting Grief Over Time



- As a little one goes through new developmental milestones; they will experience grief in new and different ways
- Model what you’d like to see
- Support the “skills” for grieving that will build the foundation for their grief as they grow:
  - Normalize death and dying
  - Validate and encourage many feelings
  - Support curiosity and questions
  - Foster connections to others
  - Create ownership over grief



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## Navigating the Tough Stuff

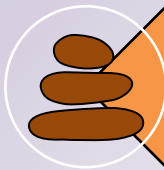
- “Speaking the unspeakable”
  - Be transparent about death, truthful about emotions
  - Be honest and direct while being age appropriate
  - Help to de-stigmatize those disenfranchised death experiences (suicide, homicide, overdose) by normalizing talking about them
    - Can help to avoid shame, blame, guilt, anger, etc.
- Focus on enhancing caregiver supports
- Acknowledge and honor the varying relationships people had with the person who died
- Seek additional resources as needed



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## Reflections



Is there anything you'd like to leave behind that is feeling heavy?



Is there something you'd like to take with you from our time together?



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## The Love Of Resources and Books

- [The Highmark Caring Place](#)
- [National Alliance for Children's Grief](#)
- [The Dougy Center](#)
- [What's Your Grief](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#)
- [Piplo Productions](#)
- [Sesame Street Workshop](#)
- [PBS Kids](#)
- [The Invisible String/The Invisible Web](#) by Patrice Karst
- [The Color Monster: A Story About Emotions](#) by Anna Llenas
- [Mindfulness for Little Ones: Playful Activities to Foster Empathy, Self-Awareness, and Joy in Kids](#) by Hiedi France
- [The Memory Box: A Book About Grief](#) by Joanna Rowland
- [The Rabbit Listened](#) by Cori Doerrfeld
- [Remembering Blue Fish \(Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood\)](#) by Jason Fruchter
- [In My Heart: A Book of Feelings \(Growing Hearts\)](#) by Jo Witek



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**ALLOW  
YOURSELF A  
LITTLE BIT  
OF GRACE**

**GOOD ENOUGH IS  
GOOD ENOUGH**

**YOU ARE GOOD  
ENOUGH**

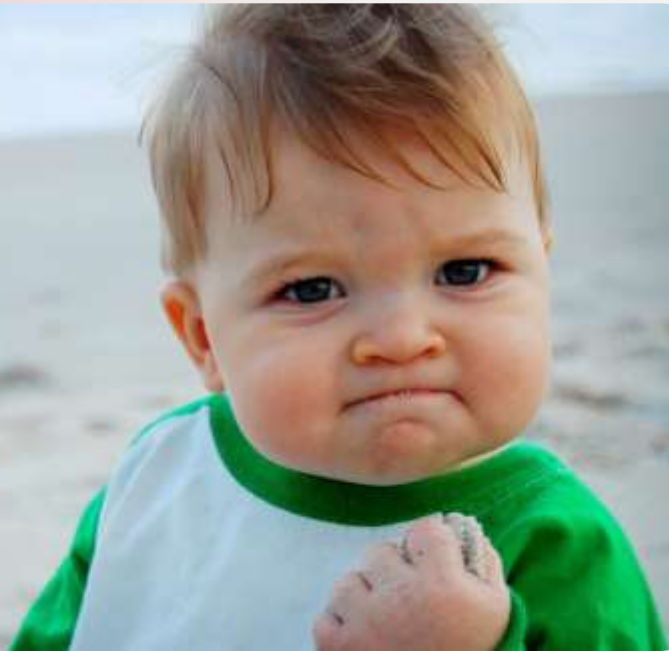


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**YOU  
ROCK!**

**Thank  
you.**



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