

Supporting Grieving Children: A Sacred Calling



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Overview of Presentation

- Myths related to childhood grief
- Addressing serious illness, death, and grief with young children
- Similarities and differences between adult grief and child grief experiences
- Techniques for supporting grieving children
- Kids and Funerals.....what to do?



Photo credit: Funeralwise.com

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WE CAN DO BETTER



- Grief is a normal reaction to a significant loss
- A recent poll by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement & The American Federation of Teachers found:
 - Most teachers would like to help the grieving children in their midst but feel that they lack the proper training

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The Most Important Thing

- Our greatest gift to the child is simply LISTENING AND BEING PRESENT
- Holding space for and with the child
- Know that the child is worried about how their parents or caregivers are adjusting.
- Grieving children may find it safer to talk honestly with their teacher or counselor about their feelings and concerns



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Many Causes of Grief– Not Just Death



<https://www. /articles/divorce-children-and-the-grieving-processdivorcemag.com>

- “If we create a space where our children can freely express their grief, in whatever form it takes, our children will learn that they are capable of handling difficult situations.”

- Amanda K. Darnley, Psy.D., MHC
- Licensed Psychologist/Owner, Chrysocolla Counseling, PLLC

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Other Sources of Grief

• Non-Death Related:

Illness or injury
COVID related losses/changes
Parental fighting/divorce
Parent marrying/stepparent
Loss of routine and stability in home
(sibling drug abuse, sick sibling)

Death Related:

Teacher, Staff, Pet Loss
Fellow Student/Friend Death
Sibling Loss
Mass Shootings



Michele Eve Sandberg/AFP/Getty Images

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Common Myths: Children and Grief



Photo Credit: <https://www.taps.org/articles/19-2/mythsaboutchildrengrief>

- Children don't understand death; therefore, they don't grieve
- Children don't hurt as much because they understand less
- Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve
- Children are resilient; they bounce back
- Children are not affected by adults' grief

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More Common Myths

- Speaking of the deceased will reopen a child's grief wounds
- Children should be protected and shielded from the pain of grief
- Children cope with grief more easily if they have lots of activities
- Childhood bereavement leads to a maladjusted adult life
- Children should not go to funerals or children should always go to funerals



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Children Don't Understand Death; Therefore, They Don't Grieve



Photo Credit: <https://bakken-young.com/when-a-child-suffers-death-and-grief/>

- Although a young child may not truly understand death, they do respond to changes in their environment
 - Change of routine
 - Increased volume of noise
 - Increased activity in a grieving household
- May not understand why these changes are occurring, they will notice that they have occurred, and they respond.
- They don't have to understand why something occurs in order to respond to it.
- Children do grieve, just not like adults.

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Children Don't Hurt or Grieve as Much Since They Understand Less

- This is a misperception that because children are less experienced and knowledgeable, they will not hurt as deeply as those who are.
 - Perhaps the opposite is true.
 - When one has little information and limited experience, reality may seem more scary and overwhelming
- Children need age (and developmentally) appropriate information
 - May need help to identify their emotions
 - Ways to express their emotions in order to appropriately cope with death and grief.
- Size has nothing to do with the hurt in the child's heart.



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Infants and Toddlers Are Too Young to Grieve



Photo Credit: <https://www.uri.edu/news/2011/12/uri-bereavement-expert-dont-ignore-childrens-grief/>

- Any child old enough to love, is old enough to grieve -Dr Alan Wolfelt
- Look for behavior changes to indicate an infant or toddler grief.
 - Increased demands for attention
 - Loss of schedules such as sleeping all night or eating at certain times
 - Regression to previously suspended self-comforting measures (thumb sucking, rocking, drinking from a bottle, etc.)
- Remember, they do not have to know the reason why something happens in order to experience the emotions of grief.

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Children Are Resilient; They Bounce Back

- Children are physically and emotionally resilient, but they do not simply bounce back from difficult experiences.
- Like adults, they must integrate their experiences into their knowledge base and find explanations for what happens to them.
- They will often grieve in short bursts of emotion rather than dwell on a particular feeling, as adults tend to do.
- The younger the child, the more quickly a grief moment may pass, but don't think a child is not grieving just because that child is playing outside or laughing at a cartoon.
- Children need as much compassionate understanding and support as adults do as they struggle through their grief.



