



## GRIEF TALKING POINTS

Inspired by the widely popular Disney Inside Out, 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.

### Inside Out talking points:

- Inside Out provides many opportunities to explore feelings in general, but there are also a lot of great conversation starters around loss and grief. Remembering that grief can be the result of any loss in life, not just a death, we can take time to talk to kids about what losses they've experienced in their life. Especially right now with the conditions put in place due to COVID-19, kids may be grieving the loss of the rest of the school year, proms, ceremonies, sports, extracurriculars, seeing their friends, school support, and more. Check in with them to see how they're adjusting to new routines and acknowledge that they may be having intense feelings about the changes that are occurring in their lives. Assist them in understanding that there is no wrong or right way to feel about what is happening.

Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling and to find healthy ways to manage stress and cope. As adults, we have a large responsibility of being emotional role models for our kids. Don't be afraid to be share about your personal adjustments and feelings, too!

- Ask your child to identify times they've felt joy, anger, disgust, fear, and sadness. With younger kids especially, consider discussing times when they may have felt more than one emotion at time and help them understand that it's okay to miss their person and to be sad, but also still have fun and feel joy. Grieving children may be confused about new feelings and emotions brought on by their grief and benefit from hearing that all their feelings are normal. Help them put a name to their feelings and talk about who they can talk to and what they can do if they're having big or overwhelming feelings. Another idea is to create a game acting out the emotions.
- Some of Riley's islands were "Goofball Island", "Friendship Island" and "Hockey Island". Talk about what islands would make up the personality of the person who died in your family. This prompt allows for you to learn from your child what they remember their person for the most and allows you to talk as a family about what made your

person special. You can also talk about what islands would make up your child's personality and use that information to identify what is most important to them.

- Perhaps the biggest lesson Inside Out teaches us is that our emotions serve a purpose. While grief is a normal and natural reaction, it doesn't always feel normal and it's common to be resistant to new or uncomfortable feelings. Acknowledge and give your child permission to feel and embrace all the emotions that come their way and provide outlets for them to express their feelings. Remind them that feelings can coexist and that they can change over time. You can also explore how their emotions have helped guide them in their decision making, helped them get through adversity, and influenced other areas of their life.
- We witness Riley observing her parent's behaviors and emotions after their move to San Francisco and how she tries to cover up her feelings to be strong and happy for them. There are a couple of scenes in the movie that offer excellent reminders about how much more aware kids are than we sometimes give them credit for. They are picking up on our emotional cues and looking to us for guidance on how to adapt and cope. Grieving children may not



always appear to be grieving in a way that we expect them to, so we may assume that they are “fine” or coping well. Additionally, they may be hiding their feelings in order to please their parents/guardians or protect them from further distress. It's important that we help kids honor their emotions and find ways to work through them with our support and the support from others. It's equally important that we don't assume how they're feeling or what they understand, but to be curious and ask instead. This way you can come alongside them and help strengthen their understanding and offer supports.

- You can invite your child to share some of the core memories they have or ask if they want to share any core memories that Include their person who died. Explore how you can ensure those memories don't fade such as making a memory box, talking about the person, looking at pictures, etc.
- Joy and Sadness try to support Bing Bong when he loses his song powered rocket wagon. Sadness offers him compassion by acknowledging that he must feel sad and providing a space where he felt safe to lean in to how he was feeling and cry. Joy, on the other hand, attempts to make him feel better by trying to get him to cheer up and be happy. When someone is grieving,

it is important to remember that it is not our job to fix anything and that it is best to meet someone where they're at rather than trying to change how they're feeling or attempting to make them look on the bright side. Instead, we can show compassion by listening to what their experience has been like, not judging their emotional response, and helping them feel safe to express themselves fully. Simply offering your presence and being an empathetic listener can be one of the most helpful things you can offer someone who is grieving. Help children understand that while some things may be hard to talk about, it's important to find ways to express themselves or talk to someone they feel safe with. When we help children understand their emotions and become aware of how to cope with them, we help them feel more in control and build resilience.

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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