

# THE LION KING



ERIN'S HOUSE  
FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN™

## GRIEF TALKING POINTS

Inspired by the widely popular Disney The Lion King, this tip sheet is designed to share suggestions on how to have open conversations with children about death and grief.

### General tips to keep in mind:

- When you think there is a teachable moment that can be made, consider your child's age and developmental understanding. Certain topics may not be appropriate for every child or warrant a conversation. Gauge their understanding by paying attention to their reactions and asking open-ended questions like "I wonder what you think happened?" or "I wonder why you think they are (insert feeling)?"
- Use simple, concrete terms when talking about death. Very young children struggle to understand euphemisms the way we do as adults. Use words like "dead", "died", and "dying". While these words may seem blunt, they help children begin to understand basic concepts around death and dying, are less confusing, and help normalize the conversation.
- Look for opportunities to discuss feelings and be open about your feelings, as well. Give feelings a name and discuss healthy ways to cope with feelings.
- Don't put too much pressure on the conversation. You know your child best. Follow their lead and answer their questions honestly. Don't worry about having all the answers to their questions. In fact, it is

perfectly okay to admit you don't know the answer. If it's a question you can explore together, we'd suggest doing so! Remember, it's okay for us to struggle with questions and feelings. When we offer opportunities for kids to share with us, we send the message that they don't have to struggle alone.

### The Lion King talking points:

- The beginning of The Lion King starts with, and is arguably most famous for, the song "The Circle of Life". While it is important to keep in mind a child's development, it is never too soon to start the conversation about death and how we are all connected by its universality. Children best understand and process when they are given honest facts about death. Speak simply and use concrete terms to gently help them understand that all living things will eventually die. The intent for this discussion is not to scare children, but to support them in their understanding so that they can acquire the tools they need to cope when death inevitably will touch their lives. The Lion King offers many opportunities to explore what death is. We can gauge a child's understanding by simply asking what

they think it means when someone dies and then follow their lead and answer their questions with age appropriate responses. Reassure them that most people live a long time and that you can take steps as a family to stay safe and healthy. Children may worry about who will take care of them if you die, so it can be helpful to talk about who will be there to take care of them if something happened to you.

- During Mufasa's life on earth, and even after death, he teaches Simba great life lessons. He talks to him about respecting and protecting their kingdom, about bravery, and fear. We can ask our child what lessons their person who died taught them. Ask open-ended questions like "I wonder if there is any important lesson that Dad taught you?" or "I wonder if Mom's death has taught you anything about yourself that surprised you?" This gives children permission to explore these big questions with someone they trust and to find their own meaning in their grief.
- When Simba asks Mufasa if they will always be together, Mufasa shares his belief that all the kings of the past are looking down from the stars to guide them. This scene offers a great opportunity to talk about your family's beliefs about what happens after death. You can also talk about ways they think their person is still guiding them or watching over them even after death. You could also ask if they can relate to Simba's confusion about not being able to "see" the kings. This enforces the idea that children are concrete thinkers and that abstract ideas are hard for them to grasp. Remember that it's not about forcing or pressuring them to think or believe one thing, but to help them

feel safe to share their own thoughts and feelings and to think about ways they are still connected to their person. We don't want to tell kids what they think or believe is wrong, as they have amazing imaginations. Instead of correcting, you can listen and acknowledge their ideas then share what you believe as well. Again, always creating that safe, respected space to openly talk.

- It is nearly impossible to ignore the scene when Mufasa is killed and Simba is left with feelings of guilt and shame. For some children, they may or may not have witnessed their person die or were present in their final moments. This scene may trigger their own personal feelings about what that experience was like for them. We can help them reflect on their experience and ask about what was helpful or not helpful during that time. This may also be a good opportunity to explore guilt and shame. Children tend to believe their own thoughts, feelings, or actions can cause things to happen, which can lead them to feel that a death is their fault. Help them understand that they are not to blame for the death and talk about ways they can express their feelings in healthy and safe ways.
- Much like when Simba starts a new life with Timon and Pumbaa, families often look different after a death. You can have honest conversations with your child about the changes that have happened in your family since the death. Acknowledging these changes and recognizing that most of them are probably unwelcomed and difficult can affirm for children that you understand that it has been hard to adjust to your new normal. Talk together about things you can be doing to stay connected

as a family and best support each other. Ask who has stepped up to support them like Timon and Pumbaa did for Simba.

- The notion that Simba runs away to escape the reality that awaits him if he returns to his kingdom may resonate with some kids. When we're faced with adversity, it may feel easier to avoid or withdrawal from the people or things we love most. You can talk to your child about times that may have been true for them, or even for us as adults. When we share examples of times we have struggled and overcame and help kids reflect on choices they've made, we model for kids ways they can be resilient and help them create their own path for healing. Create a safe place to talk about their fears and worries and help them design a plan to face the people and things they have been avoiding, but don't push or force them to do anything they are not ready to do.
- Timon and Pumbaa talk about not being able to change the past and "embracing what's next". While we don't want to minimize a child's experience, we can encourage them to name and feel their feelings fully. Kids look to adults to help them navigate new and difficult feelings, so we can model this for them by not hiding our emotions and by demonstrating healthy ways to cope or take a break for ourselves if we need one.

- Rafiki helps Simba discover that his dad "lives in him". Talk to your child about ways they think their person still lives on through them. Maybe it's through lessons they learned because of the person, by doing things the person loved or would be proud of, etc. Share your own examples to help them come to their own conclusions. You can also ask what things they think their person would be proud of them for.
- Ultimately, The Lion King is a story of remembering who we are, even when times are tough. When someone dies, it can feel impossible to persevere and move forward, but we can support children by helping them identify their strengths and reminding them of times they overcame challenges in the past. Explore ways you can best support them by simply asking what you can do to be most helpful in this moment, and help them recognize that they don't have to feel those feelings alone.

If you need additional support, please contact Erin's House:

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#### OUR MISSION

Erin's House provides support to children, teens, and their families who have experienced a death.

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