

The A B C's of Death

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The purpose of this book is to help you become more comfortable in supporting children through the uncomfortable topic of death. We have filled this book with tools, tips, and information on ways you can best support children.

Created by:
Jenna Polutanovich, Child and Youth Care Practitioner
Miranda Leonard, Graphic Designer

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Death can be an uncomfortable topic for some. Typically, there are negative connotations associated with the word death. For example, cemeteries, funerals, and hospices are usually accompanied with a dark and gloomy feeling.

Reflect on when you were a child. What did death mean to you? What emotions do you recall experiencing? Was this something you talked about? Often times, individuals explain that this was a topic they weren't allowed to discuss or it was often avoided. Hopefully, after reading this book, you are able to help children to view death as a natural part of life – because it is!

When you allow and encourage open conversations about death with children, you may notice that they become more comfortable with this difficult topic. Open conversations about death may also help them develop healthy coping skills if someone they love dies.

This resource is filled with definitions, activities, tips, and information for parents or caregivers to support children. From explaining death to children or comforting them through a life-limiting illness in the family, this book will help you confidently support them.

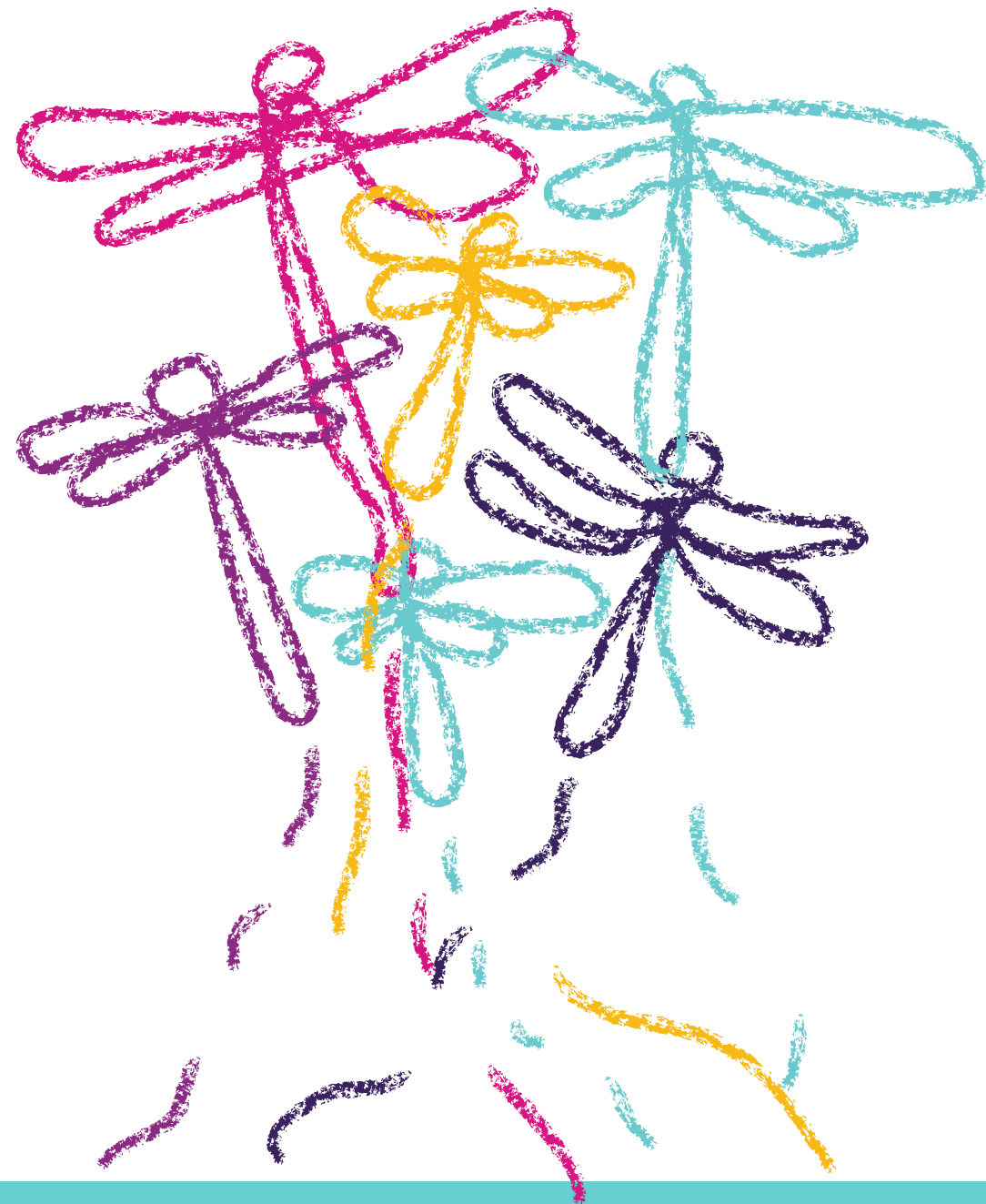
The comfort scale to the right is a great way for you to evaluate your own comfort level regarding this topic. Reflecting on your own comfort with death will affect the way you support others.

