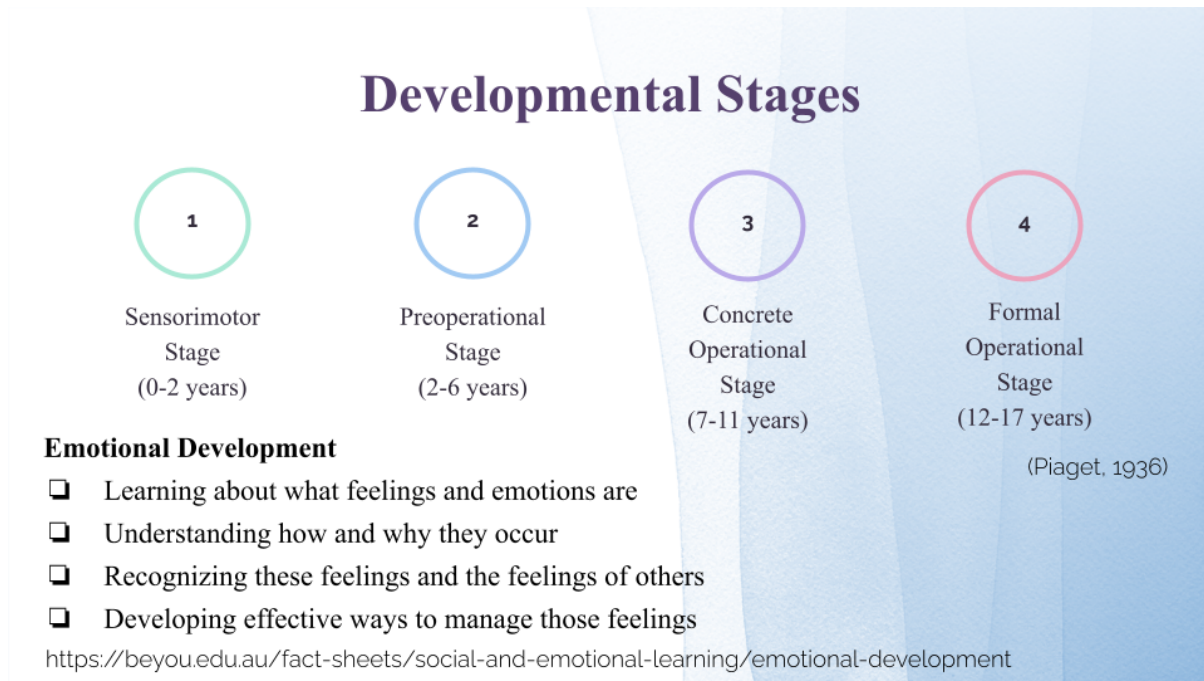


BFO Webinar
(May 25, 2021):
Overview of Supporting Children in their Grief



Developmental Stages and Emotional Development

- Developmental theory is crucial for parents and educators as understanding these expectations can lead to a healthier development for children.
- It is used to help develop education and further research in childhood psychology.
- It shows us:
 - Effective ways to teach children
 - What works in regards to discipline
 - How to engage with them in a manner that is both positive and meaningful
- Piaget's (1936) Developmental Stages:
 - Sensorimotor Stage (0-24 months)
 - Children during this time are defined as learning based on experiences of trial and error.
 - Preoperational Stage (2-6 years)
 - During this time, children are working on their development of language, memory, and imagination; their thinking and understanding are determined by their perception.
 - Concrete Operational Stage (7-11 years)
 - At this stage children begin to think more logically, children in the concrete operational stage also begin to understand that their thoughts are unique to them and that not everyone else necessarily shares their thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
 - Formal Operational Stage (12-17 years)

- At this point in development, children can think about abstract and theoretical concepts and use logic to come up with creative solutions to problems.
- Even though Piaget's theory and research are used widely in society, it is not always right.
 - These stages are mentioned so that there is a general understanding of what the thought process looks like in a child's mind during these stages of their life.
- Social and emotional development:
 - This describes how children start to understand who they are, what they are feeling and what to expect when interacting with others.
 - It is the development of being able to form and sustain positive relationships, experience, and therefore manage and express emotions, and explore and engage with their environment.
- Giving language and skills for dealing with strong or difficult emotions, such as anger and frustration, in a positive way is vital in helping children grow into well-adjusted adults.
- Being able to identify different feelings, express them (through words/pictures) and process difficult emotions enables children to be healthy emotionally and psychologically.

