

how to help children through grief and loss

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Cincinnati Children's Hospital

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INTRODUCTION

Someone you love is dying or has died.

You have children in your life who need to be told about this loss. The thought of sharing this heartbreaking news may feel like more than you can

bear. You may have a very natural wish to try to soften the blow, to somehow make it less painful. The truth is, there is no easy way to tell children this sad news.

However, there are ways to support children with honesty, understanding, love and compassion.

This book has been created to help caring adults find words and actions that will support a grieving child. It is a gathering of information from experts in the fields of children and loss.

As an adult, the death of your loved one may leave you feeling overwhelmed and in deep pain. Children will sense this grief and stress in their environment, and it is not uncommon for children to feel frightened, insecure, powerless and maybe even guilty.

You can help them feel secure by keeping their daily routine and providing lots of extra support, love and hugs.

Because children will learn their response to loss from the adults in their world, it's a good idea to include children when family and friends come to comfort grieving adults. Children may benefit from being allowed to grieve with family and others who care. Allow your child to see your healthy expression of feelings. Sharing the grief of family members provides a chance for children to recognize, name and accept feelings. Patterns for coping with grief and loss begin in early childhood, and often continue through adulthood.¹

Avoidance or silence may teach children that they should not discuss death. Open and honest communication will let children know that all feelings are ok, and they can talk to you about anything.

As hard as it may feel right now, it is a good thing to help children learn to cope with loss, rather than trying to protect them from grief.

When you get a chance, take a moment to read through this book. See what feels comfortable and natural to you. No one knows the children in your life better than you do. It is ok for you not to have all the answers. You are all on this lifelong journey of healing, learning and loving, together.

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Children are very aware of their surroundings and can feel when things have changed. They may be quietly waiting for you to talk about these changes and share information.

PREPARING FOR A SAD OUTCOME

You may find yourself in a situation where it is becoming more clear that your loved one will not survive. Of course, you don't want to give up hope. Hope can help protect you during painful times. It is natural and something that everyone holds close in their hearts at times like this. So what do you tell the children?

It will be most helpful to keep children informed as your loved one's condition progresses. Below are some examples of how you might open the conversation:

*"Everyone still hopes Jane will get better, but her body is very sick."
(Adding "very, very" sick as the situation progresses.)*

"I can tell Jane is getting sicker because her body doesn't work the way it used to. She can't walk anymore, sit up, or eat. This is normal when a body is getting ready to die."²

With this honest sharing of information, children can begin to understand the changes in their environment and can begin to prepare themselves for the changes ahead.

WHAT ABOUT VISITING THE PERSON WHO IS DYING?

You can let children decide if they would like to visit. If they choose to visit, it is important that you prepare them for any changes in their loved one's appearance and abilities. Prepare them for what they will see, hear, feel, touch and smell. Children learn through their senses. You may say something like:

"The medicine that helps Jane not feel any pain makes her very sleepy. Even though she can't answer you, she can hear what you are saying and loves you very much."²

Offering children a way to preserve memories is a gentle way to help them shift from get-well wishes, to saying goodbye.² Instead of making get-well cards or gifts, children can make something that reminds them of a special time with their loved one.

They can draw or write about things that make their loved one special, create a photo album of memories, or even have a special conversation with the person who is dying, and/or friends and family, to record cherished stories.

These activities enhance communication, provide lasting memories and help everyone maintain hope, while being realistic.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DEATH

You want to put off telling children the sad news that their loved one has died in an effort to protect them from hurting, but try not to. It is important that children share in the grieving process. Speaking with children as soon as possible can open the door to continued communication.

This type of honesty, even at this most difficult time, can help build trust with children. They need to hear accurate, age-appropriate details from those who care for them. Children will discover what has happened, whether the person who died did so from illness, accident, suicide or homicide. There are gentle ways to explain death and the circumstances.³

Given the chance, children can learn to cope with what they know. It is much harder to cope with the unknown.