Let's Talk About Death - I am...

COMFORT SCALE	comfortable talking about my own death.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	comfortable supporting someone close to me who is grieving.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	comfortable talking about death and dying.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	comfortable talking about death and dying to children.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	aware of the services offered in my community for children.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	aware of the needs of children who are grieving.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10



Talking With Children About Death.



The Dragonfly Story

Once upon a time, in the bottom of the pond, there lived a community of water bugs! Now and then, one of the water bugs would climb all the way up a lily stock and would never be seen again. They all knew that when this would happen, they wouldn't see their friend again.

The leader of the waterbug community put his foot down and said that the next one of us to climb up the lily stock must come back down to tell the whole community where they went and why. Soon enough it was that very leader's turn to climb up the lily stock! So he started climbing, and by the time he got up to the top of the lily pad, he was VERY tired. He decided he would have a nap. When he woke, he felt something different about his body. He had a tail and wings! Shocked by his new body he wanted to try out his wings and fly. So he flew!

As he was flying, he remembered his promise to the community. He tried to go back down and explain to them where he went and how amazing he felt in his new body. But he realized he couldn't go back down. He thought to himself that when their time comes, they too will become dragonflies and experience the wonderful world of sun and air. So off he flew into his joyous new life!

What Is...For Kids

Kid-friendly definitions for seemingly uncomfortable topics

DEATH

This is what happens to a person when their body becomes old, sick or injured and their body stops working and breathing. People can die when they have a serious illness, they are very old, or they get into an accident that causes their body to stop working.

EMOTIONS

Emotions are what we feel. We feel them because of what we see, hear, remember, and do. So whether we are sad and blue or happy and excited, we can share our feelings with other people by talking about them. See more about feelings on page 28.

GRIEF

Intense feelings, thoughts and reactions people have when someone dies. These feelings are usually sadness, anger, guilt, and/or shock. Sometimes feelings can be different. Anything that you are feeling after someone dies is OK. It is important to talk about how you are feeling!

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

This is the grief that happens when someone is anticipating death. This is the wide range of feelings you may have if your loved one has a life-limiting illness or when death is a possibility. A life-limiting illness could be cancer, Alzheimer's, COPD, etc.

MOURNING

This refers to the external expression of grief or certain rituals. This could include: crying, journaling, talking about how you feel, or doing an activity that helps express emotions: art, music, karate, dance, etc.



If you are unsure of a question your child is asking you, be honest! Communicate that you do not have the answer, and will get back to their question when you are ready. Being honest will show your child that you too are learning and growing with them.

WHAT TO AVOID

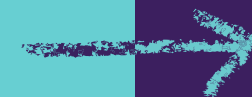
HERE'S WHY

"Your brother is very sick."



The child may begin to fear the sick individual or believe that they will become sick as well.

"Daddy has gone to a better place."



The child might become confused as to why they cannot also go to this 'better' place.

"Your sister has gone up to the sky."



