

Movies & Discussion Questions about Death, Dying and Grief

Many of our favourite movies, including children's movies, will likely have an element of loss in the storyline. Movies can be a great way to open a discussion about grief, death and dying with children and youth, as they may find it easier to talk about the experiences and feelings of fictional characters rather than of themselves. Additionally, kids and teens may not understand what is going on for the characters so they may find comfort and understanding in being able to discuss the stories they see portrayed on screen.

Tips for Viewing

- If possible, preview a movie first and then watch with your child.
- Be honest about the movie and ask the child if he or she wants to watch. You might say, "This is a pretty sad movie. I think someone dies. Are you sure you want to watch it?"
- Select age and developmentally appropriate movies; keep in mind the child's age and maturity level.
- Watch with the child, and do not be afraid to be emotional when the film moves you.
- Get comfortable; perhaps pop some popcorn. Although the movie may be illustrative or therapeutic, it is, first and foremost, entertainment.
- Observe how the child responds to what they are watching. Make it clear that the child can stop watching the movie at any time.

Discussion Lead-ins

The following are examples for how to start a conversation around the movie. Again, be aware of the age and developmental level of your child when asking the questions.

- After the movie, begin a discussion in general terms. *Did you like it? Who did you like best?* Gently stick with your questions, but understand if the child does not want to talk.
- Ask questions about their understanding of what happened.
- Fill in the blanks about what happened with clear and honest responses, even if that means giving them a little more information than they ask or introducing new words or concepts. Do not lie or skirt the truth; this often leads to more confusion. *(For example: It would have been easy for me to avoid the dreaded 'D' word by telling the kids that the King and Queen went on a trip and never came back. But then the message they are then left with is that sometimes parents go away on trips and never return to their children. That's not much better!)*
- Discuss how they think the characters are probably feeling. Discuss times they have felt this way.
- If necessary, discuss the events of the movie in the context of their life. For example, if something hits particularly close to home, address how it is and is not the same.
- What does the main character discover about him/herself?
- What good things happen in the movie? What new opportunities come up following the loss?
- How does the missing loved one stay with or return to the main character over time?

Movie List

Young Children (ages 3-7)

Bambi (1942): The story follows the life of a young deer in the woods trying to battle the overwhelming grief he feels after the death of his mother.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did you feel when Bambi's mother died? Do you know someone who has died?
2. How did Bambi's mother die?
3. How do Bambi's friends help him throughout the story?
4. Being that this movie takes place in nature, what examples of changes do you see?
5. What does this movie teach about the cycle of life?

Charlotte's Web (2006): Wilbur the pig is scared because he knows that eventually he'll end up being served for dinner. Wilbur forms a plan with Charlotte, a spider that lives in his pen so that he won't end up being anyone's dinner.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is the cycle of life discussed in this movie?
2. Which character do you relate to the most? Why?
3. What was the saddest part of this movie for you? What made it so sad?
4. What did you learn about friendship?
5. How do the characters in the movie mourn Charlotte's death? How did you mourn the death of your person?

Finding Nemo (2003): A widowed clownfish chases his son halfway around the world.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Marlin was so afraid to let Nemo swim in the open water?
2. Do you think that experiencing the death of someone you love can make you feel overprotective of others you are close to?
3. What does this movie teach you about friendship?
4. Have you ever been separated from a parent or caregiver before? If so, what was that like for you?
5. What character do you most relate to and why?

The Good Dinosaur (2015): A young dinosaur must find his way back home after a rainstorm kills his father.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Arlo's dad pushed him to safety instead of making sure he was safe first? Who is your protector? Who makes sure you are safe?
2. How did you know Arlo's father had died? What did they do with his body?
3. Why do you think Arlo felt guilt after his father died? Did you feel guilty after your special person died?
4. Arlo has dreams/visions of his dad when he needs him. Do you dream of your person?
5. What did you learn from the movie? Did you like the movie? Why or why not?

Inside Out (2015): Beautiful story about handling big feelings.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the movie, memories are stored in golden balls. Do you have memories you wish were not stored at all?
2. What feelings live inside your head? What feelings from the movie do you most relate to?
3. In the movie, Friendship Island fell. Did your friendships change after the death of your person?
4. In the movie, Riley's parents and her hockey team came to help because of sadness. Who has helped you when you felt sad?
5. Have you ever had a big change? What was that like for you? Do you think people expect you to feel a certain way?