Below are some suggestions to help you find your way with this difficult conversation:

- Invite children to share what they know about their loved one's condition.
- Let the children's own questions help guide you.
- Share non-threatening information first.
- Children need simple, honest words and explanations to clearly understand what has happened. Words like *passed away* or *taken from us* make sense to adults, but they may be confusing for children.
- Instead, use words like *dead*, *died* or *his/her body stopped working*. These simple words help children understand that the body of their loved one is biologically dead.
- Confirm what *dead* means. Their loved one's body doesn't hurt. The loved one can't move, eat, breathe or play.
- Encourage questions and let them know you will do your best to answer them honestly.
- Express your own grief and allow children to learn about grief from you.
- Explain the changes in your behavior and emotions. Explain that you are sad, and that they are not the reason for your sadness. You can tell children that *tears help get the sad out*.
- Allow children to be children. Adults should not look to children for emotional support.
- Children need to understand that while you will all be sad for a long time, things will get better. The sad feelings will come and go, and that is normal.
- Tell the child: *"I love you. You mean the world to me. I will take care of you."*

Children can sense when someone is not being honest with them. If they are given only a partial explanation, they may feel that they are dealing with something very scary and create a fantasy that is much worse than the facts.

"Be prepared to listen well with your ears, eyes and heart to what your child has to teach you about his or her grief."

~Margaret M. Holmes

Seek out support groups or counseling as you feel the need. Know that you are not alone and there is help available.

Here is just one example of what you could say to start this conversation:

“You know that Johnny has been in the hospital because he was sick. The doctors and nurses have been working very hard to help Johnny get better. But Johnny’s body has gotten so very, very sick, that the medicines are not able to help him anymore. I have to tell you some very, very sad news. Johnny’s body has stopped working. Johnny died.”

Be prepared to hold the child close and be open to answering any questions he may have, or simply let him express his feelings, whatever they may be.

IF DEATH IS BY TRAUMA/SUICIDE

When a loved one dies by suicide or in a violent manner, the grief reactions may be exaggerated and complicated. Children will need extra love, understanding and support at this time.

You may find it especially painful to talk to children if the cause of death was suicide. Children may feel that their loved one chose to leave them. Reassure them that the deceased person loved them very much, and the death was not their fault.

If children ask, *“What is suicide?”* one way to explain it is to say that people die in different ways — from cancer, heart attacks, car accidents, or old age. Suicide simply means that a person caused his or her own death on purpose. It may also be helpful to explain that the person they loved caused his own death because he had an illness in his brain.⁴

The child may ask, *“Why did Joe kill himself?”* Here are some suggestions to open this conversation:

- If a child cuts his knee, it hurts him, but his mom comforts him, and helps the pain go away. Joe had a pain deep inside, and he couldn’t think of any other way to fix that pain.⁵
- Or you may say, *“We may never know why.”*
- For very young children, you could say, *“Joe’s brain was not working.”*

Children also need to hear that all problems are temporary, and that problems can always be made better.⁶

If children ask for details, it is best to tell the truth:

“Your brother shot himself.”

“Your sister took too many pills.”

Children may keep their painful feelings and thoughts to themselves, so they don’t upset you. Let them know you are there to support them, and all feelings and thoughts are ok to share.

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Siblings of the person who died, may experience a variety of emotions:

RELIEF...

because now they don't have to share attention.

FEAR...

because now they know they could die, too.

CONFUSION...

because they're unsure if they're still a brother or sister.⁷

GUILT...

why did my brother/sister die and not me?

These are normal feelings. You can help by listening or observing nonjudgmentally as children express them.⁷

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BEHAVIOR YOU MAY SEE

Children may try to protect their parents from feeling sad by not asking questions or sharing feelings. Parents may try to protect children from feeling sad by not sharing information. Don't exclude each other as you grieve. Include each other.