<i>Secure</i>	<i>Avoidant</i>
Relate positively to others and display resilience, engage in complex play and are more successful in the classroom and in interactions with other children.	Likely to withdraw and resist seeking help, which inhibits them from forming satisfying relationships with others.
<i>Ambivalent</i>	<i>Disorganized</i>
Often anxious and preoccupied and can be viewed by others as "clingy" or "needy" because they require constant validation and reassurance.	Chaotic, unpredictable, or intense behaviors. Extreme fear of rejection, coupled with difficulty connecting to and trusting others.

Attachment Styles and Patterns

(Ainsworth &
Bowlby, 1991)

Attachment Styles and Patterns

- The quality of the family environment is more important than family structure.
- A low-quality environment produces stress that puts a child at an increased risk for different types of maladjustment: this includes aggression, behaviour problems, depression, anxiety, and delinquency
- Caring, authoritative parents, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, or marital status, are the most important factor in setting the foundation for a child to thrive.

- Looking at the descriptions of each attachment pattern or style, we can see that the secure attachment bond is the one that leads to the most positive outcomes later in an individual's life.
- Attachment styles allow us to analyze how individuals establish themselves, and the pattern that is most prevalent in one's life usually stays with you well into adulthood.
 - In adulthood, attachment representations shape the way adults feel about the strains and stresses of intimate relationships, in particular parent-child relationships, and the way in which the self is perceived.
- Attachment plays a central role in the regulation of stress in times of distress, anxiety or illness.

Children's Grief & How it Differs from Adults' Grief

- ❑ Children's cognitive development can interfere with their understanding of death
- ❑ Children have a limited capacity to tolerate emotional pain (a short 'sadness span')
- ❑ Children's acute feelings of loss may occur in spurts over many years
- ❑ Children have limited ability to verbalize their feelings
- ❑ Children are able to express their feelings in play therapy
- ❑ Children are sensitive about "being different" from their peers

(Webb, 2010)

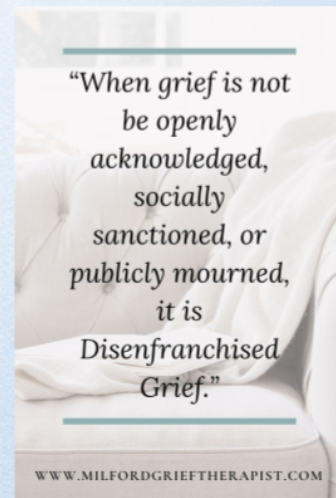


Children's Grief and How it Differs from Adult's Grief

- Children's cognitive development can interfere with their understanding of death (the irreversibility, universality- all living things must eventually die, and the inevitability of death)
- Children have a limited capacity to tolerate emotional pain (a short 'sadness span')
- Children's acute feelings of loss may occur in spurts over many years-grief experiences is much longer than adults

Disenfranchised Grief

- ❑ An individual does not have a socially recognized right, role, or capacity to grieve
- ❑ Society tends to focus on the parents losing their child, but often it does not acknowledge the children's grief and how they are coping with this sudden loss



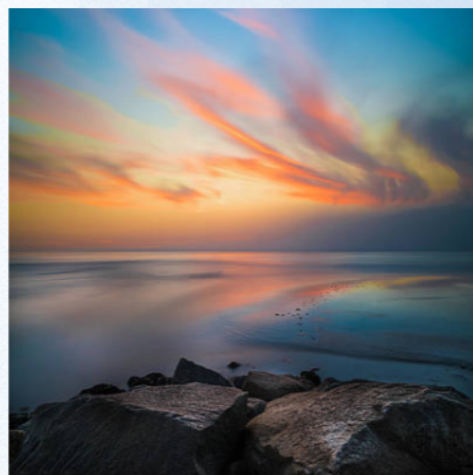
(Doka, 2002)

Disenfranchised Grief

- Society tends to focus on the parents losing their child, but often it does not acknowledge the children's grief and how they are coping with this sudden loss.
 - Children are coping not only with the loss of a loved one but also with the functional loss of a grieving parent(s) and/or caregiver(s).
- The child's grief can be disenfranchised due to society believing they are too young to grieve and not understanding what death is. Children do in fact grieve, just in different ways.
- Consequently, by silencing themselves and turning their grief inward, children are potentially putting themselves at risk for self-disenfranchisement.