Photo credit: <https://petersplaceonline.org/>

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Children Are Not Affected By Adults' Grief



Photo credit:
<https://ciswh.org/childrens-grief-disruption-and-the-social-work-skills-hospitals-should-lean-on/>

- Children are like sponges, absorbing everything they see, hear, and touch. Therefore, children are affected by the grief they see in the adults around them expressing.
 - This does not have to mean they are affected in negative ways, however.
- Many adults express their grief in completely appropriate and effective ways, and children learn from observing these grieving patterns and styles
- Adults should be aware of the power of their actions and words, as children are often the unseen audience.
- Children who receive honest communications, patient teaching, and supportive modeling will learn to embrace their emotions and find healthy, nondestructive ways to express grief.

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Speaking of the Deceased Will Reopen a Child's Grief Wounds

- This is a commonly held myth for many cultures. It is believed that continuing to speak of the deceased and expressing the emotions of grief
 - Will add to one's grief experience rather by stirring up the grief
 - Will prevent them from "moving on" after the loss
- For most people, expressing grief and staying connected to the deceased through the sharing of memories
 - Helps with the integration of the loss
 - Assists with reframing the relationship
- It is the hiding of pictures and never speaking again of the deceased that often keeps the wounds of grief open
- Encouraging the sharing of memories helps establish a new relationship with the deceased



Photo Credit: <https://www.chaptershealth.org/chapters-of-life-blog/families-caregivers/grief-in-children-top-5-ways-bereavement-camps-can-help/>

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Children Should Be Protected and Shielded From the Pain of Grief



Photo credit: <https://www.positiveparentingsolutions.com/parenting/strategies-for-grieving-children>

- Many adults believe this to be true simply because they cannot face their own grief reactions
 - **GRIEF HURTS**
- It is neither a sign of weakness nor a lack of faith
- Grief is the price you pay for love and when someone you love dies, it does hurt
- Adults want to shield a child from experiencing the pain of grief
 - hurt and pain have their lessons to teach
 - We shouldn't rob ourselves of the richness of the tapestry that hurt and love weave together. To eliminate one from the loom is to break the thread and lose the fullness of the pattern
- One can learn to embrace the emotions of grief and grow through the hurt to reach the point where memories begin to bring us joy again, versus sorrow

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Children Cope With Grief More Easily If They Have Lots of Activities

- The idea behind this myth is the thought that if children are kept busy, they won't have the time or energy:
 - Think about grief
 - Experience or feel grief
 - Ask questions that the adults may not have the answers to
- Keeping children busy simply as a way to avoid difficult questions is a temporary fix at best
- Whether they are busy putting a puzzle together or lying quietly on their beds, children are aware of what is happening around them and they will
 - Think about death and what has happened
 - Experience grief and have questions about the experience
 - Express their grief
- Establishing and maintaining open communication are among the most positive actions adults can take to help children process their experiences with death and grief



Photo Credit: <https://www.familycenters.org/The-Den-for-Grieving-Kids>

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Childhood Bereavement Leads to a Maladjusted Adult Life



Photo credit: <https://healthcity.bmc.org/population-health/how-bereavement-program-children-and-teens-helps-close-racial-grief-gap>

- While bereavement during childhood is certainly a traumatic experience, it does not mean a troubled adulthood
- If children receive appropriate and adequate support during a bereavement experience:
 - They will integrate the loss into their life
 - Adapt appropriately/normally
- Children who do not receive adequate and appropriate support and have not learned effective coping methods:
 - Often experience delayed grief reactions
 - Increased occurrence of inappropriate and destructive behaviors
- While any bereavement experience is difficult, being bereaved at a young age, does not automatically qualify someone for a maladaptive life

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Children Should Not Go to Funerals or Children Should Always Go to Funerals

