

Making Memories

by Susan Hagenbach Jones

Equipping children to manage loss.

I recently retired after 30 years of teaching elementary school children. More than 700 diverse students spent school years with me, and yet few ever acknowledged losing someone they loved. Occasionally, a parent would alert me about an upcoming funeral, but, over all those years, those precious schoolchildren said little about dying.

We live in a culture of dramatic contrast. Tragic events often lead the evening news. However, little prepares us for when someone we love is dying. How then do we teach our children that loss is an inevitable and natural part of life—a part of life that children deserve to be shown with tenderness and forethought?

Children experience loss differently than adults.

For most children, death is a surprising, unexpected notion. According to Sue Bailey, elementary school counselor in Norwich, Connecticut: “Grown ups know we are all going to die. Little kids don’t. They don’t know they will lose the people they love on their journey.”

A child’s ability to understand the finality of death—and the family changes that ensue—relates directly to age and emotional development. The same is true for articulating feelings and expressing needs. Whatever difficulty we have as adults in sorting out emotions and putting words to them, the challenge is magnified tenfold in children.

Memories can help a child balance the finality of loss.

There’s something about childhood memories that remains indelible as we grow older—that shiny new bike, first home run or cherished puppy. Amid all the memories accumulated over the years, important early experiences remain clear enough to evoke the emotions that accompanied them. Simply put, there is power in memories. Power also exists in making memories, especially in helping children to process the death of a loved one.

I know firsthand that children instinctively remember comforting aspects of a loving relationship with someone who is dying. Smiles, scents, a whistled tune, a lap for reading, the sound of a voice—even a dozen familiar things you may have never thought were special form the memories that sustain a lifetime and help fill a child’s void of a loved one.

Now is never too soon.

I have long believed, memories made with people we love are too crucial to leave to chance. Becoming deliberate about memories-in-the-making adds richness to current relationships, as well as comfort in the future. Free from the grown-up and often-romanticized notion of how things ought to be, children are particularly good at memory-making because they are good at being themselves.

Ways to engage your child in memory-making.

Children are already making memories with the people they love. Tapping into the activities and endearments that shape those relationships helps comfort children coping with a relative’s terminal illness or life-changing condition like Alzheimer’s. Children also intuitively gravitate to favorite ways of expressing themselves. Some children may prefer drawing. Other children may prefer making things. These natural inclinations become a logical way for your child to express love for and communicate with someone who is dying. They also become important tools to express feelings of loss and grief.

Resources for Parents

• *Until We Meet Again* (50/50 Publishing), by Susan Jones.

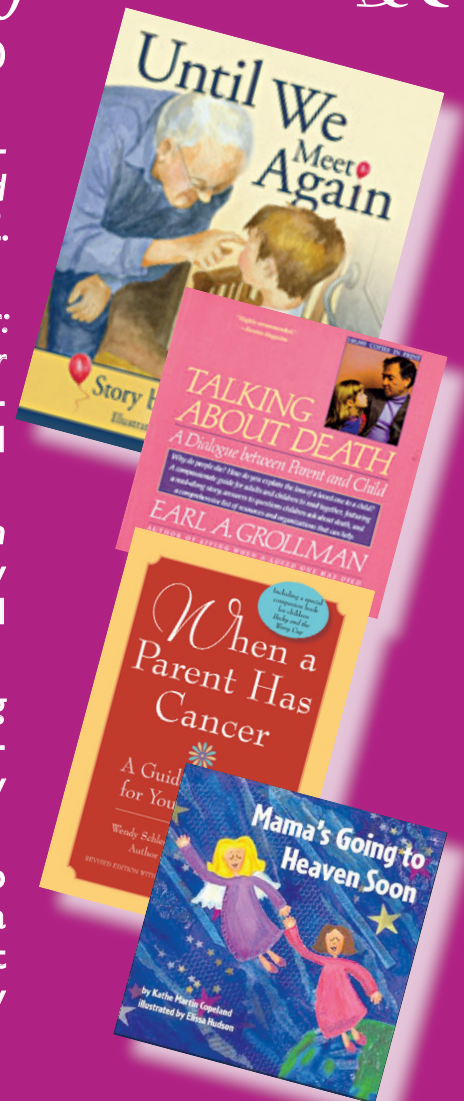
• *Talking About Death* (a dialogue between parent and child) (Beacon Press), by E. Grollman.

• *When A Parent Has Cancer: A Guide to Caring for Your Children* (Harper Paperbacks), by Wendy Schlessel Harpham, M.D.

• *Mama’s Going To Heaven Soon* (Augsburg Books), by Kathe Martin Copeland and Elissa Hudson.

• *Children Mourning, Mourning Children* (Hospice Foundation of America), edited by Kenneth Doka.

• www.erinshouse.org, a Web site run by Erin’s House, a nonprofit organization that can help connect a family with a local grief center.



Memory starters to try at home.

- Set aside a story night in which adults and children share favorite tales. Reverend Patricia Liberty, a former chaplain for Hospice organizations in Virginia and Rhode Island, reminds us that “Telling a story helps [us] be less afraid, celebrate each moment and keep loving until the last breath is drawn.”
- Have a treasure hunt to gather reminders of the relationship— find cherished photographs, favorite keepsakes and vacation souvenirs.
- Cook a special meal to eat together as a backdrop for sharing more stories.
- Start simple traditions that encourage conversations about death, like visiting a local cemetery on Memorial Day or bringing May Day baskets to terminally ill children in the hospital.
- Give your child crayons and paint to compose an artwork reminding him or her of a deceased loved one. Some children might prefer creating a collage with textures and fabrics.
- Write a simple poem or story as a tender and creative outlet. Younger children can dictate stories and memories to be jotted for them. With the child’s permission, some of these may be appropriate for sharing at a memorial.
- Encourage children to read aloud to an ill friend. It can be something they have written or something they have chosen.
- Provide a microphone and suggest an interview with family members and friends. The result can be played in a hospital room or over family supper. If possible, be sure to include stories and reminiscences by the person who is ill.
- If a sibling is terminally ill, creating a coupon book with gifts of time may be something both children will treasure.
- An often-overlooked source of memory-making is touch, especially when someone who gave robust hugs becomes fragile looking. Encouraging your child to hold a hand, gently brush hair or smooth the bed covers can maintain a precious connection long into the illness.

Begin today.

I recently came across a wonderful quote by Marie José Dhaese: “Healing from grief is not the process of forgetting— it is the process of remembering with less pain and more joy.”

Have the courage and creativity to make memories with those you love, and teach your children to do the same. While the process cannot spare you from grief, it will give you a way to share the loss with your children and celebrate the person you all love.

*Susan Hagenbach Jones lives in Norwich, Connecticut, where she taught for many years. She credits her dying father for the words that became the title of her book, *Until We Meet Again* (50/50 Publishing). Find it at www.bookofferings.com.*

Silence isn't golden

Grief counselors emphasize the importance of communication between a child and a loved one facing a terminal illness. They offer this advice:

•Answer a child’s questions in simple and direct ways.

•Maintain trust by telling the truth. Never lie to a child to minimize what is actually happening.

•Follow your child’s lead. Children will let you know if they want or need more information.

•Children take their emotional cues from the adults around them. Your own honest, healthy engagement with grief can reassure your child.