Tips for Explaining Death to Children

- ❑ Alleviate the child's fear
- ❑ Reassure the child
- ❑ Keep children informed
- ❑ Ask children
- ❑ Plan to have future discussions



(Lowenstein, 2019)

Tips for Explaining Death to Children

- Alleviate children's fear that other family members will die soon too: You can do this by telling them that "Most people live a long and healthy life. I expect to live for a long time".
- Reassure the child they will be cared for: "There will always be adults to take care of you, like aunt ___".
- Keeping children informed will alleviate their anxiety. Explain the process that will be followed and what will happen next.
- Ask children what they think about what you have said to make sure they have actually understood.
- Plan to have future discussions about details of the death as children express a readiness to hear more: "Now that you seem ready, I'd like to tell you some more about how your dad died".

Talking about Grief with Children

(Lowenstein, & Warnick, 2019)

- ❑ Explain what grief means
- ❑ Start a conversation, but do not force it
- ❑ Create opportunities for discussions
 - Playing board games
 - Spending time outside
 - Cooking together
 - Books



Talking about Grief with Children

- The emotions that come with grief can be overwhelming for children of all ages. Helping them to understand the word grief, and what it means, can help them feel less confused by the intensity of their thoughts and feelings.
 - Experiencing grief is inevitable as a human being and explaining that can be helpful.
- Explaining what grief means: grief is a complex process.
 - It can be experienced and expressed in many ways through thoughts, feelings, and emotions).
 - It can also be experienced physically, socially, spiritually, and economically.
 - Grief impacts our work, our relationships, how we see ourselves and the

world.

- Conversation: But do not force it, as it may lead them to turn their grief inward.
- Books to support children:
 - Brown, L. K. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*.
 - Mellonie, B. (1983). *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*.
 - Schweibert, P., & DeKlyen, C. (1999). *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*.
 - Goldman, L. (2005). *Children Also Grieve: Talking about Death and Healing*.

Reactions to Grief

- ❑ Feelings (e.g., sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt)
- ❑ Physical sensations (e.g., stomachaches, headaches)
- ❑ Cognitions (e.g., disbelief, confusion, worries)
- ❑ Behaviours (e.g., crying, sleep disturbances, regression, withdrawal, aggression, assuming mannerisms of the deceased)
- ❑ Spiritual (e.g., searching for meaning, yearning for their loved ones)



(Lowenstein, & Warnick, 2019)

Reactions to Grief

- Feelings (e.g., sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt)
- Physical sensations (e.g., stomachaches, headaches)
- Cognitions (e.g., disbelief, confusion, worries, such as who will take care of me now? Will someone else die? Will other bad things happen to me?)
- Behaviours (e.g., crying, sleep disturbances, regression, withdrawal, aggression, assuming mannerisms of the deceased)
- Spiritual (e.g., searching for meaning, yearning for their loved ones, hostility towards others, and may have questions about an afterlife)

Tips To Help Grieving Children

- ❑ Do not be afraid to engage
- ❑ Be fully present and listen
- ❑ Ask
- ❑ Understand how children grieve
- ❑ Create meaningful opportunities that honour the deceased loved one



<https://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com/tips-to-help-grieving-children/>

Tips to Help Grieving Children

- **Don't Be Afraid to Engage:** For example, if a child experienced the death of a parent, it is important to engage with that child on some level- Share a favourite memory of their loved one with them.
- **Listen and Be Present:** Having an opportunity to tell his or her story is often beneficial to a child's healing process. It is important to really listen when they are sharing.
- **It's Okay to Ask:** When in doubt, ask a grieving child how you can help. Expect that you might get a range of answers or even a large amount of questions about grief.
- **Understand How Children Grieve:** Children will grieve for the rest of their life. It is important to remember that each child has his or her own way of grieving, and that is okay.
- **Create Opportunities for Rituals:** Rituals can give children tangible ways to acknowledge their grief and to honour the memory of those who have died, such as poem-making, and scrapbook.