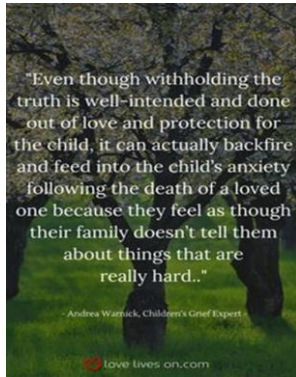
- Funerals are a time to symbolically say goodbye and get on the path of acknowledging a loved one is no longer here. They can be an important part of the grieving process.
- When it comes to kids attending funerals, there's no right or wrong thing to do
- Children and adolescents should have the choice as to if or how they wish to participate in funeral rituals.
- Every child handles grief differently (just like adults). Ask yourself:
 - How old is your child? Do they want to go?
 - Is your child anxious, or easily distracted? Does she tend to dwell on things, or do they roll off their back?
 - Is it going to be an open or closed casket? How long will the ceremony be?
 - Assess if there is likely to be people having excessive displays of emotion. Is so prepare children; even if the adults around them seem upset, they are still okay, safe, and will feel better again soon.
 - Prepare them for what they will experience. If body is present, it will be cool to touch and hard.
 - Have someone assigned to each child as their support person. This person should be able to remove the child from the situation if the child asks.



Photo Credit: <https://time.com/6202983/children-grief-covid-19-pandemic-bereavement/>

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Addressing Serious Illness and/or Death With Young Children



- Consider the child's age and developmental stage
- Speak with the family to understand:
 - Current situation
 - What the child has been told
 - How the child is reacting
- Speak in language the child understands. Be literal:
 - He died this morning –that means his heart stopped beating and he isn't alive anymore
 - He doesn't have any more pain or trouble breathing
- Reassure the child that even though you are very sad, and the child may see you crying and being upset:
 - You love the child very much and you will continue to provide a safe environment for them (probably with the help of friends and family)
 - You want to continue to care for the child in spite of your sadness

One on One Presence to Grieving Children

- Create a safe and welcoming (private, but non-isolated) environment for one-on-one conversation*
 - *Ensure it is in compliance with organizational policy and professional standards
- Anticipate emotions (tissues, trashcan near by)
- Things they can do with their hands to serve as a distraction or to ease their minds
 - Crayons/paper
 - Playdough
 - Small ball



Photo Credit: <https://www.verywellfamily.com/help-child-to-stop-worrying-about-death-1448615>

Supporting The Child and Their Family

- When a parent dies, children worry about the death of the other parent. Reassure a child that he is loved and will always be cared for
- Send children a sympathy card (there are kid versions)
- Children recognize their surviving parent is under stress. They often need another support person or persons as they don't want to burden their parent any further



Photo Credit: Drchristinahibbert.com

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Starting the Conversation and Caring



- Start with simple conversational questions (ease into things)
 - What is something fun or good that happened this week?
 - If you were planning the most perfect day, what would it be like?
- Use words you (and the child) are comfortable with:
 - How was your summer? (Does the child bring up the death or not)?
 - If not, don't push. Most important to develop relationship first
 - If they do, give them opportunity to share what they want about the experience. Use open questions. What would you want to share with me about your dad?
 - Young children may become detached with too many questions. A good way to get a sense of how they are coping is to invite them to create a story using dolls, drawing pad or some type of characters. For older children, they may choose to draw or write a story
 - Pay attention to the story....it usually parallels their current life experience
 - Don't rush things

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The Child's Grief Response

- Each child is unique in their understanding of death and response to grief. This is largely influenced by the child's developmental level, personality, age, past losses, relationship with the deceased, etc.
- See supplemental sheet for a review of common grief responses based on the age and developmental stage of the child
 - <https://www.usd259.org/cms/lib/KS01906405/Centricity/Domain/5652/Developmental-Stages-of-Grief.pdf>

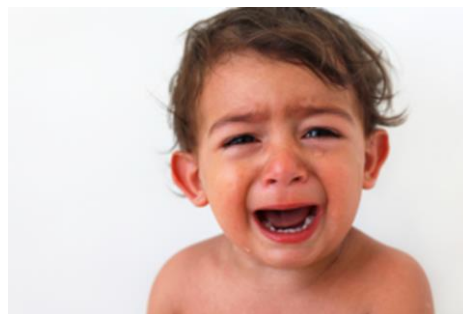


Photo credit: Sarahockwell-smith.com

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Similarities Between Adult and Child Grief

- Need to express grief openly
- Need to have their grief acknowledged by others
- Need extra support through the grief process
- Need assurance it was not their fault (magical thoughts)
- Need assurance they are not “going crazy”
- Need to know grief isn't always this raw – it does get better at some undetermined point in the future



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Differences Between Adult and Child Grief



