

# **The Loss and Grief of COVID-19: Real Challenges and Practical Suggestions for the Family Court System September 17, 2020**



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# Presentation Roadmap

## Coronavirus and Young Children

1

- Review the impact of the many losses and the grieving process brought about by COVID-19 with attention to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers

2

- Address the unique stressors that infants, children and families face in the Family Court System and Child Protective Services

3

- Examine the ways in which infants and young children respond to loss to deepen our understanding of the grieving process, and to offer ways to respond to grief with supportive relationships.

4

- Consider the individual differences and cultural diversity in the grieving process – and to remind adults of the importance of their own self-care to be fully available in the lives of infants and children.

# Who We Are

**The New York City Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC)**, is funded through **ThriveNYC**, in partnership with the **NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)**

TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development (NYCCD) and the McSilver Institute on Poverty Policy and Research

- **New York Center for Child Development** has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York with expertise in informing policy and supporting the field of Early Childhood Mental Health through training and direct practice
- **NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research** houses the Community and the Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers (CTAC/MCTAC), which offer clinic, business, and system transformation supports statewide to all behavioral healthcare providers

TTAC is tasked with building the capacity and competencies of mental health and early childhood professionals through ongoing training and technical assistance

<http://www.TTACny.org>



# Visit our Website

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**NYC Early Childhood Mental Health** **TTAC**  
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### Events

**Thursday, April 2, 2020**  
TTAC Webinar: Supporting Families and Caregivers of Infants and Young Children Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Wednesday, May 20, 2020**  
Beginning at the Beginning: The Foundational Elements of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation – Part I


**Friday, May 29, 2020**  
Beginning at the Beginning: The Foundational Elements of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation – Part II

**Thursday, June 4, 2020**  
Beginning at the Beginning: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation in Infant & Toddler Care – Part III

**Wednesday, June 10, 2020**  
TTAC Webinar: The Loss and Grief of COVID-19: Real Challenges and Practical Suggestions

**Friday, June 12, 2020**  
TTAC Webinar: Reducing Bias during COVID-19 using the Crawford Bias Reduction Theory & Training


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# Acknowledgements for Contributions

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- Michele Many, LCSW, Louisiana State University HSC

# *What is happening in our Country and World?*

*The Many Pandemics*

# How Children Grieve- Key Questions

- How do we know that a child is grieving?
- How do we share news of loss to children?
- How do we support a grieving child ?

# Both Adults and Children have Experienced Losses with COVID-19

## Parents/Caregivers

- Loss of Routines
- Seeing family and friends
- Celebrating occasions together
- Job and income losses
- Children at home/home schooling
- Fears about and experiences with illness and death
- Uncertainty about the future
- Life is different

## For Children

- Loss of routines
- Day care and school closed
- Seeing friends, socialization, and learning
- Missing play with friends
- Missing relatives and grandparents
- Parents/caregivers not as available
- Older siblings at home
- Life is different with changes, unpredictability, and uncertainty



# For Children and Parents in the Child Welfare System There are Additional Losses

## Parents/Caregivers

- Concerns about and missing seeing their child in person with virtual visitation
- May have difficulties with internet & connection with virtual visitation
- May be more difficult to relate to their child with virtual visits
- More difficult to follow case plan requiring appointments
- Worry about delays for possible reunification

## Children

- May be confused about why they can't see and be with their parent and miss in-person visits
- May be confused about the changes with COVID- worry about getting sick or caregivers being sick
- May not understand why they can't go outside to play with other children
- More anxiety and stress in family that is confusing
- Missing the usual routines

# Mental Health Concerns in United States around COVID

- US Census Bureau and other Federal Agencies surveyed 40, 000 people related to mental health symptoms in May 2020
- 34.4% reported symptoms of either anxiety or depression
- During late June, a CDC survey of 5412 people indicated that 40% of adults were struggling with mental health issues and substance use
- Symptoms were higher among women, younger adults, essential workers, and racial/ethnic minorities

# Loss and Grief with COVID-19

- The world has changed and it doesn't feel temporary
- Loss of in-person connections substituted with virtual connection
- Losses create stress, and in young children which can lead to “misbehavior” which is best understood as “stress” behavior”

# How to Understand Loss and Grief for Young Children

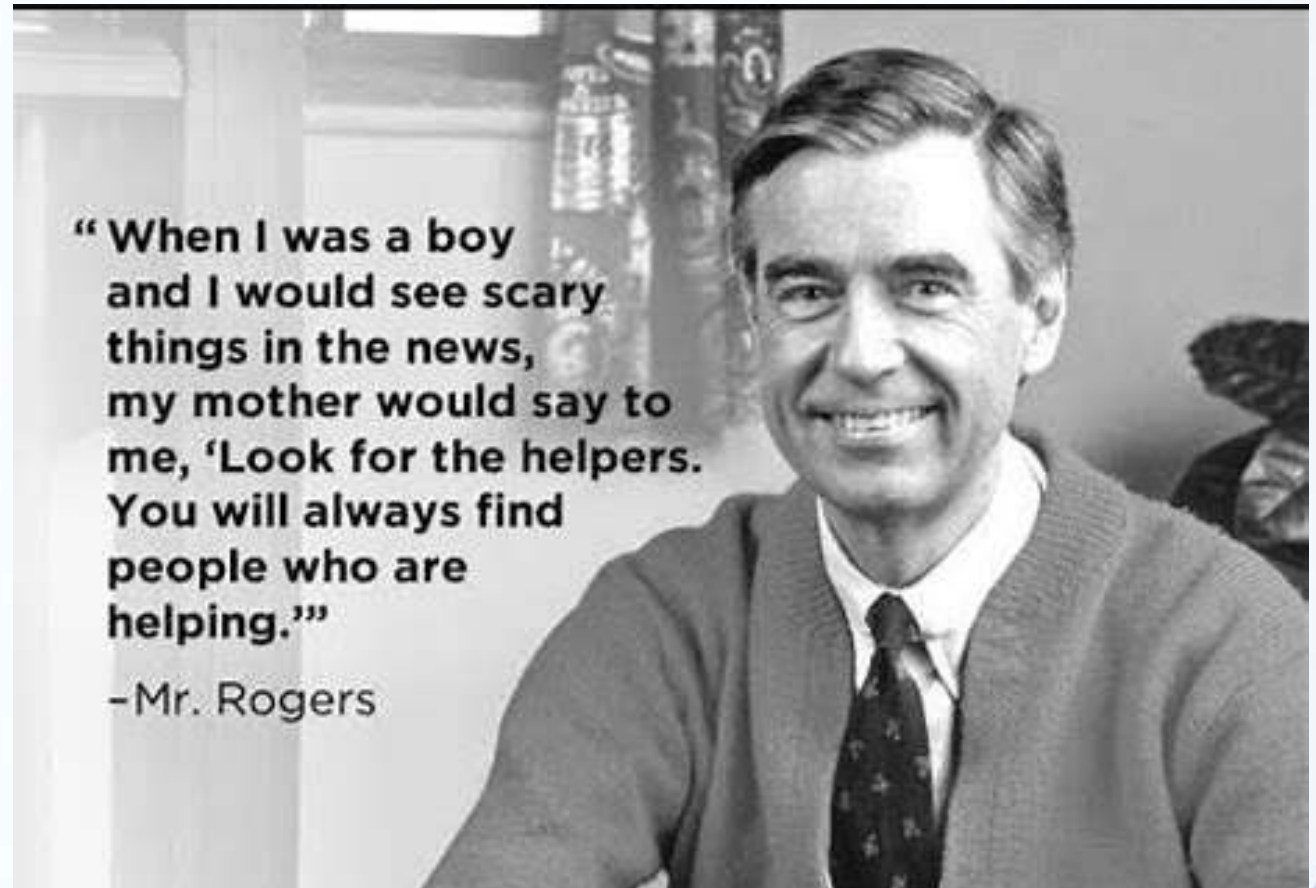
- Infants and young children grieve in “spurts” – meaning that the child may be angry, sad, aggressive, upset or clingy, followed by periods of play, happiness and engagement.
- For children and parents in child welfare, their reactions may be magnified and intensified with virtual visitation.