Being a Parent of Bereaved Children (Sibling Loss)



- ❑ Understand and support children in their grieving
- ❑ This is difficult when the parents are grieving too
- ❑ Allow the children to talk about the brother or sister who died
- ❑ Refrain from making comparisons between the children that are unfavourable to the surviving children
- ❑ Do not expect a surviving child to take the place of the one who died. *Parents may expect other children to fill the shoes/assume the role of the deceased child*
 - This hurts child development and may cause rebellion
 - Try not to be overprotective of surviving children. They need the freedom to take risks and to develop in a healthy, confident and independent way.

<https://kidsgrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=311&pageid=781>

Being a Parent of Bereaved Children (Sibling Loss)

- Young children may lack the verbal capacity to express how they feel, and they may also experience developmental impairments.
- Somatic experiences may occur and are often powerful but invisible.
- Children must be given a voice to express their thoughts and feelings outside of their verbal capacity.
 - Permit for them to grieve by validating and normalizing their feelings.
 - Support healthy expression and mourning.
- Often after a death, a child feels helpless for not preventing the death from happening.
 - Ways to help them is by doing legacy work with them or by including them in making something for the deceased.
- Children also tend to feel responsible after a death occurs, so it is essential to explain the death in child-friendly language and tell them that it is not their fault.
- Children will often oscillate between feeling sad and being happy and playing; this is “normal”.
 - Returning to play is a way for the child to generate energy and aliveness, but it also unburdens them and returns them to be a child.
 - They often show expression through play.

Being a Caregiver to Bereaved Children

How to respond to grief:

- Helplessness
- Loneliness & loss of relationship
- Vulnerability
- Difference
- Emptiness and loss
- Mystery of death



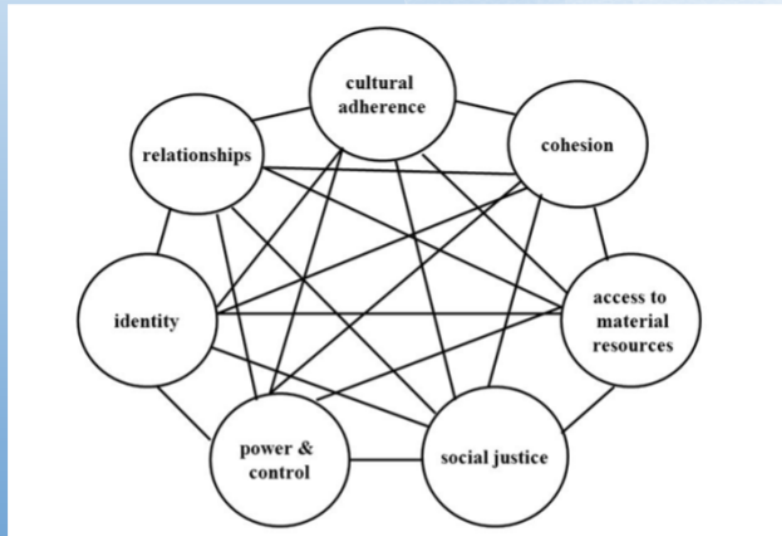
(Warnick & Toye, 2015)

Video: Sesame Street

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>

- This is a good video to watch with children ages 3-6 to help them understand that it is okay to miss someone and that experiencing grief, crying, and remembering good times are all okay things to do.
- Coping with the death of a loved one brings enormous challenges for the whole family.
- Grieving may never completely end, but working through the difficult feelings can become easier with time. Through support, open conversations, and finding ways to keep the person's memory alive, families can begin healing together.