Children may have fears of becoming sick and dying, too. Reassure them that they are healthy (if they are). Explain that they can't catch what the dying sibling has (if true). Remind them that they might get sick with a cold or flu, but they will get better.

Children may be worried that their parents will die. As a response, you may tell them that even though no one knows for sure when they will die, you will probably not die for a very long time.

Adults are sometimes surprised by children's reactions. You may feel that the children aren't showing enough sorrow and believe they should be crying more (or less). Or you may think that the children are asking inappropriate questions. Remember, no two children grieve in the same way. Encourage children to express their feelings, whatever they are.

Some children regress in their behavior and engage in thumb-sucking or bedwetting. They may become "clingy" or have temper tantrums. Nightmares are not uncommon. Some children become more withdrawn or more aggressive, or may develop health problems.

Sometimes children express their grief in physical ways, rather than words. To help them express feelings of frustration and anger, you could offer children safe activities to engage in, such as tearing up pieces of paper or yelling into a pillow.

Engaging in play is how children express their thoughts and feelings in a way that is comfortable to them, even while grieving. It is normal and helpful. Adults may gain insight from observing the play of a grieving child.

Children of all ages are likely to experience some feelings of guilt and may feel responsible for the death of their loved one.

They need to be told with love, that it is not their fault. Reassure them that thoughts, words and wishes don't make people die. People do not get sick or die as a punishment for being bad.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONCEPTS

It is important to recognize that children's responses to the death of a loved one will vary based on their age, stage of development and previous experiences with death. The following information summarizes how children of different ages understand and react to death, and ways you can help them. These age ranges are not exact.

Birth–2 Years Old

CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

- No understanding of death
- Aware of the absence of the loved one
- Upset by loss of physical/loving presence of parent
- Absorbs emotions of others
- Begins to grasp what “all gone” means

REACTIONS

- General anxiety or separation anxiety
- Crying
- Sleeplessness or excessive sleeping
- Clinginess
- Biting
- Throwing objects
- Temper tantrums

HOW TO HELP

- Provide physical contact, cuddling and holding
- Maintain routines as much as possible
- Provide rules and limits that are concrete and specific
- Meet immediate physical needs
- Say short, truthful statements about what happened
- Let family and friends help with care and household tasks

Preschool: 3–5 Years Old

CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

- No understanding of permanence of death; see death as reversible
- Death may be confused with sleeping or being away; belief that the person will return
- Engage in “magical thinking,” believing their thoughts, actions or words caused the death
- May see death as punishment for bad behavior
- Responses may be intense but brief, and come at specific times
- May think dead people live underground

REACTIONS

- Regressive behaviors such as baby talk, bedwetting, thumb sucking, wanting a bottle, fear of the dark
- May ask repeatedly about the death in order to begin making sense of loss
- May act as if the death never happened due to belief the deceased is coming back
- May have physical complaints, such as stomach aches, headaches, not wanting to eat
- May have concerns about safety or abandonment; may fear separation from significant others
- May act out feelings because of difficulty verbalizing; may cry or fight more than usual

HOW TO HELP

- Give simple and truthful answers to questions
- Avoid using these phrases as they give mixed messages: *passed away*, *sleeping/resting*, *taken from us*
- Encourage anyone explaining the death to use the terms *dead/death*
- Maintain routines, activities, and schedules
- Allow time to regress
- Give nurturing, physical contact
- Allow safe ways to express anger and other feelings
- Encourage play and fun
- Include in family rituals and mourning

School Age: 6-11 Years Old

CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

- Understand that death is final, but still believe it won't happen to them
- Show interest in the biology of death; may ask for more details about death
- May view death as punishment for one's actions
- May question how their life will be different, what will be the same
- Worry that their caregiver may die
- Think about life's milestones without the loved one