The Lion King (1994): Following the death of his father, Simba, the cub who will be king, goes into exile.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Simba felt guilty for his father's death?
2. How did Simba's guilt impact his life?
3. Do you wish you could talk to your person like Simba was able to talk to his father?
4. Have you felt any of the feelings that Simba felt?
5. How did Simba's friends support him? How could you support a grieving friend?

Moana (2016): A young girl struggles to find her identity and purpose after the death of her grandmother.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the movie we see Moana struggling between wanting to lead her people and wanting to follow her heart. What do you think is Moana's biggest challenge?
2. What other losses does Moana experience other than the death of her grandmother?
3. How is death and burial talked about in your culture?
4. In Moana's search for identity, what does she discover about herself?
5. How do the different characters in the movie cope with their grief?

Onward (2020): Original, heartfelt sibling adventure about love and loss.

Discussion Questions:

1. One of the hard things about grief is that the memories we have start to fade. Often we forget things we never thought we would, like the sound of our person's voice. Has that happened to you?
2. For Ian, the magic happened when he believed in himself. What are you capable of when you believe in yourself?
3. Did you have a chance to say goodbye to your person? If you did, did you make the choice not to? Is that something you regret or do you know that decision was right for you?
4. Was your person sick before they died? Did their illness scare you?
5. If you were to make a to-do list with your special person, what would be on it?

Toy Story 4 (2019):

Discussion Questions:

1. Woody struggled to let Bo Peep go. Was it hard for you to say goodbye to someone you cared about?
2. Gabby felt defective because she didn't have a voice box. Has there ever been a time when you felt broken?
3. Why do you think Woody felt responsible for Forky?
4. There is a similarity between Forky, Gabby, and Bonnie. They are all struggling with their place in the world, a sense of belonging. Have you ever struggled to find your place? Where do you feel you belong?
5. Gabby is not a one-dimensional antagonist. She is not just evil for evil's sake. She has a clear motive, and that is to be loved by her own kid. Sometimes we believe we have good intentions, but we can end up hurting those around us in an attempt to get what we want. Can you relate to that?

Up (2009): A grieving widow and young boy become reluctant adventurers together.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the movie, the baby died before it was born. Do you know someone who has lost a baby? Do you have a brother or sister who died before they were born?
2. When Ellie died, Carl didn't want to leave his home. Is there a place you didn't want to leave because you felt you were leaving your person behind?
3. Ellie and Carl never got to go on their adventure. Is there somewhere you wish you could have gone with your special person? If so, where would you go?
4. Do you have photos of your person? Have you made a memory book or a photo book to remind you of them?
5. How did you feel when you saw Carl throw out his belongings? Do you feel attached to things that belonged to your person?

Older Children (ages 8-12)

Bridge to Terabithia (2007): A young boy faces the death of his best friend.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the significance of Terabithia? What does it represent?
2. If you could cross a bridge into a magical land to see your person again, would you? If so, what would you say to them? What would you do with them?
3. The death of a friend can be just as significant as the death of a family member. Do you think that is portrayed in the movie?
4. How is Leslie's death talked about in the movie? How were you told about the death of your special person?
5. Friendship is a major theme in the movie. What makes the friendship between Jess and Leslie so special? Why is friendship important?

Coco (2017): A young boy travels to the land of the dead to find out the family secret of his great-grandfather.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is Miguel on a mission to find his great-grandfather?
2. What did you learn about death in the Mexican culture? Do you wish Canada had a yearly celebration to remember our dead? Why or why not?
3. Miguel believes his family is cursed because of his great-grandfather's choice to leave his family to pursue a music career. What do you think is the real curse that has befallen his family?
4. What can we learn about forgiveness and love from this movie?
5. The importance of family is a big theme in this movie. Do you think family bonds are valued as much in Canadian culture? What about in your family?

Fly Away Home (1996): Following the death of her mother, a young girl bonds with her estranged father by learning to fly with geese.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do the characters find healing in nature? Do you find spending time in nature or with animals therapeutic?
2. What other losses does Anna experience besides the death of her mother? What other losses have you experienced as a result of the death of your person?
3. What helps Anna develop a sense of resilience in the face of her loss?
4. What did you learn from the movie?
5. What positive changes do Anna and her father experience throughout the movie?