# What is meant by **Ambiguous Loss**?

- Loss of a way of life
- Not being able to see friends or visit family
- Loss of high-quality education or overall educational experiences for children and youth
  - Modified openings
  - Virtual education
  - Uncertainty and concerns about safety in schools
  - Frequent changes in plans
- Loss of rituals – weddings, graduations, birthdays, even funerals
- Ambiguous loss can lead to a similar experience of grief as an actual loss – denial, anger, depression, acceptance

# Mister Rogers helped us Learn How to deal with “Sad and Scary Things”

- What to do when children bring up something that frightens them:
  - Ask them what they know about it – their fantasies are often very different from the actual truth
  - Children need to hear most from adults that they can talk about what is scary
  - When children hear about scary things, they need an adult nearby to help them
  - If they want to play, encourage play as they may show their scary feelings through their play (ie, hurricane play after Katrina)





# Children's Behaviors may Reflect the Losses

- Crying
- Withdrawing – Hiding
- Aggressive behaviors
- Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Repetitive play
- Any behaviors that are different

# Difficult Experiences of Loss and Death with COVID-19

- With a more predictable death, there are opportunities to say goodbye and some planning can be done.
- The deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic are often traumatic without family nearby
- Frequently they are not expected and there are no “normal” ways to say good-bye
- Grief/Loss and complicated bereavement with COVID-19
- It is easy to see how children can be overlooked.
- Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death.

# Bereavement and Grief in COVID-19

- With social distancing, grief and mourning may be disrupted making it more difficult for families to share the grief, recognize the passing of a loved one,
- Is it the same to share the pain without physical contact?
- How many times in the past weeks have you felt that just being able to hug family and friends would make a difference in how you feel – physical contact is especially important with loss and grieving!
- Funeral traditions that are part of many cultures have been disrupted by COVID-19; i.e. Jazz funerals in New Orleans

# Loss and Grief

- Grief has no timeline.
- The expression and course of grief have features unique to each individual, family and culture.
- Grief is experienced and expressed differently in infants and young children. Grief creates stress, and in infants grief can lead to “misbehavior” which is best understood as “stress” behavior”.

# Loss and Grief

- Grief is a normal and expectable process through which we all come to cope with and heal from losses in our lives.
- The work of grief includes:
  - Expressing and regulating strong emotions.
  - Shifting the focus from the real to the remembered,
  - Internalizing and holding the good and the positives that were part of lost relationships and experiences.

# A Child Development Lens for Loss and Grieving

- The developmental age at the time of the loss is considered:
- 8-24 months – Fear of separation
- 12-36 months – Fear of bodily damage
- 3-5 years – Fear of being seen as bad, disappointing
- (Age when conscience develops)
- 

Adults need to explain loss to the child as they, developmentally, may experience it

1. “I know you will miss the hugs, kisses, playtime with him. Do you want to make a photo album for you to look at?”
2. “Your body works well, you run, jump, breathe, laugh, eat and sleep. Our loved one’s body was hurt and stopped working.”
3. “It’s not your fault. You could not have done anything that would change this. You can help by drawing a picture, writing a note, planting a tree, etc.”



# The Impact of Trauma on a Young Child

- **Trauma**: An event that overwhelms the child's ability to cope,
  - Causes fear, helplessness
  - Can be expressed by sadness, withdrawal, or disorganized / agitated behavior.
- Witnessing or experiencing an event that poses a real or perceived threat to the life or well-being of the child or someone close to him/her



## Infants and Children in Protective Service intervention Often Face a Triple Threat to their (Attachment) Development.

1. Experience of neglect and abuse
2. Experience of separation, loss, and lack of a secure base despite a safe placement.
3. Experience of being lost: A child's unique needs are may not addressed efficiently by the system of child welfare, mental health, etc.

***COVID-19 adds to the Cumulative Stress they feel.  
Connections are even more important than ever.***

# Loss and Grief

## Patterns and Themes of Grieving in Young Children in Response to the Death or Permanent Loss of a close Caregiver:

# Loss and Grief

## Dysregulation & protest

- In these early stages expression is primarily through changes in body-based behaviors-eating, sleeping, digestive processes

## Searching

- intensive searching or calling for the deceased person.

# Loss and Grief

## **Awareness of the permanence of the loss**

- Intermittent pattern of sadness & emotional withdrawal (“short-sadness span”)
- Intensification of expectable developmental anxieties of early childhood such as separation anxiety, fears of bodily injury
- Possible new fears such as preoccupation with death
- Possible return of behaviors more typical of an earlier age (regression)
- Anger

# Loss and Grief

## Recovery

- Recollections of and identification with the lost caregiver in play and words
- Refocusing of energy in relationships, the world and the awakening of the urge to complete development



# What we do to avoid our pain

When Adults expect that children will be sad or angry when someone dies, they,

1. Take protective measures.
2. Avoid any reference to the loss.
3. Over explain, using adult language.
4. Say things like, “He went to sleep and didn’t wake up.”, or “She’s gone away.”

When children sense that something has happened, they,

1. Want to play
2. Watch the adults
3. Hope that their questions are answered, simply and in their developmental language.

# Honesty

- “When grandma (or mom, cousin, friend- whomever a child has lost), became ill or is hurt, the doctors and nurses work to do their best to help. We really hope that our loved one gets better.” THEN you can be HONEST with a child, if the person dies.
- “The helpers did their best but the body stopped working.”
- “Look, your body works well, you run, jump, eat, sleep, play. We will miss them and we can remember how we loved spending time with them.” “What do you remember most about \_\_\_\_\_?” “It’s okay to be sad. I am sad too. What would help you feel better? Would it help if I gave you a hug?”
- “Lets.....” ( finding active ways to remember loved ones gives opportunity for expression of grief)”

# Experiences of Death with COVID-19

- With a more predictable death, there are opportunities to say goodbye and some planning can be done.
- The deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic are traumatic.
- They often are not expected and there are no “normal” ways to say good-bye.
- It is easy to see how children can be overlooked.
- Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death.

# Bereavement and Grief in COVID-19

- With social distancing, grief and mourning may be disrupted making it more difficult for families to share the grief, recognize the passing of a loved one,
- Is it the same to share the pain without physical contact?
- How many times in the past weeks have you felt that just being able to hug family and friends would make a difference in how you feel – physical contact is especially important with loss and grieving!

# What Can We do?

Be present and available to answer questions or just be there.

*Winnie the Pooh  
and  
Piglet*



# Responsive, Supportive Caregivers are Needed, But...

- If the adults/caregivers are also experiencing loss and grief, children are left seeking safety and security from an adult who is potentially unavailable to offer it.
- This is felt as a “Double Whammie” for children
  - Experiencing the stress of loss
  - Experiencing the loss of their care
- So we need help the caregivers!



# Caregivers can:

- Ask the child how they feel- also thinking about new ways of asking- how is your body feeling?
- Offer a space for a child to be heard. You may need to let a child know that it is safe to talk to you about their grief.
- Don't be afraid to open the conversation! Ask the child what they know or what they have heard and correct any misconceptions

# What Can We do?

- Express the emotions that you have and explain the loss of the relationship and how you will miss the person as well as the activities that you did together.
- When a loved one has died, ask the child what they liked to do with the person and what they may want to tell the person. Offer note- writing, drawing, conversations.