Seven Resilience Resources Children Need



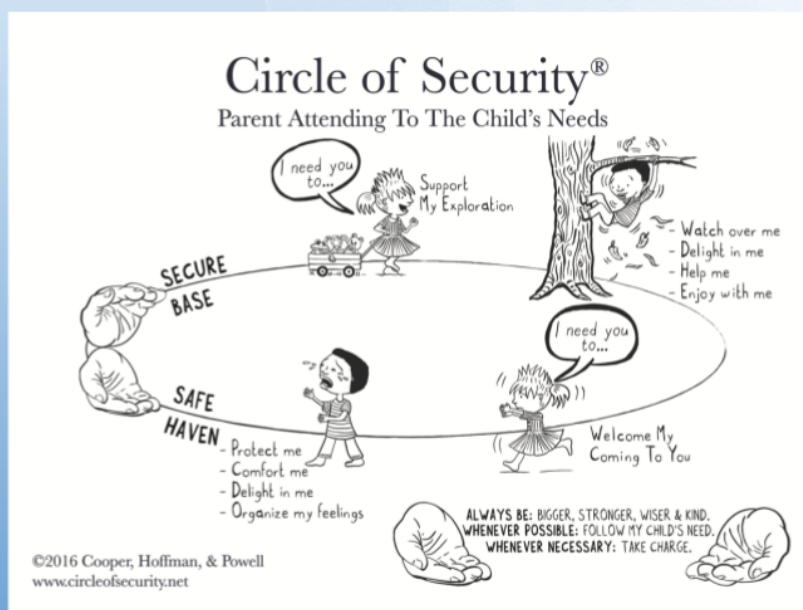
(Ungar, 2015)

Seven Resilience Resources Children Need

- These resources are seen to be interconnected as each one depends on the other for the overall success and development of resilience.
- In this concept, we look at relationships, identity, power and control, social justice, access to material resources, cohesion, and cultural adherence. Altogether these factors build upon how a child is able to respond to stress and grief.
- Relationships include family, friends, school, and extracurricular activities
- Identity incorporates the child's faith, spirituality, volunteering, jobs, and academics
- Power and control relies on their ability to be independent, how they are able to carry out self-care, and if they have solid leadership skills
- Social justice fosters the child's ability to empathize and sympathize with others
- Access to Material Resources includes their savings as well as their income which ultimately affects their life course
- Cohesion means their ability to participate and be included in events taking place in their everyday lives
- And finally, cultural adherence refers to the amount or presence of spiritual and faith-based activities that bind the individual into a wider support group
- If children and adolescents are positively supported in these ways, they will be able to better endure grief and will be more likely to have a less confusing emotional healing experience.

As a parent/guardian/and caregiver, you are their **secure base and safe haven.**

This means letting them explore in order to grow, but also allowing them to come back for support when needed.



Circle of Security

- The Circle of Security relates to what we have discussed about attachment styles and patterns. It is a great resource to follow when thinking about how to best establish the needs of the child and balancing those findings with what is available to you. In all situations, it is best to be a helpful and guiding hand in the child's life. Establishing safety, security, and trust is an effective way to create stronger and more resilient bonds.
- Looking at the picture, we can see that there is a flow to the circle of security. This is a guide that recognizes the needs that children have and that parents need to attend to. It is explained that there needs to be a safe base in order to help children to explore and grow, we want children to say "I need help", coming forward and asking for guidance when they need it. Children need reliable and consistent protection and comfort as well as know that they are cherished members of their families and are important individuals. Like adults, children require reassurance, compromise and sincere apologies, this is their way of holding onto the security that you provide to them.
- We go more into the importance of language later on with Michaeline, but it is important to note that children are tuned in to body language since a large part of their environment and interaction with others is non-verbal. Since children are naturally curious beings, do not be surprised if they have no filter on their questions and engage in controversial or uncomfortable conversations, validate their concerns and curiosity and do your best to give them the truth.
- As a parent/guardian/and caregiver, you are their secure base and safe haven. This means letting them explore in order to grow, but also allowing them to come back for support when needed.
- If needing to have difficult conversations surrounding typically taboo or uncomfortable topics, including death and grief, takes cues from the child, explain to

them, in a way that is meaningful and understandable, why it is important that the conversation is taking place.

- Initiating a conversation may not be practical for caregivers of young children, but this explanation can still occur through actions such as play.

Importance of Play - Resilience

- ❑ Play is how children make sense of their environment
- ❑ A form of communication
- ❑ Is a way for caregivers to collect information from child (showing or acting out situations using objects can be easier than using words)
- ❑ Play can help students reduce anxiety, take control of their own situations, strengthen social relationships, reduce complexity and imagine positive scenarios



<https://www.playcore.com/news/how-play-helps-us-develop-resilience>

Importance of Play - Resilience

- Play and make-believe may seem inessential or unimportant to us, but to children, it is a verified way of learning and it is how they make sense of their environment.
- To them, it is a form of communication, and by using this method of information sharing, they are able to share with us what they may not be able to put into words.
- Play can help children reduce anxiety, take control of their own situations, strengthen social relationships, and help them to imagine positive scenarios.
 - It is important for their social development as playing with others means noticing social cues, listening, and taking in another person's perspective; these are key aspects to developing empathy which is then linked back to resiliency and emotional development.