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (2001): On Harry's 11th birthday he discovers that he is a wizard and he is introduced to the truly magical world to which he belongs. At school, Harry learns the truth about his parent's murder and begins to cope with his loss.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which character do you most identify with and why?
2. Do you think Harry would have grieved differently had he known the truth about his parent's death from the beginning?
3. What role did Albus Dumbledore and Hagrid play in Harry's grief journey?
4. How can friendship help someone who has experienced a loss?
5. One of the biggest things you can learn from this movie is the value of belonging. How did finding the magical world change Harry's perception of himself?

Hugo (2011): In the year 1931 in Paris, an orphan who lives in a train station tries to solve a mystery related to his father's death.

Discussion Questions:

1. What makes Hugo and Isabelle's friendship so special?
2. Why is the automaton so special to Hugo? Did your person leave you something special or important?
3. In what ways is the train station a refuge for Hugo?
4. What happened to Hugo and Isabelle's parents?
5. Who is the villain in this story? Who is the hero?

The Lost Husband (2020): Romantic drama focused on how to move forward after a loss.

Discussion Questions:

1. Children often exhibit "acting out" behaviour when grieving. What evidence of this do we see in the movie?
2. Two of the main characters are grieving different types of losses-a loss due to death and one due to divorce. How does each loss impact Libby and O'Connor?
3. For children especially, secondary losses can be even more difficult to deal with than the primary loss. What secondary losses is the family experiencing?
4. How is the father's death talked about in the movie? Do you think adults talk openly with children about death? Why or why not?
5. How does the loss impact other relationships?

My Dog Skip (2000): A story about friendship between a boy and his dog, which has died of old age.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think happens to pets when they die? Do you believe in a pet afterlife or in pet reincarnation? What happens to Skip when he dies?
2. Animals can be very therapeutic companions. In what ways does Skip become a comforting friend to Willie?
3. We see two characters struggle emotionally after returning from war. What unhealthy coping strategies do they use to deal with their pain? Do you know the difference between healthy and unhealthy coping?
4. In the movie, Willie is the victim of bullying. Have you ever experienced bullying? How does Willie cope with it?
5. In what ways does Willie change throughout the movie?

My Girl (1991): An 11-year-old girl is surrounded by death but also experiences the death of a friend.

Discussion Questions:

1. Many people assume that we don't grieve the loss of someone we have never met. This movie shows otherwise. What evidence do you see of that?
2. During the funeral, we see some differences between how children grieve and how adults grieve. What did you notice?
3. Do you think that for children, the loss of a friend can be as significant as the loss of a parent or caregiver? Why or why not?
4. In the movie, Vada talks about what she thinks heaven is like. Do you believe in heaven or an afterlife? If so, what does that special place look like to you?
5. Vada thinks that Thomas J. will be okay in Heaven. What makes her say that?

We Bought a Zoo (2011): A recently widowed father buys and renovates a zoo with his children.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did your family change after the death of your special person? If so, what changes did you experience?
2. In the movie, we see how each member of the family expressed their grief in different ways. Did you have that experience of grieving differently than someone in your close circle?
3. Do you think children and teens grieve differently than adults? Why or why not?
4. What did the family learn from restoring the zoo?
5. It's common knowledge that animals can be therapeutic for people. What evidence of that do you see in the movie?

Teens (ages 13-18)

All The Bright Places (2020): Two fragile teens -- one still hurting from a devastating loss, the other struggling with both internal and external upheaval -- meet, fall in love, and attempt to help one another heal.

Discussion Questions:

1. One thing I noticed the movie shows is that people tend not to “get over” the loss of a loved one in a time frame that society expects. Has this been your experience?
2. Laughter really is a great antidote to pain. What evidence of that did you see in the movie? Do you agree?
3. Why do you think that sometimes teens don't get the mental health support they need?
4. What role did Finch play in Violet's life? What did he teach her?
5. The impact of sibling loss is underrepresented in society. Why do you think the death of a sibling is not discussed as much as the loss of a parent or the loss of a child?

The Bucket List (2007): Two friends who are terminally ill set out to complete all the things they want to do before they die.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have a bucket list? If so, what do you want to do/accomplish before you die?
2. If you only had 6-12 months to live, would you want to know? Why or why not?
3. One of the “lessons” the movie teaches us is that death can be unexpected. Was your person sick before they died or was their death unexpected?
4. Why do you think people put off doing things that they dream of until it may be too late?
5. If you could make one more memory with your person, what would it be and why?