An abstract concept such as this may be challenging for children to grasp and can lead to further confusion regarding where the individual is.

"Grandma has gone to sleep forever!"



The child may also be scared to go to sleep, or wonder why their loved one hasn't woken up yet.

"We lost your mother today."



The child might wonder why she can't be found. They may also believe they could still be found.

Helpful Tip! 

If you are wondering where to go from here, try to be open and honest about the situation. Explain what the illness is, what death means, and always encourage questions or conversations around the topic. Being open and honest with children encourages resilience as well as allows for them to realistically prepare and accept the truth of the situation!



Developmental Stages and How They Impact Grief.

Developmental Stages & Grief

The way in which a younger person grieves is greatly affected by their age, stage of development, previous experiences with death, and their relationship with the individual who has died. Identifying the child's developmental stage could assist you with your approach to best support them through their unique grief journey.

The following are generalized examples of developmental stages and ways they might impact the grieving process. **Grief is very unique.** The following information has been gathered based on observation and experience and does not mean the child is experiencing grief "improperly". There is no proper or improper way to grieve.

0-1 Baby

2-4 Toddler

5-7 Child

8-12 Pre-Teen

13-19 Teenager

Concept of Death

At this age, it can be very difficult to conceptualize death. Babies may experience feelings of detachment based on the loss they have experienced.

Grief Response

This age group relies mostly on their senses; they may not understand that the person is gone forever but can feel that they are no longer there.

How to Support

When supporting this age group, it is important to provide them with feelings of safety and comfort. Providing them with a structured routine can benefit their wellbeing.

Baby



Concept of Death

At this age, the concept of death could be seen as temporary and/or reversible. In some cases the toddler may believe that it is contagious and could happen to them.

Grief Response

At this age, the toddler could experience an intense, brief response to death. You may notice that their attention is focused on the death for short periods of time, and they can be easily distracted by external factors.

How to Support

Try to provide a simple, honest explanation of death with consistency in the language used. Provide the child with physical comfort and stability. Reassure that death is not contagious and that the child will be cared for.

Concept of Death

At this age, death can be seen as temporary or reversible.

Grief Response

At this age, the child may be very curious about details of the death. They may ask repetitive questions such as why, how, where etc. Some children may act as though nothing has happened, expressing feelings of confusion and distress.

How to Support

Try to provide a simple, honest explanation of the death. Try to avoid euphemisms such as went in the sky, went to sleep, etc. Create an environment for them to express their feelings and suggest various healthy coping strategies (see pages 34-42).



Toddler

Child



Concept of Death

At this age, the child may begin to conceptualize the death however could also find it difficult to understand the finality of death.

Grief Response

Similar to the previous age group, they may want to know more details about the death and ask specific questions. This age group has more of an understanding of the concept of death.

How to Support

Try to provide an open honest explanation of death and answer their questions honestly. Create an environment for them to express their feelings, provide coping skills and physical outlets.

Concept of Death

At this age, death can be seen as inevitable, universal, and irreversible. Abstract thinking is possible, allowing for the conceptualization of death.

Grief Response

This age group may want to talk to others outside of family and often prioritize their friend's needs over their own. Some may not want others to know what they are going through.

How to Support

Try to provide an open and direct dialogue about death, encourage verbalization but do not force it. Listen, set consistent limits balanced with autonomy and choices. Allow them to work through their grief at their own pace.




Pre-Teen



Teenager



How to Support Children




Discuss.
Talk about the reality of the situation, and what it means to them.

Authentic.
Be honest and explain to the child how you are also feeling in the situation.
Example: "Mommy is feeling ___ about..."

D R A G

Routine.
Provide the child with routine, as there is so much change around them they will need stability and structure.


Give space.
Allow for them to come to you with how they are feeling in their own way and on their own terms.



Open conversations.
The more you allow for open conversations the more they will feel comfortable talking about the situation.

O N F L Y

Normalize.
Normalizing their feelings and questions.
Example: "That is a really good question." or "Of course you would feel that way."




Fun!
Try to create some fun activities whether it be play, sports or creativity, this can help them to express their emotions.

