

"Enhancing **resilience** in children  
experiencing grief and loss"

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# Objectives

- 1) Participants will learn at least 3 ways that powers of play therapy and creative arts can enhance resilience.
- 2) Participants will learn at least 3 key ways that developmental stages impact understanding of grief and loss experience.
- 3) Participants will be able to describe at least 3 specific play therapy and creative arts techniques to nurture resilience.

# Developmental Considerations: Overview

School aged children (ages 6 through 12) often see death as something that comes and gets you (ie The Grim Reaper). They may believe that death is contagious and may connect death with violence and other scary things. They are curious about the body and what happens to it after death. The idea of irreversibility and inevitability are starting to be understood. They may show increased aggression and decreased impulse control. Caregivers of children at this age can help their children by providing opportunities for play in a safe way, setting firm limits on aggression, encouraging empathy, being patient with and helping with coping of nightmares or fearfulness at bedtime, reassuring children that responses are normal and fade away over time, encouraging involvement in school and community activities, and by creating safety plans for the future.

# Developmental Considerations: Typical Reactions

Permanence: Before the age of 8, most children may think that death is reversible, like a long trip from which people return. It's part of their cognitive development. They may have difficulty with concepts such as "heaven." For this reason, well-intentioned sayings such as "he/she are in a better place" are quite confusing and not recommended. Same goes for sayings such as "death is like sleeping for a long time" or "they are resting." Being as direct, yet gentle, as possible is key. They may have difficulty verbalizing their many and varied feelings.

Impulse Control: Children may show increased aggression and decreased impulse control, and even hyperactivity and seemingly random bouts of laughter or silliness. These responses are all normal. Caregivers may find it helpful to provide opportunities for playing out their thoughts and feelings about death (ex: with toy figurines and household items), providing empathy, and getting involved in activities for physical release (ie. sports, boxing/punching bag, running, gardening, hiking, etc).

Worries: Children may start to worry about the safety of other family members. Children may ask “Will you die too?” Consider answering with something like *“Eventually everyone dies, but I take good care of myself so that I will live a very long life with you. And, doctors are working hard every day to better understand why bodies get sick, and that is very helpful for all of us”* can be reassuring and honest.

Fright: Children may worry about spooky things like burials and ghosts. Reminding children that when a body dies it cannot feel, get cold, get hot, get hungry, etc can be helpful so that the child doesn't worry in a concrete way that the person they love is buried. Consider sharing something like, *“it's just the body that is buried, their personality/soul/spirit is in heaven or always carried with us in our memories/hearts, etc.”* Helping them separate reality from fantasy is helpful.

Ego-centric Beliefs: Sometimes children blame themselves for the death of a loved one. Children naturally are ego-centric — we all think the world is in our power when we are young — so naturally they will think that they could have done or said something to have prevented, or even to have caused a death. Part of this is also due to their developmental reliance on their own magical thinking (ex: “if I only had given her my share of orange juice”, etc). Sharing something like: *“There is nothing you could have done or said to have stopped Dad from dying. Dad died loving everything about you.”*

Repetition: Questions are common (children learn through repetition). If there's a question you simply cannot answer at the moment (and there will be those moments... its okay!) consider saying, *"That's a really important question to me, and even though I don't know the answer to that, I'm so glad you asked it, and we'll keep trying to figure out these things together."*

Routines: Sometimes children take out their anger on their caregivers. When a death occurs, children feel a lack of control. Keeping children in school and other routines can be very helpful. It can also be helpful if they are allowed to make small choices everyday, and to add some input when planning funerals, memorials, and anniversaries. Having the ability to influence decisions can help children to regain a sense of control.

# Caregiver Responses

How can caregivers help children to grieve?

- Children release feelings in a healthy way through: crying, tantrums, and playful belly laughs! If they do not, those feelings will come out sideways through anxiety, obsessive compulsive patterns, aggression, etc. Be there with them in all their varied feelings.
- Remember that a child's grieving will look different from the adults. Children tend to bounce in and out of grief - they usually do not sustain long periods of intense grief. They may be playing usually one minute, and crying the next. That's not only okay, it's healing!
- Continue to hold space for talking about feelings, on a daily basis. Don't assume the child is alright just because they are resuming their usual ways.