Video: Andrea Warnick - Kids and Resilience

<https://vimeo.com/231547546>

- This video as presented by Andrea Warnick perfectly ties into what we have touched upon regarding the ability for children to be resilient and what they need in order for this characteristic to grow and develop to withstand stressors.

Grief During COVID-19



- ❑ Complicated
- ❑ Lack of social connections
- ❑ Isolation
- ❑ Alternative resources and activities

Grief During COVID-19 (Slides and Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3zOidrvVek>

- Living through the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult enough without having to add the stressors of grief and the loss of a loved one.
- Grief during this time varies and can be spread across multiple and different areas in an individual's life.
- The lack of social connections, the effects of isolation, and the inability to access vital community resources are some of the factors that contribute to why we are having difficulties coping during this time.
- This video highlights what can be helpful and why grief is considered to be complicated when involving the pandemic.

The 4 C's

The 4 Cs are four common concerns that children have when someone they care about is seriously ill, dying or has died.

They are:

- Can I CATCH it?
- Did I CAUSE it?
- Can I CURE it?
- Who will take CARE of me?



<https://kidsgrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=261>

The 4 C's Relating to the Common Concerns Children Have When Thinking About Death and Dying

- **Catch it:** Similar to a cold, children may think that they can 'catch' what their dying loved one is suffering from (i.e. Cancer)
- **Cause it:** They may think "The baby died because I said I didn't want a sister"- Children believe that their thoughts or wishes influence the world around them, but we must reassure them that it was not something they did or said that caused the death. They may believe they are responsible for death, but death is inevitable, as we know.
- **Cure it:** "If I'd behaved better and wasn't so hard to take care of, daddy would've come home from the hospital." Children can believe that they could have prevented their loved one from dying. Explain to the children that the death was out of their control and nothing could have been done to prevent or cure it.
- **Care:** When a parent has died, children often worry about who will take care of them, even if they have a healthy surviving caregiver. They may fear that if one person in their life can die, someone else they depend on may also die. This can lead to a fear of being abandoned and needing to look after themselves. Help children identify other adults who care about them and may help support them through this time. These might be family, friends, teachers and community members.
- It is important to address these questions to children, even if they do not ask. It is significant for them to understand the entire situation of what is happening; to validate, acknowledge, and normalize their experience as some children may not share their thoughts and worries with their parents or caregivers.

CHILD

C - *“consider”* the needs of the child

H - *“honesty”* in dealing with the child

I - *“involve”* the child

L - *“listen”* to the child (meet the child at his/her level of understanding)

D - *“do”* it again and again (repetition)

(Lowenstein, & Warnick, 2019)



Things to Consider When Supporting a Grieving Child (CHILD Acronym)

- Your child still needs to be a child and they still need a parent that cares for them and supports them.
- Be honest with your child, even if you are struggling.
 - Children need to know that their parents grieves and that they also have good and bad days.
 - It is okay to let your child see you cry.
 - Cry with your child, this forms a bond and gives the child permission to come to you when they are feeling sad.
- Involve the child in continuing the bond and other methods of open grieving
- Listen to what your child needs
 - Open communication is extremely important for them, so they understand that they can come to you when they have questions.
- Continue to do this
 - It is not a one-time thing, repetition is key for children to fully grasp the concept and meaning of what is being taught.