You!
Take time for yourself during this time. Know that you are doing everything you can, go easy on yourself!

L

Listen.

They will want to talk about how they are feeling and ask questions. It is important to allow them to vocalize how they feel.



The following are the suggested six needs of the bereaved, written by Alan Wolfelt. These points are believed to be the phases that children may go through when grieving. It is important to note, however, that these are only suggested guidelines as grief is unique to all.

Needs of the Bereaved



- 1 Acknowledge the reality of the death.
- 2 Embrace the pain of the loss.
- 3 Remember the person who died.
- 4 Develop a new self-identity.
- 5 Search for meaning.
- 6 Receive ongoing support from others.

IDENTIFYING FEELINGS

Children or youth who are grieving the loss of someone they love may experience a vast range of emotions. It is important to be supportive and continue to normalize your children's feelings.

Once they are able to identify how they are feeling, you can respond in ways that allude to an open-minded understanding.

Some examples of supportive responses:

- It sounds like...
- That is such a great question regarding your feelings!
- Could you please tell me more about that feeling?
- It is normal to feel that way...



Try to avoid using language such as "I know how are you feeling", or "why are you feeling that way?" These comments can sound assumptive and judgmental.

To help children identify their feelings, ask them to point to a face that they connect with and explain that feeling!



Activities to Facilitate With Children Who Are Grieving.

Activities for Children's Grief

There are many activities that you can facilitate at home as a way to remember a loved one who has died. Here are a few example activities that you can lead with a child who may be grieving.



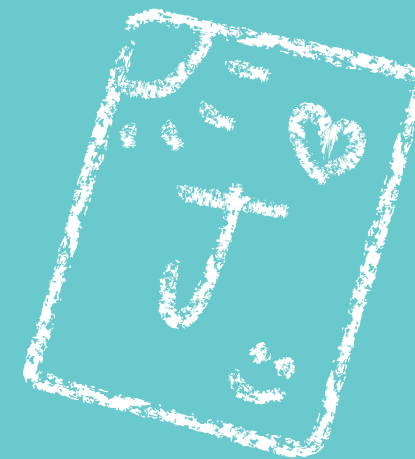
Memory Box

Use any type of box with a lid and decorate it how you would like to. Have your child fill it with all the memories, items, and/or keepsakes they may have of their loved one that has died.



Feelings Charades

Write different feelings on strips of paper and put them in a bag. Have your child pick out a feeling word and have them explain the emotion without saying what it is. You could also have them act it out with their body or have them explain a time in which they have felt that way.



Grief-itti

You will need a piece of paper and colouring or writing utensils. On the paper, have your child write their loved one's name horizontally in the middle. Then, have them draw pictures or write words that remind them of their loved one around their name.

Play-Doh Activity

Using two different colors of Play-Doh, have the child sculpt the first colour of something that would represent themselves. Once they have finished, put it off to the side. With the second colour, have them sculpt something that would represent their loved one. Once finished, have them hold both sculptures in their hands and mix them together until both colors have been combined. Once mixed together, have them try to pull apart the two colors. When they realize it is impossible, explain how similarly to their loved one, it is impossible to take away all of the memories. They will always live with those memories and no one can take them away from them.



THE HOLISTIC MODEL

The holistic model is aimed at focusing on the "whole" of a person. The four quadrants are what make us up as human beings. If one of these quadrants are off, then our "whole" self may be off balance. By incorporating some of the following activities into the child's everyday life, you will be supporting their grief and encouraging healthy coping skills.

On the following pages, there are example activities and coping skills to try with children. Some activities may fit in all sections of the Holistic Model.



PHYSICAL

Every child experiences grief differently and may need to express their emotions through physical activity. Below are some activities that children can use to help them express their grief or how they are feeling through something they enjoy.