Photo credit: Childrengrieve.org

- **Child's grief:** intermittent, sometimes seemingly absent **Adult's grief:** continual awareness and experience of loss
- **Child's understanding of death:** limited to their age and cognitive development **Adult's understanding of death:** more mature in their understanding, understand permanence
- **Child's ability to remember the deceased:** limited before puberty, may need help remembering **Adult's ability to remember the deceased:** fully developed memories are complete

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Differences Between Adult and Child Grief

- **Child:** grows up with the loss, grieves longer **Adult:** has already grown up when the death occurs
- **Child:** may talk openly about death **Adults:** have preconceived notions about how people respond and may not share their feelings
- **Child:** depends on a consistent caregiver to meet basic needs **Adult:** basic needs can be met by self



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Things to Keep In Mind....

- Answer a child's questions simply. Don't over answer or provide information that they are not asking for.
- Okay to acknowledge "this is unfair" or that "I don't know"
- Be honest – compassionate – kind
- It is okay for the child (and/or parent) to be mad at God
- Remember, it is important to listen more....say less...just be present to the child and hold space with them for their pain.



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Other Ways to Express Grief and Support

Discuss with family ways to tangibly honor and remember:

- Consider planting a tree
- Chinese Lantern
- Make a donation to a related cause
- Hosting a memorial 0butterfly release
- Candle lighting or Mass (Often in November for All Saints/All Souls Day). Allow child to say the name at candle lighting.
- Hang pictures in room of family members who have died. Hold a prayer service. Use battery powered candles as desired
- Visiting gravesite and bring balloons, flowers, handmade art, or something meaningful

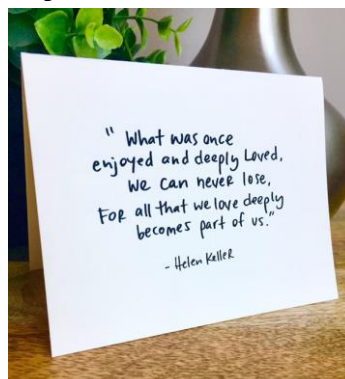


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Other Important Considerations Related to Grief

Techniques that work well with
grieving children

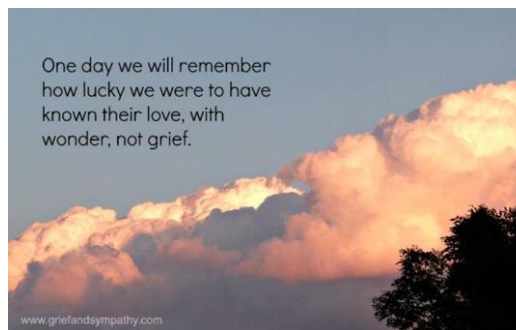
- Play
- Shared creation of art & crafts
- Story creating
- Drawing/create with play dough
- Physical activity (walk, Basketball)



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Other Important Considerations Related to Grief

- Cumulative Grief/Collective Loss
- Local example, Catholic HS lost a school administrator, a beloved teacher, and a student, in less than 2 months.
- Multiple family members die in short period of time (12-24 months)



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Words That Help and Support

"Losing the one you love is so hard. And so I'm praying hard for you, for peace, for comfort, for whatever you need right now."

Photo Credit: <https://community.seconddlife.com/forums/topic/472563-amanda-dallin-vanbeeck-is-gone-for-ever/page/2/>

- "I am so sorry your family is going through this"
- "I wish there was something I could do to help you hurt less"
- "This feels unfair and I don't know what to say to help you...I promise I am praying for you and your family daily."
- "How can I best help you?"

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Avoid Saying Words That Don't Help or Offer Support



- God never gives you more than you can handle!
- God needed another angel!
- It was God's will!
- Be strong – you are the man of the house now...
- Avoid generalizations that kids often take literally:
 - Dad went to sleep (as the child may be afraid to sleep or for their family to sleep).
 - Grandma got sick and died (as child may be fearful if you or they become sick-explain it is a different kind of sick)

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Funerals, Memorial, and Other Services

As a general guideline, children should be allowed to attend a wake, funeral, and burial **if they want to**

- They can be involved in the funeral planning and activities
- Being with family members for these rituals gives the child an opportunity to:
 - receive grief support from others
 - say goodbye to the person who has died (in their own way)



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Factors to Consider Regarding Attending Services

- Does the child want to attend? If yes:



- Prepare them for what they will experience
 - Inform them if the body will be present or not
 - If present, tell them the body will be cold and hard to touch
 - Explain cremains (if they will be present), describe this carefully. Body no longer has feelings – so no pain. Put in a room that is really hot (again, not uncomfortable) and the body becomes sand like.
 - Possibly flowers (smell may fill room) and pictures/video at the funeral
 - People may be crying, laughing, hugging
 - We are all sad, but we will be okay, this is a way to say goodbye to.....
- Allow the child to participate – place a rose or note in casket, honorary pall bearer, etc. **if they want to**
- Have someone assigned as the support person for children (1:1 ratio). Remove them if it is too difficult, take a walk, get ice cream, etc.