REACTIONS

- Regressive behaviors and fluctuating moods
- Act as if the death never happened
- Hide feelings
- Withdraw
- Nightmares/sleep disturbances
- Declining or greatly improved grades, concentration difficulties
- Aggression
- Crying, anxiety, headaches, or abdominal pain
- Separation anxiety when going away to camp, school, etc.
- Hostile reactions toward deceased
- Guilt; blames self for death
- Fear of continuing friendship bonds; might lose that friend
- Day dreaming
- May fear they will die at same age
- Pre-occupation with death
- Taking on mannerisms of deceased

HOW TO HELP

- Allow regressive behavior and offer comfort
- Explain that everyone has different reactions to death at different times
- Give permission to cry through words and example; or let them know it's ok not to cry, if that is more typical behavior
- Encourage safe expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports
- Answer questions truthfully
- Encourage attendance at funeral as a way to say goodbye
- Respect wishes if child makes decision not to attend funeral; be sure to understand reasons why
- Maintain routine and structure but allow for flexibility
- Be a nonjudgmental listener
- Make it clear that their feelings are very important

Adolescents: 12-18 Years Old

CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

- Comprehend that death is final and unavoidable
- Denial
- Conflict with control of feelings; fear they will be viewed as weak if they show their feelings
- May utilize spiritual concepts to cope
- Internal conflict about feeling dependent yet desiring independence
- Can acknowledge that life is fragile

REACTIONS

- Shock
- Anger/aggression
- Confusion
- Occasional regressive behaviors
- Hides feelings
- Impulsive and high-risk behavior
- Fights, screams, argues
- Wants to assume more adult role
- Preoccupied with death
- Takes on mannerisms of deceased

HOW TO HELP

- Expect and accept mood swings
- Allow for hidden feelings unless there is risk for harm
- Be available to talk and listen
- Share your grief
- Find peer support groups
- Encourage healthy expression of grief
- Discuss role changes that may occur in family structure
- Provide physical touch and say, "I love you" often

VISITATION AND FUNERAL

Children will look to the trusted adults in their lives to help them understand the important ritual of the funeral. Although it is important to give children the choice whether or not to attend the funeral, attending can help children gradually understand that death is a natural part of life, that every living thing has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Having a role to play can help, too. Children sometimes feel better when they have a job to perform. It can give them a sense of control, when so much feels out of their control.

HERE ARE SOME JOBS THEY MIGHT DO:

- Create a collage of special photographs
- Pick out a special toy, drawing or some other meaningful item, to put into the casket
- Write a poem or story about their loved one that can be read aloud

Find out if the child has any fears or misconceptions about the funeral or visitation. You can help clear up these fears by explaining the process to them.

Children have a natural curiosity about death. Expect that there may be questions and answer them with simple, honest answers. Don't be surprised if some of these questions are morbid or blunt. Try not to give more information than they are seeking.

Should the child decide not to attend the funeral, be sure to find out what fears or misconceptions may be behind this decision. You can help clear up these fears by simply explaining the process. Gently remind them that this is the last time to see their loved one's body, except for pictures and videos.

If the child still decides not to go, you could take pictures and videos and put them in an envelope to view at a later time, when the child is ready. If later on, the child regrets the decision not to attend the funeral, assure them that they made the best decision they could at a very difficult time.

EXPLAINING THE CASKET

You could describe the casket as a special box that holds the loved one's body. Let children know that the time they have near the casket is limited. This will prepare them so that they will have enough time to say their goodbyes to their loved one.

Explain whether the casket will be open or closed. If it will be open, explain what the body will look like and what the loved one will be wearing. Explain that the body will be cold and hard, because the person's blood stopped moving when the body stopped working, and that blood is what usually keeps our bodies warm and soft.

The days immediately after the death are a special time for family and loved ones to gather, share stories about the person who died, provide caring support for one another and say their final goodbyes.