# Children of Different Ages Understand and Handle Death Differently

- Young children may need different supports
  - Toddlers and preschoolers do not understand that death is permanent – they may think the person is coming back, is an angel
  - They don't yet understand that everyone eventually dies.
  - They may continually ask about the return of a lost person which can be very upsetting to the other parent or adult caregivers
  - Young children expect and need physical comfort when they're upset
  - Young children may be clinging and fussy, not understanding and missing the familiar caregiver
  - Then a “substitute” caregiver may give up in trying to support them

# PRESCHOOL

- Avoid euphemisms as preschoolers have trouble understanding death and may believe the death is reversible.
- Provide opportunities to express thoughts and feelings about death through play activities and drawing.
- Answer questions using concrete descriptions and be prepared to repeatedly answer questions.
- Possible reactions include:
  - Clinging to caregivers or other trusted adults.
  - Fear of separation
  - Regressive behaviors such as wetting pants and thumb sucking
  - Decreased verbalization

# How can adults support children in time of loss?

- Consistent ***Routines*** maintain the sense of trust and control when children notice that things feel different.
- Using the child's language and concrete answers that are developmentally appropriate, encourage the child to process not only feelings but the sense of change also.

# Understand “Disenfranchised” Loss and Grief

A loss that is not validated by others or is minimized and dismissed.

## Examples

- Losing a pet
- Staying home from school
- Moving to a new house
- Loss of an elderly grandparent
- Missing a parent while in foster care.
- Feeling abandoned or afraid.

## Hurtful things to that are often said.

- Oh you can get another cat.
- It's like being on vacation!
- You are so lucky. Your old house needed to be fixed!
- She was so old. It was her time.
- Don't worry. I am your mother now.
- You're not alone. There is nothing to be afraid of.

# What may Interfere with Supporting Children related to Grief and Loss

- Adults around them are preoccupied with their own grief and overwhelmed with not being able to say good-bye in person
- They may not think about their child's developmental needs
- Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death as the adults are preoccupied with their own grief and overwhelmed by preparations and planning
- Also, children may be easily distracted by play so adults may think they are indifferent
- When a child loses a loving, supportive person, there may be no one familiar to help them deal with the pain and sadness of the loss



# Why talk to Young Children about Death

- Many adults worry that talking about the death will make matters worse
- More often than not, a clear direct explanation, based in reality, using language that children can understand with emotional support is more apt to bring relief than is leaving children to create their own explanations
- Particularly during the preschool-years, children have vivid imaginations and weave fantasies and tales that can be more frightening than reality.

# What to Say to Young Children about Death

- Young children are concrete, they understand their world in tangible ways that often have a basis in the body.
- Describing death as the cessation of bodily functions is often a place to start-the deceased person does not breath, or eat; is not hungry or cold.
- Assuring children that they did nothing “naughty or wrong” and that they had no part in the death of the loved one is an important consideration, as young children understand the world through their own eyes and viewpoint and tend to imagine that they are implicated or even causal in events far beyond their control.

# What to Say to young Children about Death

- There is no fixed script about what to say to young children about death
- Parents know their children best, therefore talking to a young children about death will be informed and tailored by the unique relationship each parent and family has with her/his child, family style and cultural and family traditions
- It is suggested the explanation should include three essential components:
  - that the deceased person cannot be with the child anymore
  - that the deceased person did not want to leave the child
  - that the person will never return

# Ways to be Helpful and Supportive

- Provide affection and security. Reassure the child that she is loved and part of the family and you'll all get through this together.
- Look for ways to help her express emotions both verbally and nonverbally, for example, through art and play.
- Be alert for the child's causal connection of her personal wishes or actions to the death of her loved one. (Ex: being angry at someone; wishing someone were dead or would disappear.)

# What Can Caregivers and Children Do?

- Help a child draw a picture of the person or thing they have lost.
- After a child has suffered a loss, ask the child to tell you about the person, what they liked and ask about a time the child spent with the person, or something they did together.
- Later on, look at a photo album of pictures of the person the child is missing, and if there are picture of that person with the child, ask the child if they can remember where the picture was taken and what they were doing together.
- Let the child who is not yet a writer, dictate a story about the person so they can keep it in their home or near their bed.
- Just listen to the child.
- Read a book or a story
- Give a hug

# Helpful Ideas

- Kids need pictures of Dad and Mom and family pictures around their homes and their grandparents' homes.
- For children in Protective Services, finding ways to connect the Foster Parents and Birth Parents are critical:
  - Have pictures of each other in the homes where children live
  - Speak with the child about missing their family, and “feel with” the child when they are sad, angry, confused.
  - Make regular plans to be together with all the adults who are caring for the child, so he/she knows that everyone is keeping them in mind with love.
- Realize that the child may be expressing feelings not only about the actual loss itself but also about the changes in members of the family after the loss.
- Re-tell good memories. This is very important.

*How you **ARE** is as  
important as what you do!*

Jeree Paul and Maria St. John



# Consider these elements in “how” you respond

- **A-** Affect – **This is what a child experiences first and most!**
- **G-** Gesture – Modulate and be attuned in face, hands, movement and pacing
- **I-** Intonation – Modulate the tone of your voice as this conveys affect
- **L-** Latency (Wait) – Wait and allow the child time to “take you in”
- **E-** Engagement – Before you continue, be sure you have engaged the child

# CO-REGULATE

A		Affect	expression
G		Gesture	movements
I		Intonation	voice
L		Latency	pacing
E		Engagement	

LEND YOUR CALM.

Gerard Costa, Ph.D., 2018

# Additional Worries for Children, Parents and Other Caregivers

- With a death during the COVID-19 pandemic, children may worry about what may happen to them or their surviving loved ones and others in the community.
- Caregivers should provide reassurance whenever possible about the precautions that are being taken to keep them and their loved ones safe.
- After a death, Caregivers should try to keep family routines or change to a new routine as needed and, as recommended with COVID-19, plan opportunities for fun or other positive experiences as part of the routine

# Remember that Children need to Play

- Shared activities with siblings or family members may be important if possible
- Participating in a pleasant or enjoyable activity can be helpful
- Remember that for children, play is an important part of their lives and learning. They may play at this time which may be upsetting for grieving parents and caregivers.
- Remember that if children seem to be coping well, they are likely doing all right
- Try not to be upset if children play out the trauma of the caregiver leaving and not coming back. Children cope through repeated play of scary and upsetting experiences (i.e., disaster play)

# Protective Factors

- The most important protective factor is a committed available adult capable of sensitive, responsive, reliable caregiving and emotional support
- Developmentally appropriate involvement in cultural and family traditions and rituals that bind anxiety and alleviate grief
- Providing clear, direct developmentally appropriate explanations
- Creating a climate that gives permission to feel
- Maintaining schedules, routines and rituals of daily life for security and trust

# Support that Promotes Grief and Healing

- Allow children time to play – they may reenact aspects of the loss, memories of the loved person, or family rituals around death, over and over
- Repetitive play may help the child heal -it is a form of unburdening meaning the child equivalent of, “If its mentionable, it’s manageable.”
- Keep daily routines, schedules, and rituals as constant as possible - predictability is important for children and control that promotes feelings of trust and security.
- Preserve constancy of caregiver, consistency of caregiving, and place as much as possible for predictability



# Ways to Help and Heal

- Be available and listen!
- Listen without giving advice.
- Offer support in an unobtrusive but persistent manner
- Do not offer stories of your own. This can have the effect of dismissing the grieving person's pain.
- Allow the grieving person to use expressions of anger or bitterness, including such expressions against God. For some people, this reaction may be normal behavior in an attempt to find meaning in what has happened.