- We can use honest and loving phrases such as: *“When someone special dies, we have many confusing feelings in our hearts - you may feel scared, angry, sad, sick - all feelings are OK. It can feel like we have a big hurt inside our hearts, and that feeling may last a very long time. We can share our feelings together - through talking, playing, cuddling, drawing, or crying together. Do you have any other ideas for how we can share our feelings together?”*
- We can explain the process of death based on their current understanding of the human body with phrases such as: *“His heart stopped beating and his lungs stopped breathing. That means that his body stopped working, so he died. I don’t know why that happened to his body. What I do know is that the part of Dad that made him special — which is called his personality/soul/spirit — has left his body.”*
- Depending on your religious or spiritual beliefs, you can add phrases such as: *“His spirit is in Heaven now. Heaven is not a place we can visit — it’s not like a playground or a park. It’s different. One day, a very long time from now when it is our time to die, we too will live in heaven with Dad. For now though, we will live here together in our own bodies which are still alive, healthy, and strong. When we miss Dad, we can look to heaven at night when the stars shine brightly, and we can pray to Dad and all of our guardian angels any time of day we wish to. It’s so sad that Dad won’t be here with us anymore — but he’ll live on in our hearts and in our lives, always.”*

# Therapeutic Ideas

Metaphors/Visualization for Nature: Metaphor allows us to provide a direct message in a roundabout, gentle way. Consider making a story about hope and growth, specific to the child's interests (ie. butterflies, waves on the ocean, etc): "Death and all the changes that happen afterward can cause many different kinds of feelings. All these feelings together are called "grief." Sometimes grief can feel pretty powerful — like a strong wind or a huge wave during a storm. At other times though, it can feel barely there at all — like a gentle breeze or calm ocean. That's because grief comes and goes. Just like the wind in the trees, and the waves at the beach." Use nature that is part of your everyday life as a natural opportunity to discuss phases and cycles of life, such as planting a memory garden, observing a particular tree season after season.

Create a memory corner, scrap book, or ritual: Consider it a cozy space that will evolve as they grow up — always a space that they can go to alone, or with with family and friends, where they can remember their loved one. They can keep photos, a memory box, etc there.

Some children enjoy creating a special alter around the anniversary of death, with favorite foods, items, photos, etc of loved ones who died. Disney Pixar's "Coco" reflects on Mexican customs, including making a special alter with favorite foods, items, photos, etc of loved ones.

Caregivers may also choose to engage in a daily memory sharing during dinner time (some families mark this ritual with holding hands, passing a baton, etc.).

Play, Play, Play: Children may need help expressing feelings and sorting out their ideas of changes in their worlds. Caregivers can help their child to communicate in the way that is most natural: play. Having puppets, figurines, and any other prop special to them is helpful and cathartic.

Opportunities for re-enactment through Play: Caregivers u can fill up a box with sand (or simply play on the floor), and using the various figurines provided gently explore feelings and thoughts. Sometimes I make the shape of a heart and ask the child to “show me how your heart feels” or “show me what your dreams are like at night” or “show me what you think happens to people after they die” or “show me a wish you have for this week”, etc. Drawing is a simple way to do this. Having a tool that helps externalize and put into motion their feelings can be helpful even if there are no words attached.

# Ideas for the upcoming holidays

- Move toward (not away from) special rituals (ie. baking and cooking family recipes, storytelling, etc) and create new ones together that include tributes (ie. ornaments, candles, special letters, etc).
- Consider meaningful gifts through crafts (ie. creating a blanket out of the loved one's tee-shirts or other clothing; scripted jewelry; a bouquet of silk flowers made out of ties etc; old baseball caps and when the child wants to feel close to their loved one encourage them to put on the cap and “think about a situation in the way that he would have”).

# Additional Resources

Movies: Lion King, Coco, The Land Before Time.

Books: “The Fall of Freddy the Leaf” by Leo Buscaglia, “Gentle Willow” by Joyce Mills, “In my heart” by Jo Witek, “I feel sad” by Cornelia Spelman, “I miss you” by Pat Thomas, “I didn’t get to say goodbye: a story for young children grieving during Coronavirus” by Jillian Kelly Wavering and Andrew Barnett, “The invisible string” by Patrice Karst.

Children and Family support groups and camps: Camp Comfort Zone (<https://comfortzonecamp.org/>), Shannon’s Hope Camp (<http://www.shannonshopecamp.org>), Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families ([www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)).

Support specific to death by Suicide: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([www.afsp.org/copingwithsuicide](http://www.afsp.org/copingwithsuicide)).

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