Mention that the body may look like it is sleeping. Remind children that being dead is not the same as being asleep. Sometimes our mind plays tricks on us when our heart is sad, and it may look like the person is breathing or has moved. Reassure them that feeling this way is normal for children and adults.²

It is ok to encourage children to touch or kiss the body, but there is no need to insist if they are uncomfortable.²

If the casket will be closed, explain that the person's body is in the casket and that it may be closed for religious beliefs, tradition or personal reasons. It is not necessary to go into details. If the casket is closed due to extreme changes in appearance, you may ask if they have any questions about why the casket is closed, and answer as simply as you can.²

If the lower half of the casket is closed, children may think their loved one's legs are missing. Reassure your child that your loved one's legs are present.

Explain that there will most likely be a line of people waiting to say goodbye to the loved one's body in the casket. They may see people who are sad and crying, people who are laughing remembering funny stories and people who are sharing special memories.

BEHAVIOR TO EXPECT DURING THE VISITATION AND FUNERAL

YOUNGER CHILDREN may have a short attention span and want to run and play. They may want to visit the casket often to see and touch the body. Some younger children may get uncomfortable when adults around them show intense emotions. Keep an eye on them for signs of distress.

SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN have a limited attention span. They may become bored and show attention seeking behaviors. Some children may like being helpers and could do jobs such as opening doors, getting water or tissues. It may be helpful to have a space where they can be with other children and supplies to make goodbye messages.

OLDER CHILDREN are often able to understand and appreciate the purpose of a visitation and funeral but they may have a difficult time viewing the dead body and see it as unnecessary. Teenagers may be concerned about being judged on how they are expressing or not expressing their feelings.

Consider providing materials for older children to write a letter to the person who died. If possible, try to arrange for a private room away from the viewing room, where children can go to take a break. Provide snacks, drinks and activities for any children who are present. Ask for trusted adult volunteers to supervise younger children.

After the visitation and funeral, be sure children know it is all right to talk about what they experienced. Encourage them to play, draw or write about their feelings. You may find it helpful to read books about death and dying to learn more about how you can help them cope.

BURIAL SERVICE

Prepare children for seeing people carry the casket out of the funeral home and church, synagogue or mosque and place it in a special car called a hearse. Let children know that the hearse is taking the casket to a cemetery, a place where caskets with people's bodies are taken to be buried in a grave, far underground. Assure children that the cemetery is a nice place to visit and they can go as often as they would like.

Tell children that family and friends may gather afterward to comfort and support mourners, and to remember and celebrate the life of the loved one.

It is helpful to let children know what to expect at this gathering; who will be there, if there will be food and if there will be other children to play with.

CREMATION

If your children have questions about cremation, you can tell them that some people want to be cremated instead of buried in the ground when they die. To describe cremation, begin with simple explanations, checking along the way to see if you are answering their questions.

Remind them that the dead body cannot feel pain. Here is one way you can explain cremation:

"Do you remember that Jane's body cannot feel anything because her body stopped working and she died? Jane's body was put into a large box. Special people brought her body from the hospital to a place called a crematorium. At the crematorium, the box with Jane's body in it will be gently placed into a special machine that will turn her body into ashes."

If the child asks how the body turns to ashes, you could say, "A very hot heat turns Jane's body into ashes."²

Check to see if that is enough information. Never use the words burn or fire, as that is an upsetting image for children.

Explain that the ashes will be placed in a special container called an urn. If a child wants to see or touch the ashes, prepare the child for what the ashes will feel and look like.

Let the child know if the ashes will be scattered now, later, or kept in a special place.

If possible, learn ahead of time if you will be present when the casket is lowered into the ground. Prepare children that there may be music playing, people talking, reading, praying or singing. Let the children know that these things often make people very sad because they have to say goodbye, knowing they will never see their loved one again, except in pictures or videos.

LIVING WITH THE LOSS

Here are some ideas to help children as they learn to live with the loss of their loved one:

Acknowledge the reality of the death⁷

Make sure children understand how and why the person died. Be aware that as children grow up, the death will take on new layers of meaning.