Based on: <http://www.agis.com/Document/786/fact-sheet---grief-and-loss.aspx>



# Self-Care for Caregivers is Crucial

- Caregiver well-being is the most important factor in supporting children through the death of a loved
- Parents and caregivers need support and should be encouraged to seek support for themselves as needed
- Remember, with COVID-19, that virtual support with telephone or via media is better than no support!

# Culture organizes all Development and Even How we Experience and Express Grief

- Affect
- Dress and customs
- Language and gestures
- Interpersonal relationships/behaviors
- Art, music, movement and dance
- Diet and food choices
- Historical context - “Legacy”; historical and personal “myths”
- “Religious beliefs, values and world views - including belief in God, evil, afterlife, notions of equality, personal choice, freedom.
- Death and grieving

# Culture and Grieving

- Grief is experienced and expressed differently across and within cultures. Unique rituals, rites and practices are followed around loss and death.
- Trout and Foley: “Sit at the feet of families and wonder what it is like for them.”
- Ask families to “teach” you about their beliefs, customs and practices around loss and grieving.
- Cultural respect and humility.

# Examples of Cultural Variations in Grieving

- Jamaica (West Indies): Funerals in Jamaica are grand and supreme social events; they even replace Sunday worship services if necessary.
- Africans believe that death completes an elaborate life cycle. It is a rite of passage that allows the person's spirit to travel on to its next life or world. However, this passage only happens if the person has a proper funeral;
- South Africa: After a person dies in the house, all the windows are covered in ash, and mirrors and other reflective objects are covered. All pictures are turned around, and the bed is removed from the deceased room.
- For Latino families: Mourners pay their respects by wearing black or dark colors. During the mourning period immediate family members do not watch television, play the radio, or attend social events; pray "novenas" for 9 days (praying of the rosary is done each day); hold mass for the deceased during the first anniversary of the death and light candles

[https://dying.lovetoknow.com/Culturally Creative Expressions of Grief](https://dying.lovetoknow.com/Culturally_Creative_Expressions_of_Grief)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13459576\\_Grieving\\_and\\_death\\_rituals\\_of\\_Latinos](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13459576_Grieving_and_death_rituals_of_Latinos)

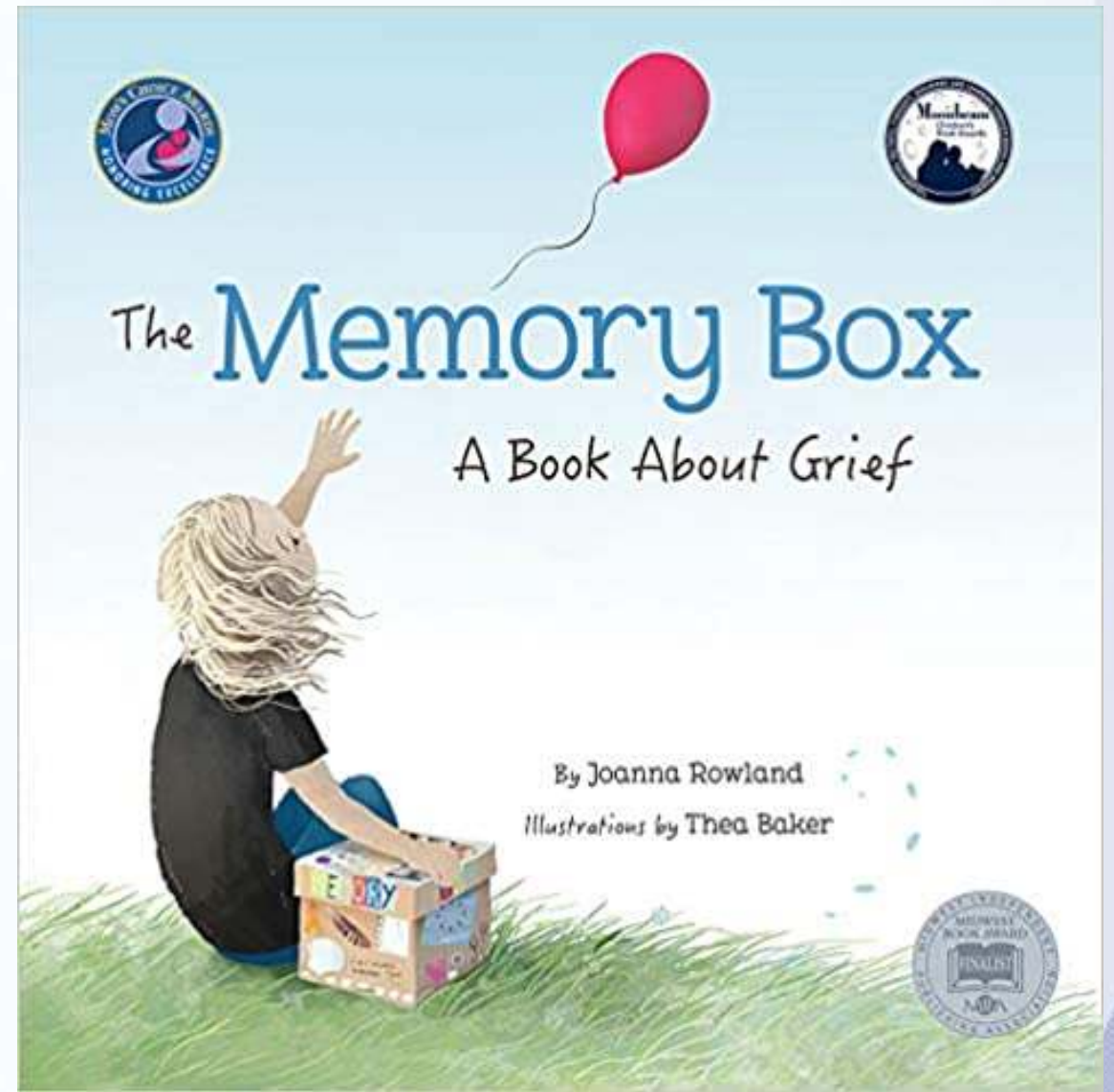
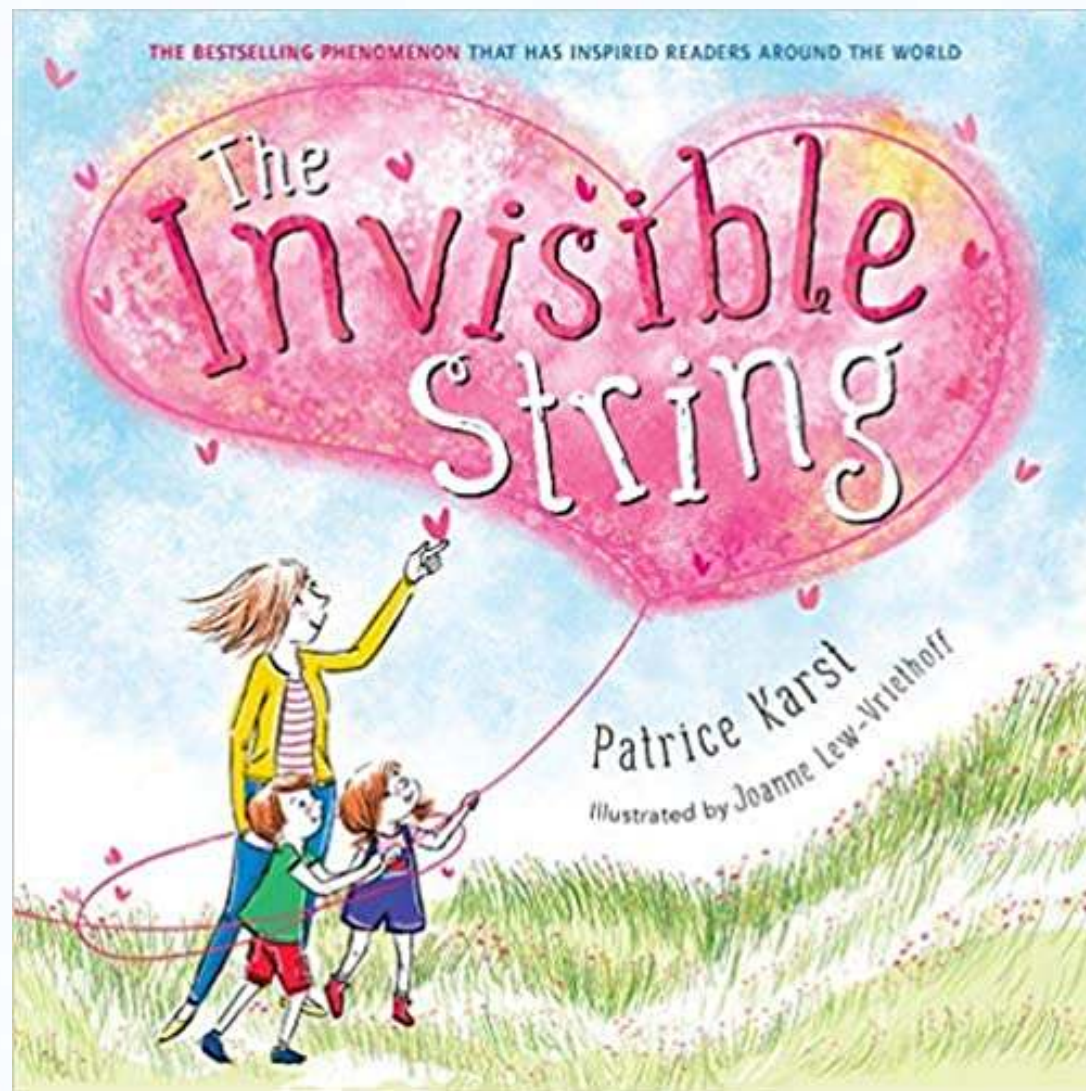
# Take Home Messages