Charlie St. Cloud (2010): Charlie struggles with survivor's guilt after his little brother is killed in a car accident.

Discussion Questions:

1. If you could see the people you know who have died, would you want to?
2. Why do you think Charlie could not drop Sam's baseball glove in his grave?
3. Is there a special place you like to go to spend time with your person?
4. What memories connect you to your person?
5. The death of a sibling is not as common in media as the death of a parent. Why do you think that is?

The Edge of Seventeen (2016): A grieving high schooler deals with complicated relationships with friends, family, and boys.

Discussion Questions:

1. Sometimes in teen movies, grief can be romanticized. Do you think grief is portrayed accurately in this film? Why or why not?
2. How does grief complicate relationships with family and friends? What evidence of that do we see in the movie?
3. Explain the special relationship Nadine had with her father. How was their relationship different than her relationship with other family members?
4. Near the end of the movie, Darian shares his frustrations with feeling he has to be the ‘man of the house.’ In what ways has his dad's death changed the way he sees himself? How has his role in the family changed?
5. How does Mr. Bruner influence Nadine's life? Has there been a special teacher or mentor who has had a positive impact in your life?

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2011): A young boy's search for meaning after his father dies in 9/11.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do women grieve differently than men in the movie?
2. How does grief affect Oskar's life?
3. Explain the significance of Oskar's father dying in the 9/11 tragedy
4. How does the movie show that grief is universal, regardless of how your person died?
5. Why does Oskar feel the need to hide his feelings from others? Have you ever felt that way?

Me Earl and the Dying Girl (2015): A teen is forced to befriend his former childhood friend who has been diagnosed with leukemia.

Discussion Questions:

1. How was Greg's life changed by his friendship with Rachel?
2. In the epilogue, Greg writes about the impact of Rachel's death on his life before coming to the conclusion that he wants to pursue film school rather than go to college. In what ways is writing about his story therapeutic? Have you even written about your life experiences?
3. What was the significance of the film? How did the film impact the lives of Greg, Earl and Rachel?
4. Throughout the book, Rachel is dying. What can this book teach readers about anticipatory grief?
5. Why do you think Rachel decided to stop chemotherapy? How did you feel about her decision?

My Sister's Keeper (2009): A young girl struggles with her role as her sister is dying from leukemia.

Discussion Questions:

1. Anna and Jesse have grown up with their sister Kate's illness. How do you think living with a chronically ill family member has impacted their lives?
2. This movie poses an ethical dilemma: is it right to use one child in order to save another? What do you think?
3. In the movie, we see Jesse setting fires. What do you think is the reasoning behind this?
4. Why does Kate ask Anna to sue her parents for medical emancipation? How did that impact Anna's relationship with her family?
5. Do you know someone who died from cancer? If so, did you know they were going to die? How did the knowing or not knowing shape your grief?

Patch Adams (1998): A doctor uses humor to help his patients and gains a new purpose in life.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can humor help people cope with challenges and hardships?
2. How did Patch make a difference in the lives of his patients?
3. Patch sought to make positive changes to the field in which he worked. What is something that you would like to see change in your world? How can you make a difference?
4. There are a lot of examples of non-death loss. Can you name them?
5. How can unconventional ideas or ways of practice lead to revolutionary changes?

Raising Helen (2004): The fun, but irresponsible aunt is awarded custody of her sister's children after her and her husband die unexpectedly in a car accident.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you wonder what would happen to you if your caregivers were no longer able to care for you?
2. In what ways does Helen change throughout the movie? How can hardship help us to grow in a positive way?
3. What helps Helen to bond with her nieces and nephew in her new role as their caregiver?
4. Why did Henry stop playing basketball? Have you ever felt guilty about smiling or laughing after the death of your person?
5. How does the relationship between sisters Helen and Jenny change throughout the movie?



Step Mom (1998): A mother dying from cancer must come to terms with her children's new stepmother.

Discussion Questions:

1. This movie shows the realities of families coping with divorce and trying to navigate new family dynamics. How has the divorce changed the lives of Anna and Ben?
2. How do Isabel and Jackie reconcile their differences in the best interests of the children? How do you handle conflict within your own family?
3. How is Jackie's illness shown in the movie? Is this realistic? Why or why not?
4. How does the family work together to navigate difficult circumstances?
5. What are some examples of anticipatory grief in the movie?

Sources:

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What's Your Grief: whatsyourgrief.com/64-movies-about-grief-and-loss

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