Feel the pain of the loss⁷

Be a nonjudgmental listener, and encourage children to talk about their painful feelings. Rather than trying to *dry their tears* and cheer them up, hold them gently and let them cry as long and as hard as they want.

Remember the person who died⁷

Encourage children to talk about the person who died. They can share a special memory, or show you a picture of the person who died. Have them tell you what was going on when the picture was taken. This helps keep memories alive.

Use the name of the person who died⁷

As you talk with children, use the name of the person who died, comfortably and often. Try to avoid generic terms such as *your brother*. Using the person's name helps children accept the reality of the death.

Develop a new self-identity⁷

The death may change the child's sense of who he is. For example, if the child had been a big brother or a younger sister to the loved one, the child's role in the family is now different. One helpful activity is to have the child draw two pictures, one of his life before the death and one of his life after the death. Then talk about the differences in the pictures.

Search for meaning⁷

When someone we love dies, we may question the meaning of life. Children may go to the trusted adults in their life and ask simple questions: "*Why do people die?*" "*What happens to people after they die?*" You can remind them that death is a natural part of life. Plants die, animals die, and eventually people die. It is also ok, even helpful, to admit that you struggle with the same issues.

Help the child at school⁷

Grieving children may have a rough re-entry into school. The child may feel ignored, or even teased. Make sure the teacher understands the relationship the child had with the person who died, and share suggestions for helping the child at school. Call the teacher regularly for updates on the child's life at school.

Ease the child's relationship with her peers⁷

Children who are grieving may feel different from their friends and other kids. Give grieving children some helpful words that can be used when talking with other children about the death. Invite friends of the grieving child over, and help make it a fun time.

.....

"The grieving child who understands that love and laughter are still possible in his life is the grieving child who can look forward to the future."

~Alan Wolfelt

.....

GETTING THROUGH THE SPECIAL DAYS

Birthday and holidays may feel especially challenging and sad. Try to handle one special day at a time, rather than trying to plan how you will cope with all of them. Just plan what you and your children will do on this special day. You can observe this day and make it be what you and your family want it to be.

Keep the traditions that feel comfortable, change the traditions that are too painful and maybe create new traditions to honor the memory of your loved one.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Ask family and friends to write down or record cherished memories of your loved one. Or make a donation to an organization that would have special meaning to your loved one.

As a family, you can plan how to remember your loved one who has died in a way that is most meaningful to you.

WITH LOVE...

Long after the person has died, children will continue to grieve. As they grow and mature, children will grieve the death on new and deeper levels and will need your

compassionate support and presence.

"When your broken heart mends, you will no longer be the same. You will never be the same again. You will be stronger."

~June Cerzo Kolf

If you can help the grieving child mourn as the need arises, even years after the death, you will be helping her grow into a healthy, loving adult.⁷

Be gentle with yourself and the children in your life.

Be aware that grief is as individual as a snowflake. No two people grieve in the same way or in the same time frame.

Be there and be present for the children in your life, with love, understanding and compassion.

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT EXPRESSIONS OF FEELINGS

As children continue to live their lives after the loss of their loved one, you can help them find ways to express their feelings and to feel supported. Below are just a few examples you may find useful:

.....
Create a memory book or box

.....
Write down or draw feelings

.....
Write a story, poem or letter to the one who died

.....
Find a special picture of the one who died and create a special frame

.....
Be artists together

.....
Plant a garden together

.....
Listen to music together

.....
Play a quiet game together

.....
Play an active game

.....
Play outside

.....
Explore nature together

.....
Cook something


.....
Stay up late together

.....
Laugh

.....
Teach the child something new, or go somewhere new

.....
Volunteer together

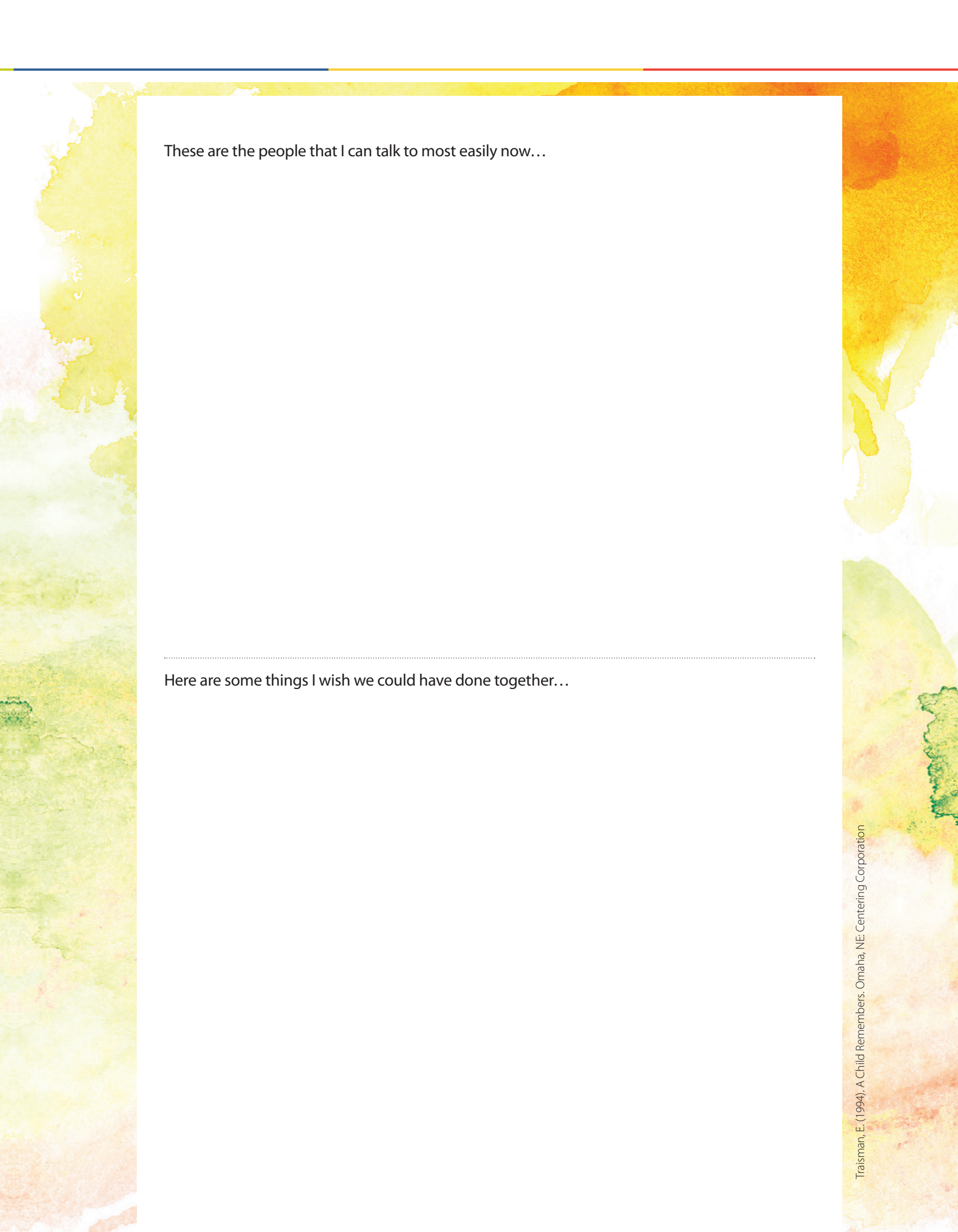
.....
Let the child have some time alone



The following pages
are meant to create a
thoughtful space for
grieving children as they
remember and think
about the loved one who
died. You could do them
together, or each of you
could put down your
own thoughts and
share them later.

Here is a poem or short story about you/us...

This is what I say to people about you...



These are the people that I can talk to most easily now...

Here are some things I wish we could have done together...



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