- Loss and grieving occur even with young infants.
- How grief occurs and “looks” is organized by the child’s developmental level, culture and family.
- Infants and children need adults to support their experience and expression of sadness and grief.
- The availability of loving, attuned caregivers is needed at all ages.
- Adults who care for children need to be mindful of self-care.

These are very useful books that sensitive caregivers can use in helping young children

## *Children's Books About Loss, Death and Grief*





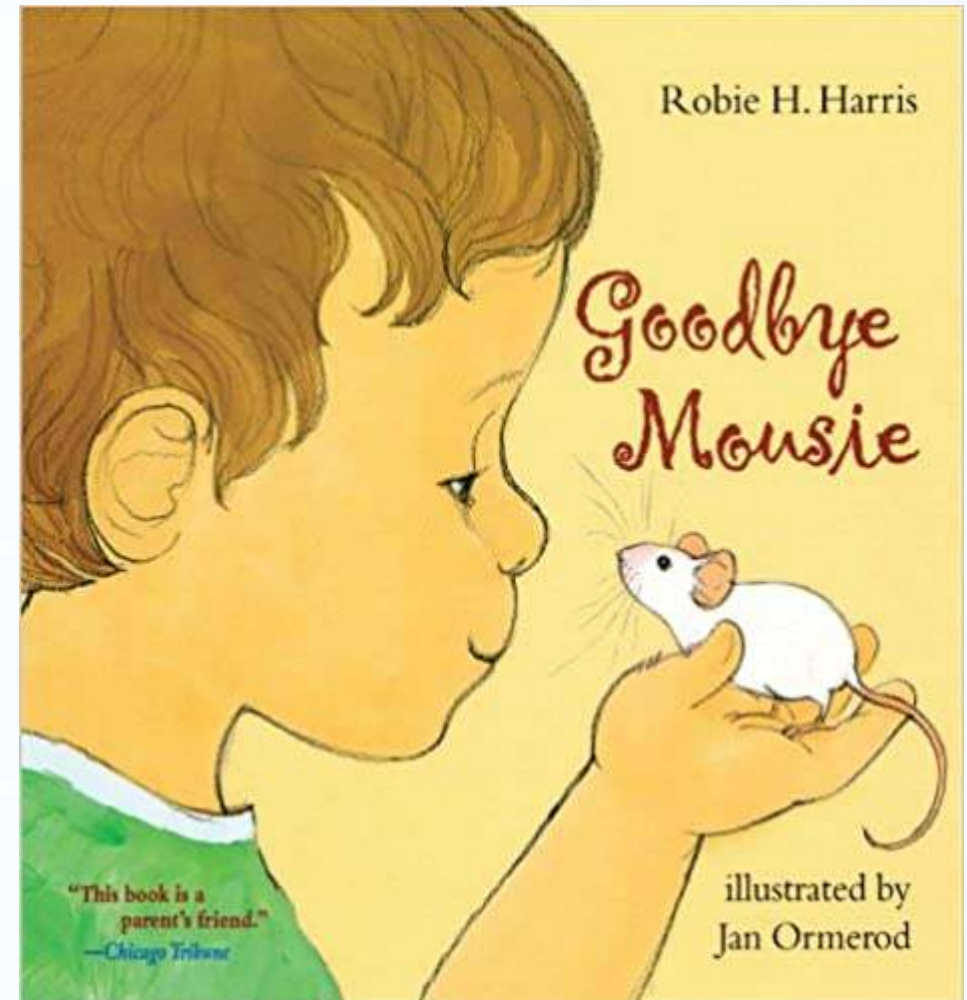
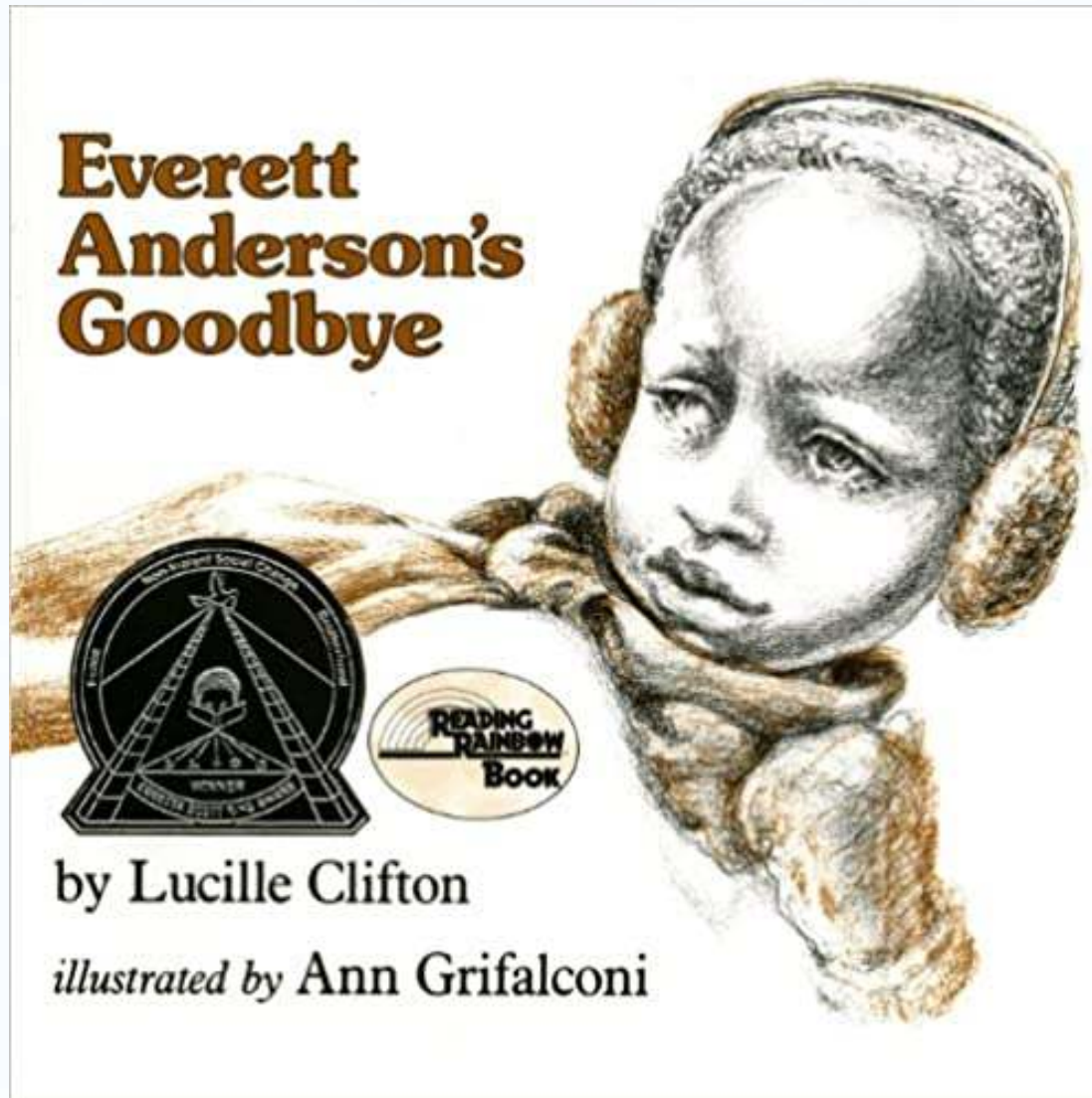
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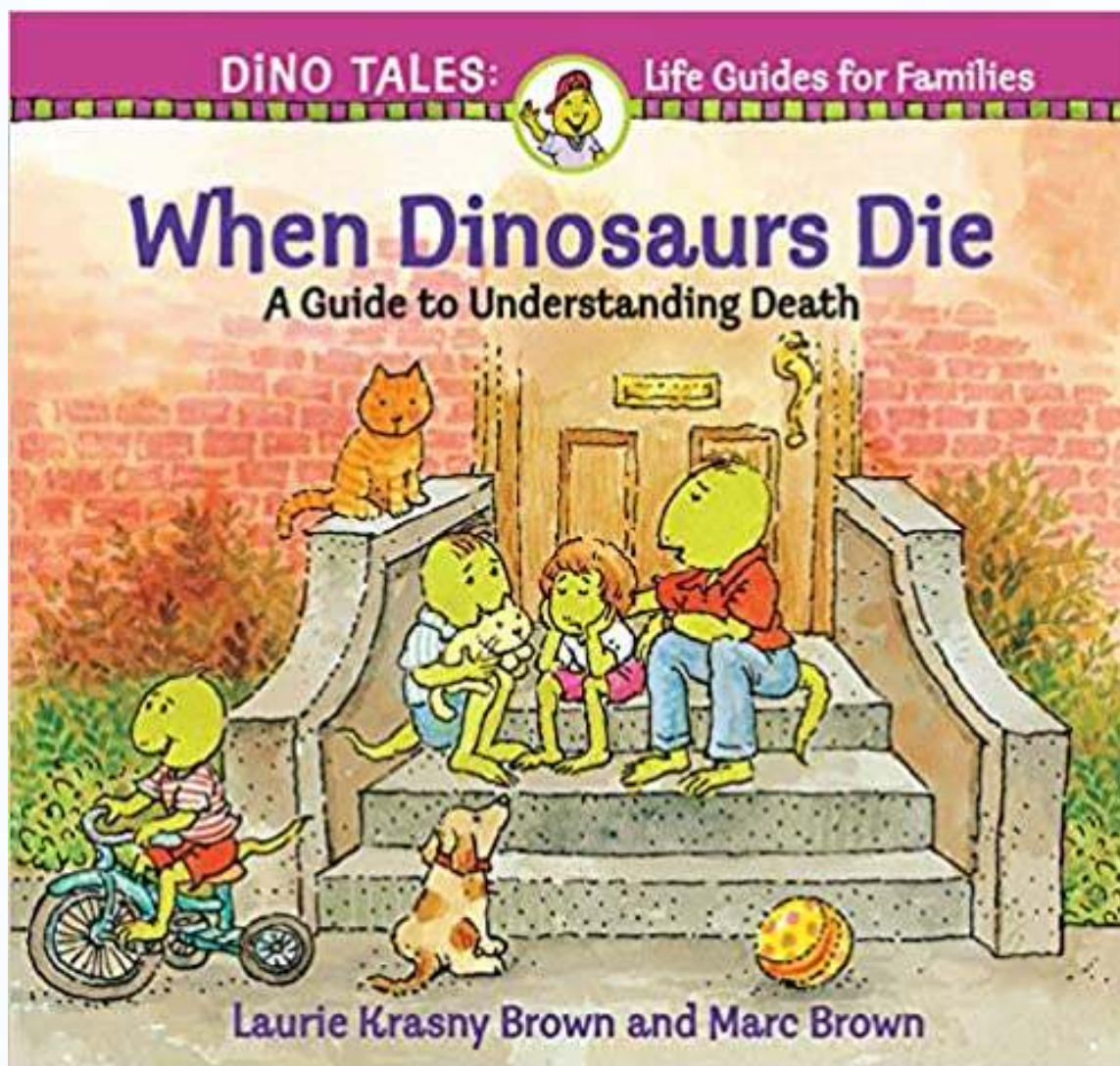
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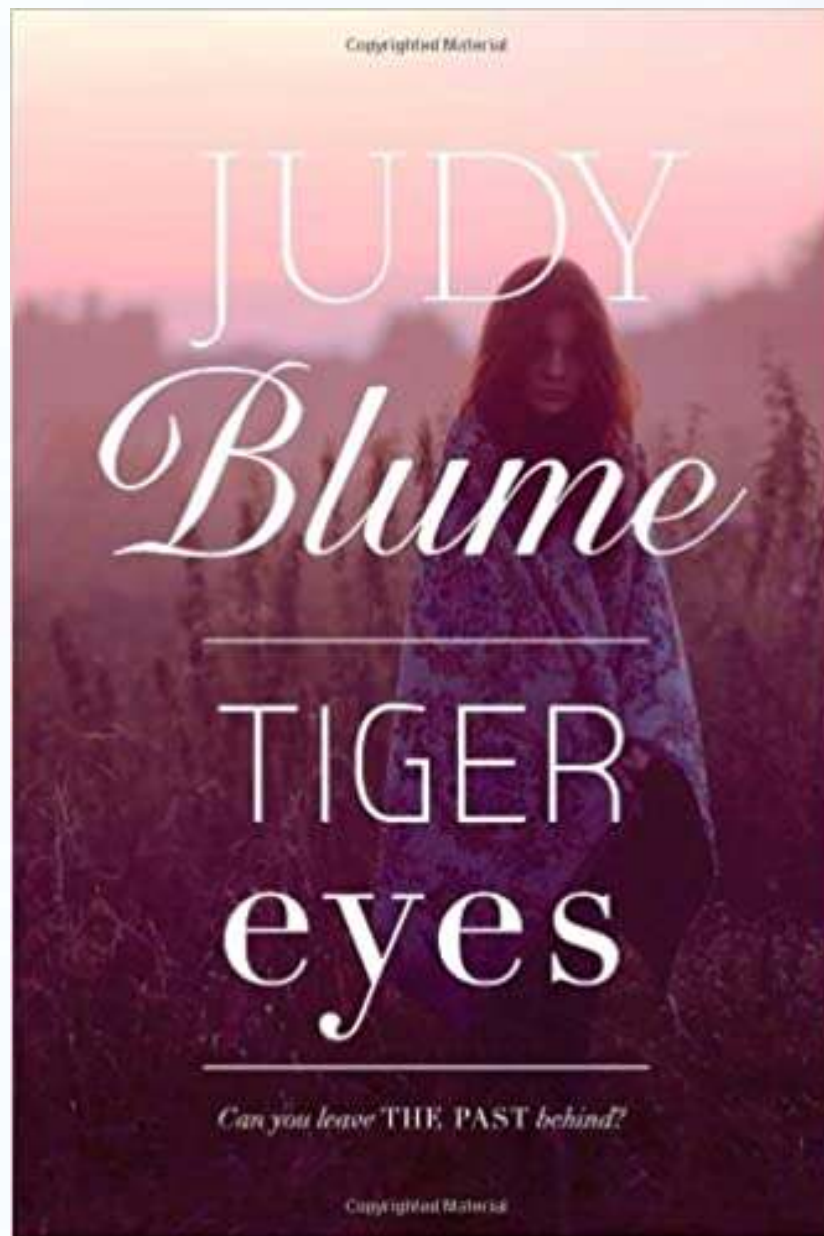






