



GRIEF TALKING POINTS

Inspired by the widely popular Disney *Onward*, 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.

Onward talking points:

- Throughout the movie we hear Ian's mom and brother refer to their "inner warrior". When our lives are touched by death, many times we have to dig deep to find the warrior in ourselves to help us have strength to cope and reason to move forward. You can ask your child about times they have had to seek their inner warrior. Maybe it was when learning about an illness, when they found out their person died, or when attending the funeral. Perhaps maybe it was returning back to school and facing their friends and teachers. Affirm how scary and hard those times must have been and acknowledge the courage it takes to be aware of our feelings and finding the strength to overcome those moments. Remind them that just like they have overcome hard times in the past, they can

continue to do so and that you will always be there to support them during those times.

- Ian and Barley talk a couple times about the memories Barley still has of their dad. A lot of times, children may have little or no memories of their person who died. Siblings may even recall completely different memories from a similar event or occasion because of the way they perceived it. Sometimes, adults try to protect their children by withholding information or limiting how much they share about the person who died. Onward does an excellent job of reminding us how important it is for children to learn about their person and be able to talk about their memories the way they remember them. You can simply ask your child if they want to learn more about their person and follow their lead. Remember to focus on the love that person had for the child and not let our own biases or feelings jade the conversation.
- We also witness another scene where Ian runs into an old friend of his father. Ian is pleasantly surprised to learn more about his dad. Another reminder of how much those left behind typically enjoy hearing their person's name and hearing others talk about them. Sometimes, we may hold back because we're worried that if we bring up the person who died that we will upset someone. Gently remind yourself that it's not you bringing up their person that is upsetting them, it is the fact that their person died. When they show your distress to you, it is not because you have made the situation worse. Rather, view those times as opportunities to show them that you are there for them and that they don't have to

be alone during those times of sadness.

- Ian and Barley's dad was remembered for being "bold", among other things. You can ask your children what word(s) they would use to describe their person who died. Remember to not try to correct or change their answers. Be supportive by withholding judgement or assumptions and let the child express themselves freely.
- Oftentimes, family dynamics are impacted after a death. As families adjust to their new normal, they may find that their roles within the family look different. Sometimes, families have to move or new people are introduced as parents start dating again. We see this with Ian and Barley's mom and her boyfriend, Colt. Onward provides many opportunities to start a conversation about how your family may look differently after a death. Explore how these changes are affecting your child and how they are feeling about it. If it's appropriate, ask for their input about decisions you can be making as a family to help them feel involved. Set limits, but also be mindful of their feelings. Maybe they know you're going on a date, but you decide together that you'll call to check-in at a certain time. Involving children helps them feel like they have more control when their lives feel out of control. Remind them that their main responsibility is to keep being a kid and help them find safe and healthy ways to cope.
- Onward starts with Ian turning 16, and we're reminded that while he has no memories of his dad, his grief is still very real. Sometimes, as adults, we overlook how much a child can actually grieve for someone they have never met. In reality, though, they are grieving all of the memories they will never

be able to make with their person. We are also reminded how developmental milestones can serve as moments when grief may resurface more intensely. We can help support kids when we remember to check-in during big life events or during special days that we know are significant. Simply acknowledging that they may be missing their person more during those times can help normalize the experience for them. We can be supportive by offering the option to honor their person during those times if they choose or by simply sharing memories or asking open-ended questions about how their person may have been feeling or thinking if they were still here.

- Ian makes a list of things he hopes to do with his dad. We can promote healthy conversations with our kids by asking what they wish they could do with their person. It isn't about trying to fulfill the need or fix anything, but rather just letting them talk openly about what would be important for them to be able to do with their person. Conversations like this help them understand it is okay to have these thoughts and that you are there to listen and talk about the person if/when they want to.
- Explore with your kids how your family has moved onward despite the pain and challenges that you've faced since your person died. Talk about things you've

overcome or are still working through individually and as family.

- Onward ends with Ian recognizing how grateful he is for his brother, someone he can look up to and who has supported him. He also realizes how his dad was right there with them all along. Help your child think about who in their life has been supportive or made an impact on them since the death. Explore what qualities that person exhibits that makes them so special to them. You can also discuss times when they may have felt their person present. Remind them that while our person is not physically with us, we can still carry them with us through a different kind of relationship.

We hope that this tip sheet provides you with the support you need to open up conversation with your child about feelings of grief they may be experiencing. Feel free to adapt these suggestions to fit the needs of your child.

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

- **By phone:** 260.423.2466
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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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