

Good Grief: Dealing with Loss by Listening

by Johanna Booth-Miner



Photograph by the author

A timeless question: What do we do with our grief and how do we help those around us who are mired in the cycle of grief — all at their own stages?

Our center was tragically thrown into the orbit of these questions full force one February. What started as a simple kindergarten child complaining of a headache turned into a center searching for resources and pulling together as a community to deal with a devastating loss. In short order, doctors diagnosed our young student with an inoperable brain tumor. Two months later, she died. Our early learning center faced one of the toughest times in our history as we grappled with how to support the family and our learning community throughout the grief process that must be traveled.

Death is a difficult and sensitive subject to talk to children about. Most of us adults are at a loss for words and often do not want to feel like we have said the wrong thing.



Johanna Booth-Miner is the owner and director of Live & Learn Early Learning Center in Lee, New Hampshire. For 43 years through Live & Learn, she has worked to meet the needs of and develop an educational partnership among family, Live and Learn Early Learning, and the community that works together to maximize the potential of each child. This NAEYC accredited program is a nature-based place-based early care and education program. Johanna has always been active in the professional organizations for Early Childhood professionals, serving 18 years as President of The Alliance for Better ChildCare and now is the Past-President of the New Hampshire Association for the Education of Young Children (NHAEYC).

Since many do not know what to say or do for children, families and/or colleagues who have lost a pet or someone close to them, many adults wind up avoiding children's questions. Some adults feel it is best to not talk to children at all about this very important subject. But we are teachers and one of our most powerful jobs is clarifying misunderstandings and wonderings amongst our children.

The aphorism of our center is: teaching that comes from the heart. We needed to find a way to face this tragedy with a heart-centered approach. We also needed to realize that this would be a teaching process for all of us on the path of grief. We needed to make sure we were able to talk about memories and sadness. No matter how caring and open our profession is, dealing with raw emotions and wanting to make them better takes reflection and listening.

Our heart-centered approach focused on exactly that: listening. Through formal education and even from the time we are born, as humans we are taught to speak, read and write. However, we are not taught to listen with careful consideration. To truly listen one must be intentional and present for the other person. We have to put aside our to-do lists and stop thinking about our own responses and just focus on the other person's words and where they are coming from. Listening without judgment allows the speaker to be honest and

take time to find words for their feelings. Following our student's death, we had to teach ourselves to gently acknowledge the feelings of the families and the children in the classroom and, most importantly, to listen.

We discovered that there are some resources for teachers on dealing with death, but not many. Our goal as educators is to create a safe environment for the children in our center where all questions are welcome, accepted, and responded to. Times like these bring this philosophy to the forefront. The plan for our center began with meeting as a team of teachers to best figure out how to offer support to the family, the whole community, and the classrooms. A meeting with the families let them know how we would be approaching the subject openly and without judgment, all the while consistently reminding children that we are open, listening, and ready to help with their questions and feelings. We accepted the fact that grief is normal and that each and every member of the community would process grief in his or her own way. We would be using the words *died*, *death*, and *dying*. This was important to us, as this let children know what was happening in terms they could relate to. (It was important to us that we did not rely on inaccurate words such as *going to sleep* or *sickness*, without explaining that this type of sickness varies greatly from a cold; that becomes too hard for children to compartmentalize.) This language brought about many questions from both adults

and children, which meant that often our answer would be: “I do not know the answer to that; let’s figure this out as a community. What do you think might be the answer or place to start?”

With the kindergarten child staying at home as her health failed rapidly, we wanted to ensure that her family was still linked to our community and that the child, herself, felt she was still part of our school. Led by our co-director, pairs of teachers visited the family’s house nightly to chat with the child about what they were learning in class and give the parents respite and support. We chose to enroll the younger sibling into our preschool for two years at no cost to the family. My co-director agreed to be the emotional support and place for the parents to get hugs and fall apart, while the teachers supported the child. To ignore or attempt to sugarcoat the impending death of the child would be of no service to the family or her classmates. Each morning we greeted the parents with hugs and time to listen and grieve with them. We had to all acknowledge this was happening, which brought with it huge feelings and needs.

Our community quickly put together actions to help with the growing financial strain for the family, as both parents left their employment to spend time with their child. We ran breakfast fundraisers, spaghetti suppers, and coffee-to-go fundraisers at the center, which not only brought the family funds, but also strengthened our community. Families and teachers made meals for the family to ease the nightly routine and stress. One family from the community, who owns and creates decorative tiles, offered their services to preserve the ill child’s handprints and also sponsored a fundraiser at the center to create a Celebration of Life wall.

Our nature-based center values and thrives on the importance of contact with natural items. Armed with natural clay and items from nature, we sat by the child’s side and she placed her hands in

the clay. A smile spread across her face that seemed to light up the room. The family told us that this was one of her last smiles. For two hours we stayed and made tiles with the whole family. This experience is forever etched in my heart; we learned that we often had to talk first and share our memories to help facilitate sharing and listening, not only while the child was dying, but long after she had died.

Back in the classrooms the children were confused, angry, and upset. They asked questions like, “Where did my friend go?” and “Will I die, too?” Some children thought their friend’s illness was their fault, while others just thought she would get better and things would return to their normal.

Here is the time where we were honest and patient, something we all do at our best. We encouraged each child to express her painful emotions and sadness freely. Keeping it all inside and unexpressed prevents all of us from bringing into the open our grief, mourning, and sadness. These feelings are all okay and expressing them helps us heal and form memories. When not addressed and expressed, they can create serious emotional problems later in life. As painful and scary as it was for us to watch, the children in our kindergarten were having the valuable learning experience of dealing with loss and tragedy.

We found that a good strategy for our teachers was to encourage the children to ask any questions they had about the death. If you listen carefully, children will let you know how simple or detailed your answer needs to be. They may be very curious about what happens to a body after a person dies. They may ask if she is cold or hungry. We did our best to answer honestly that once a person is dead, her heart and mind and body no longer work. She no longer breathes or talks or walks or moves. Her body is no longer warm, but cold to the touch. Giving the children these concrete details

helped them to process an unfamiliar experience.

We found that this approach actually reassured children that their fears and feelings were normal. We did not want the children in our center to be the forgotten mourners, nor did we want to try and keep their world as happy as possible and shield them from an experience that was very real for them. As a community, we did not want anyone to grieve alone.

Having witnessed the power in the experience with the clay with the family, we set up our gym area to create more natural clay tiles and invited all families to come and press natural objects into the clay. The tiles were then fired and assembled to a Celebration of Life display. During this time we shared stories of loss and grief, as well as happy memories of our departed friend. This process helped the families and children see us grieving as well, and to feel the power of the community for support and building memories. We discovered that this task was difficult for those of us who were raised to be stoic New Englanders who pigeonhole traumatic events and feelings. This enlightened us as to how much more effective our newfound healing process was.

I truly believe that people enter our lives for a reason. This beautiful young girl taught us how to look at our community and build a system of support and caring. I have learned that she came to help us all grow emotionally. As I traveled through the loss of my mother this year, thrown back into this process of grief, I relied on community support and the closeness of my siblings. We can live by and cherish the following statement: “We are only given today and never promised tomorrow. So make sure you tell the people who are special in your life that you love them.” Listening, reflecting, and sharing memories keep this sentiment in our teaching and hearts each and every day.