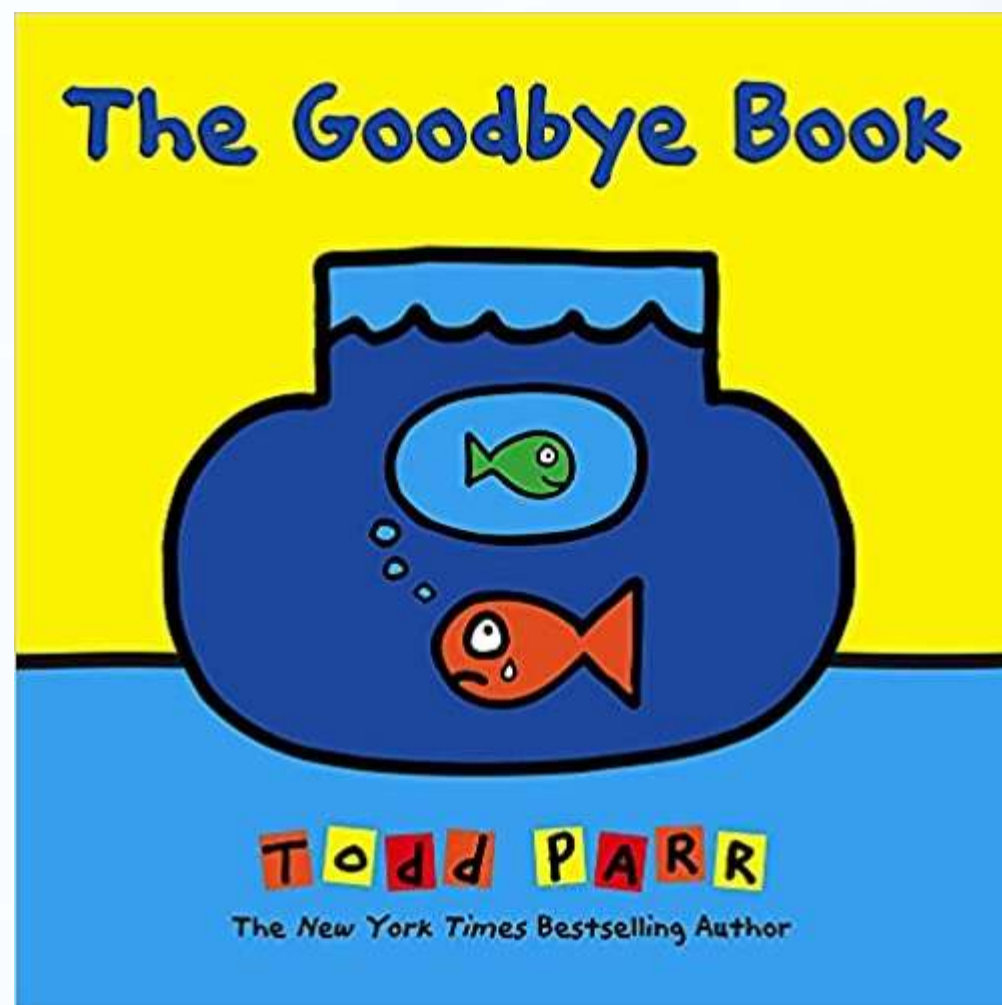
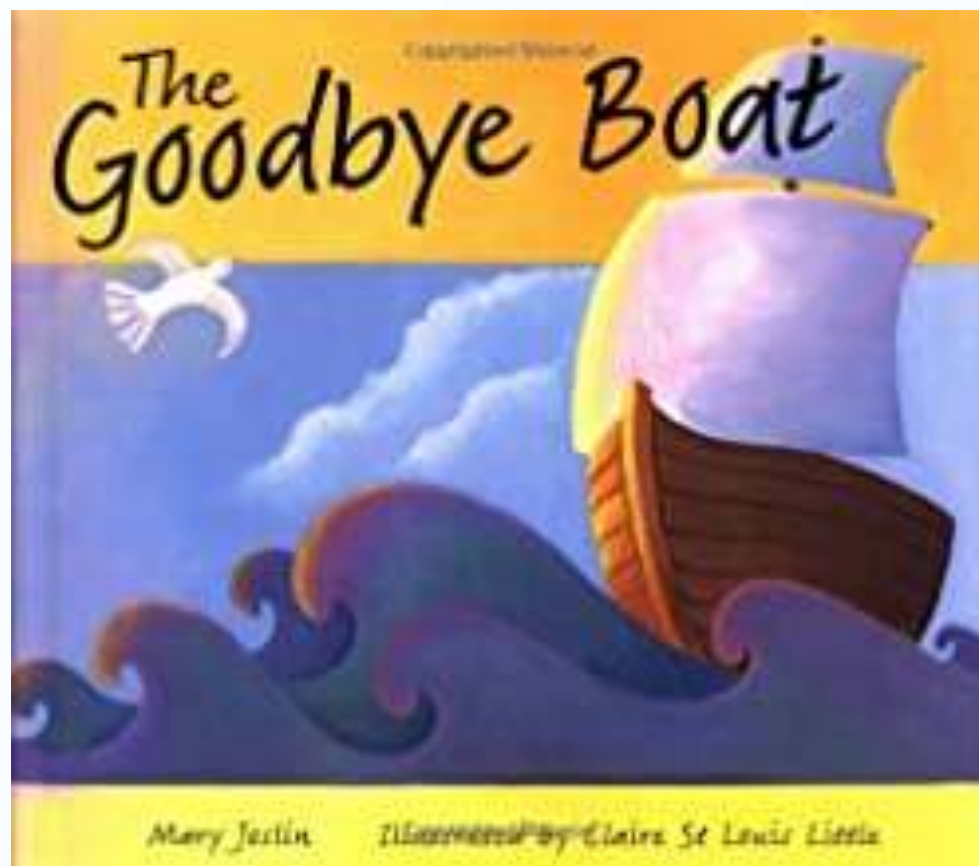
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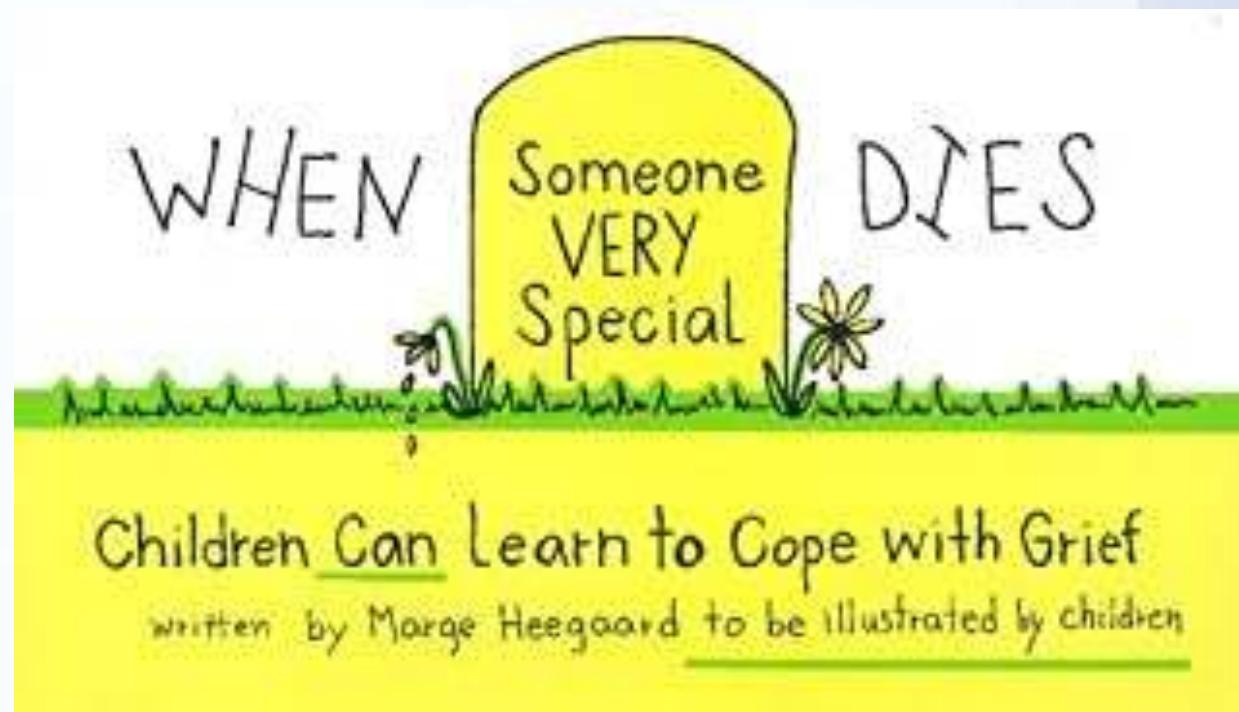
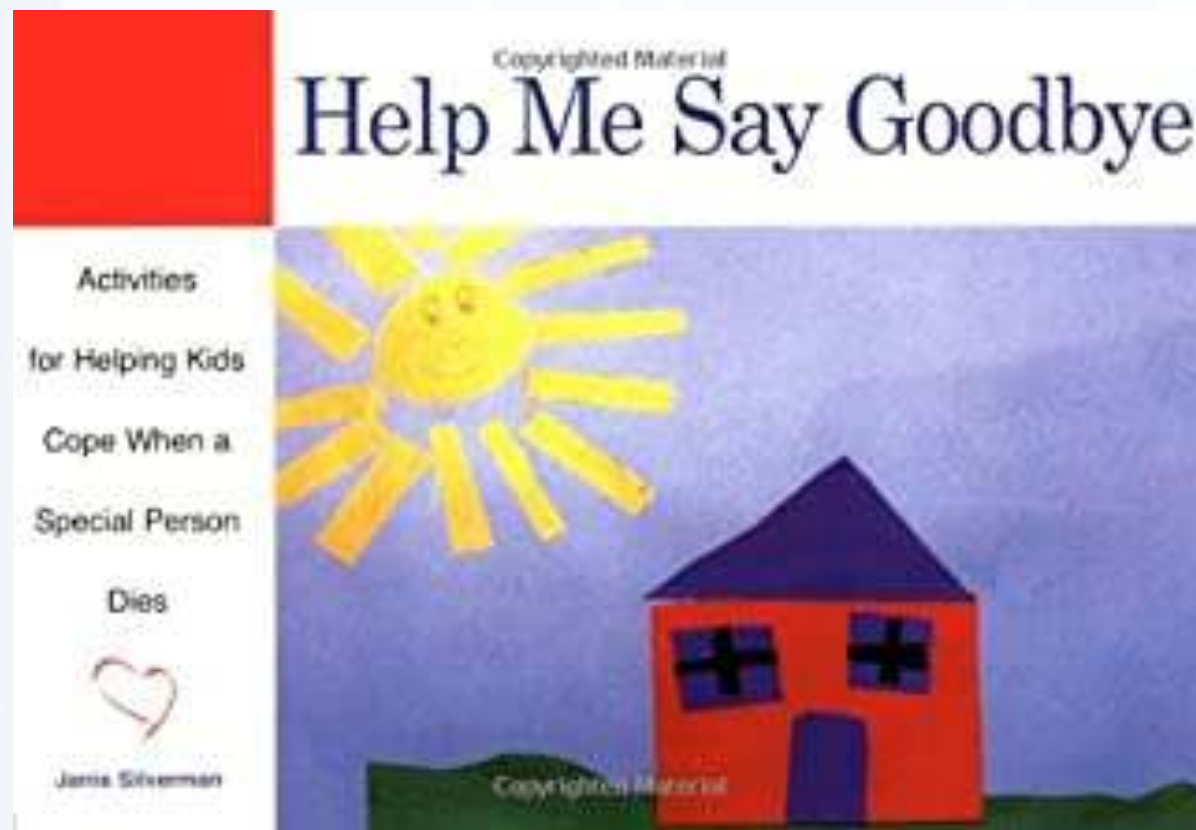