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If Child Chooses Not to Attend Services

- Do not shame the child for not going
- Provide an opportunity for them to ask questions afterwards or in the days following
- Invite them to join you when you visit the cemetery
- Assure them that you love them, even if they don't attend the services



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Organizations That Support Grieving Children

- National Alliance for Grieving Children
<https://childrengrieve.org/>
- The Dougy Center –
<https://www.dougy.org/>
- The Center for Loss and Life Transition
<https://www.centerforloss.com/>
- Catholic Social Services - Search for your local office



Camp Pathways
A Hospice of Dayton Children's Grief Camp

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Photo Credit: Kim Vesey

Other Places to Seek Support for Grieving Kids

- Local Children's Hospital
- Local Hospice Program
- Ask Funeral Home for information on local organizations which help grieving children
- Google local organizations supporting grieving kids (i.e. Oak Tree Corner)
- Time at the cemetery (with an adult who is comfortable being there with them)

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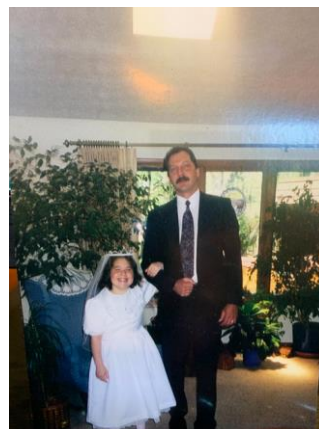
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Additional Resources

- Websites and books which provide information on topics such as
 - Common age-related grief reactions
 - Exploring and sharing a child's grief
 - Frequently Asked Questions (should kids attend funerals, normal vs complicated grief, etc.)
 - Handling special dates/celebrations after death (birthdays, Mother's or Father's day, Christmas, etc.)



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<https://www.centerforloss.com/bookstore-category/for-adults/books-resources-to-help-kids-teens/>

Books & Resources to Help Kids & Teens

How I Feel: A Coloring Book for Grieving Children
\$2.00 - \$30.00

My Pet Died: A Coloring Book for Grieving Children
\$2.00 - \$30.00

Healing a Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers
\$11.95

My Grief Rights: Inset Cards
\$15.00

How I Feel: A Coloring Book for Kids During and After Divorce
\$2.00 - \$30.00

Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart Set
\$21.50

A Child's View of Grief
\$6.95

Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens about Death, Suicide, Funerals
\$6.95

Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers
\$21.50

Healing a Child's Grieving Heart Set
\$21.50

Compassioning the Grieving Child: A Helpful Guide for Caregivers
\$20.95

The Compassioning the Grieving Child: A Helpful Guide for Caregivers to Help Children and Teens Heal
\$20.95

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Supporting the Parents: When Their Network of Support Retreats




Photo credit: <https://schoolsocialwork.net/the-role-of-grief-in-working-with-parents-of-children-with-significant-disabilities/>

- When tragedy strikes, it screams “This could be us”. This makes people uncomfortable, and they avoid interacting with us.
- Sometimes friends/family feel guilty we are experiencing this situation.
- They may not reach out or say anything to avoid saying or doing the wrong thing.
- Regardless, the grieving person may feel abandoned when they need support the most, and don't receive it.
- Send card 3-4 weeks after death

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Companioning Grieving Children

HOPE is ultimately the most important message to communicate to the child as we companion them on their grief journey.....



Photo Credit: <https://theforgotteninitiative.org/s666/>

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Thank you! Contact Information

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What Cloud Grief Resources

- Author, Owner
- Website: Whatcloud.net
 - Children's Books About Love, Memories, and Grief
- Email: kim@whatcloud.net
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- Linked In: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kim-vesey-8598491a/>

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