Language and Communication

- ❑ Simple, direct, and clear language
 - ❑ Avoid euphemisms
- ❑ Provide a safe and open environment
- ❑ Open communication is a process



Language and Communication

- Often, parents or caregivers may try to protect their children from the pain of learning about death.
 - Parents and caregivers may not have the capacity to deal with their own grief, and guilt may be a major factor that they are struggling with.
 - They may be so overwhelmed by their own grief or caregiving responsibilities that they feel unable to attend to anyone else.
- Taking into consideration the children's ages, it may vary in the ability of how they are comprehend the reality of the death.
 - If children are younger, parents may need to use simple and direct language that will not be confusing for them.
 - If children are older, they might have a mature understanding of death; thus, the parents may need to explain to them that it was not something they did or did not do that caused the death (the death was not influence by them).
- Avoid euphemisms, such as "passed away", "sleeping", "we lost them" or "the person is gone"- direct language is important.
 - Try saying died, dead, and death - Children are curious and may have many questions if the language isn't direct and clear.
 - "Lost" where is he, is he coming back? Don't understand the permanent nature of death.
 - "Heaven" Can I go to heaven to see grandpa?.
 - "Sick"- if they are sick, or have a common cold, they may think they will die.
- If parents and caregivers can provide a safe and open environment, then it might allow children to express and talk about their experiences.

- Open communication is a process that takes time within a family because each family member is grieving differently (one child may be withdrawn and one child who is active with peers and within the community).
 - Just because a child isn't showing emotion (crying) doesn't mean that they aren't grieving.
- By establishing a supportive environment, family members might be able to express their grief in a healthier manner and reflect on the deceased in a meaningful way.

Meaning-Making

- ❑ Meaning-making can be done in many different ways; most common is through the retelling of the story or the narrative of what happened
- ❑ Continuing bonds
 - ❑ Journaling
 - ❑ Keeping traditions
 - ❑ Displaying photographs
 - ❑ Adopting a hobby the loved one enjoyed

“Meaning making involves “making sense” of or coming to understand the situation in a different way, finding benefit or positives that come from the situation, and changes in identity”

(Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff- Bulman, 1992; Park, 2008).



Meaning-Making

- Meaning-making is when a bereaved individual creates a story where the loss has meaning, they can see how to move forward with a revised narrative of how to function in the world without their loved one.
- Bereaved individuals can benefit from learning how to continue on with their lives, not by getting over the loss, but rather by keeping the memory of their loved one with them.
 - The theory of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) helps to explain the benefits that can arise from maintaining an ongoing connection with the deceased, such as through prayer or pictures.
- Meaning-making in response to loss includes the ideas of sense-making (the process of finding or creating a sense of understanding regarding a loss), benefit finding (the creation of meaning structures that underscore positives resulting from a loss), and identity change (the positive or negative reconstruction of self) (Flesner, 2013).

Self-Care

“*Mindfulness* is a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other practices to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress”.

“*Boundaries* are a psychological demarcation that protects the integrity of an individual or group or that helps the person or group set realistic limits on participation in a relationship or activity”.



(Mayo Clinic, 2021)
<https://dictionary.apa.org/boundary>

Self-Care: Mindfulness and Boundaries

- Think about how your body is feeling. Are your shoulders tense? Are you hungry? Are you stressed? Have you had enough sleep? Thoughts such as these can impact our ability to be present, especially with our loved ones.
- It is important to recognize the needs of your own body before you are able to engage with someone else, particularly impressionable individuals such as children.
 - It is our responsibility to keep ourselves in check.
- We need to be able to have moments such as these to ourselves so that we can take account of what we are feeling and what the body requires from us.
 - Being attuned to ourselves, in all aspects, physically, mentally, and spiritually, can help us to stay grounded during times of uncertainty, struggle, and stress.
- Practicing mindfulness on a regular basis can improve your tolerance level and help you to understand why your body is functioning the way that it is.
- When working with or being around children, we are exposing them to how we are feeling.
 - Our energy and feelings are contagious, and children are a reflection of their environment.
- Meditation and mindfulness can bring us back into the present moment so that we are not distracted when we are needed most.
- Along with meditation comes the necessity for boundaries. If you are noticing during personal reflection that you are spreading yourself too thin, whether it be work, volunteering, family, or anything that consumes your time and energy, you need to put up boundaries. This means saying no to something that may overwhelm you, it can also include setting your own limits.
 - Boundaries are a way to take care of ourselves.
- When we set boundaries, we're less angry and resentful because our needs are getting

met.

- Boundaries make our expectations clear, so others know what to expect from us and how we want to be treated.
- Please remember that to be helpful, we need to be present and focused, and we can't give to others what we don't have ourselves.

END OF WEBINAR