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OF SOCIAL WORK







# Cemetery Quilt

Kent and Alice Ross

*Illustrated by Rosanne Kaloustian*



# The Tenth Good Thing About Barney

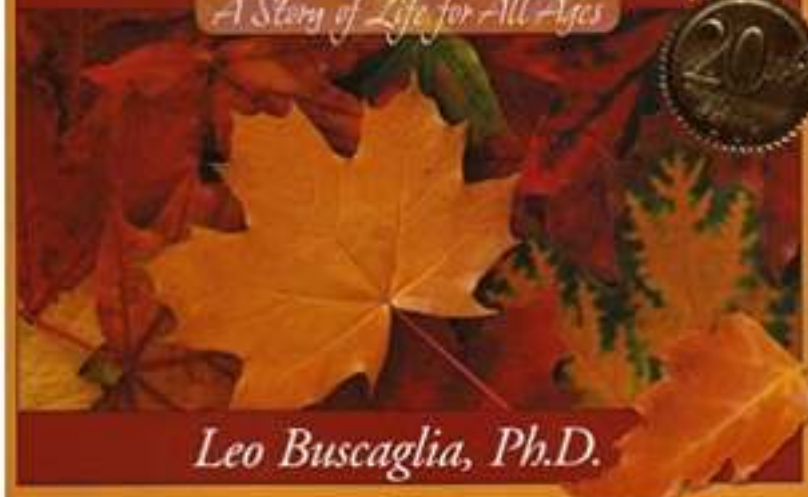


Judith Viorst

*Illustrated by Erik Blegvad*

# the Fall of Freddie the Leaf

*A Story of Life for All Ages*



*Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D.*

# Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics: [After a Loved One Dies](#)
- American Academy of Pediatrics: [Childhood Grief: When to Seek Additional Help](#)
- National Institutes of Health: [Talking to Children About Death](#)
- Zero to Three: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3366-helping-your-toddler-cope-with-grief-and-death>
- <https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/uploads/Files/PDFs/GoodBooksforToughTimes.pdf>
- <http://www.agis.com/Document/4482/helping-a-child-deal-with-death.aspx>



# Thank you!



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