Walking, Running, Jumping, Biking, Playing their favourite sport, Dancing, Trying yoga, Stretching, Stomping their feet, Ripping up paper, Throwing soft items such as stuffed animals, pillows, bean bags, etc, at the wall, ground, and other harmless areas



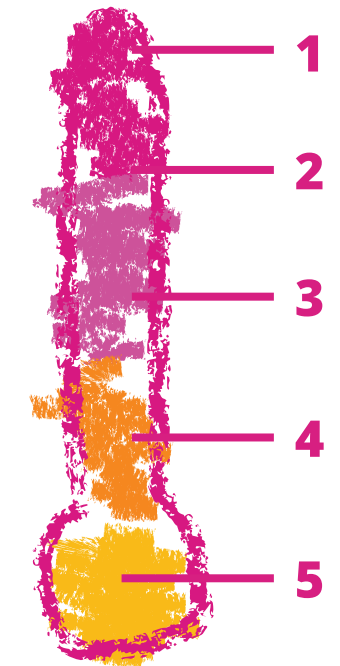
EMOTIONAL

Every child will have different emotions regarding their grief. It is important to allow them to express how they are feeling. Try some of the activities below as a way to support their emotions.

Using emoji sheets to identify feelings, Journaling to express emotions, Talking about their emotions with others, Writing or drawing a picture about happy memories they have of their loved one, Crying when needing to, Reading books about expressing emotions, Colouring or drawing to express emotions, Playing Jenga - they label an emotion with each block they pull, Using scales or ranges to identify how they are feeling, Creating goals about where they would like to be regarding their emotions



sad



happy

MENTAL

There are many activities that you can facilitate with your child that will promote and support their mental health and wellbeing. The following are ideas that you can use to help your child through their grief as well as to support their mental health.

- Journaling feelings, Colouring, Drawing, Exercising, Talking to someone, Sculpting Play-Doh (see page 43), Reading books



SPIRITUAL

In regard to grief, spirituality would be the way that a child connects to the understanding of their loved one's death. The following are some examples of activities to help support their grief journey, spiritually.

- Writing a letter to their loved one who passed, Sculpting memories of their loved one, Planting a flower or tree in their memory, Visiting the cemetery, Meditating, Creating a dream builder, Attending a memorial service/funeral



Below are some additional resources should you find yourself in search of reading material, movies, or community support.

General

- Needle and Thread *by Jan Thompson (local Sault Ste. Marie author)*
- The Invisible String *by Patrice Karst*
- Waterbugs and Dragonflies *by Doris Stickney*
- The Memory Box *by Joanna Rowland*
- Always Remember *by Cece Meng*
- Death is Stupid *by Anastasia Higginbotham*
- Ida Always *by Caron Levis*
- When Dinosaurs Die *by Laurie Krasny Brown*
- The Elephant in the Room *by Amanda Edwards and Leslie Poncian*
- Alan Wolfelt Books
- Disney Movie "COCO"
- Disney Movie "Inside out" (Distinguish feelings)

ARCH*

- One-on-one support for children using therapeutic use of play
- One-on-one support for youth
- Compassionate kids PD day camps
- One-on-one adult grief counselling
- Grief support groups

* Please call 705-942-1556 if you would like further information.



Support Resources

We Remember Them

A poem of remembrance by Sylvan Kamens & Rabbi Jack Riemer. Reading this poem is a great way for children and adults to take the time to remember their loved one.

At the rising sun and at its going down,

We Remember Them.

At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,

We Remember Them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring,

We Remember Them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer,

We Remember Them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of the autumn,

We Remember Them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends,

We Remember Them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as

We Remember Them.

When we are weary and in need of strength,

We Remember Them.

When we are lost and sick at heart,

We Remember Them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make,

We Remember Them.

When we have joy we crave to share,

We Remember Them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs,

We Remember Them.

For as long as we live, they too will live,

For they are now a part of us, as

We Remember Them.



Grief is a unique experience. For adults, it can be difficult to navigate the best way to support children through their grief. We hope that this book has acted as a guide for you with helpful tips, ideas, and information on how to support children through one of life's hardest experiences...

death! As parents or caregivers, it is important to also be gentle with yourself, as this can be just as difficult for you. If you find yourself or your child needing further support please contact the Supportive Care Team at ARCH.



YOU
ARE
NOT
ALONE

