



Revolutionary Love Letters to Parents

Grieve

From:

The Revolutionary Love Project

To: You





Grieve

Dear Parent,

Grieving with children might sound intense. We tend to associate grief with significant losses—death, natural disasters, and war, the very experiences we protect children from. But grief isn't defined by intensity. It's a reaction to life saying no—no, you can't have that job anymore; no, the world isn't free of violence; no, you can't have your father anymore.

Young children grieve every day, multiple times a day. Grief is part of being a young child and growing up. They remind us of just how prevalent daily no's are. We might wonder, is it really that sad not to have the yellow cupcake? For children, it is, whether we think it's reasonable or not. They've not yet learned to judge some sadness as more valid than others.

While the frequency and intensity of children's grief can feel exasperating, we can use these experiences to help children and ourselves learn to grieve more fully. We grieve with our children, not to take away their feelings or give in to their demands, but to walk beside them through the pain.

We do this because what doesn't get grieved turns to grievance, which breeds power struggles and resentment. We do it because it teaches children how to do it for others. We do it because it strengthens our capacity to be with the world's grief. We do it because tending to what's ungrieved in our lineages prepares us to be the ancestors we so desperately need.

Disappointment over a cupcake might seem a world away from grieving with victims of terrible violence. In a way, it is. But from our heart's perspective, every grief gently

and consistently tended strengthens our capacity to show up for others.

What they forget to tell us about parenthood is that it requires us to learn to grieve—to strengthen our heart’s capacities. The world isn’t what we hoped it would be for our kids. We are not always the parents we want to be. Our children are not always people we approve of. As babies, they are intimately and dependently tied to us. If we do our job right, they grow up and move away, so we must let go of the person we’ve literally grown. Whether you feed an infant, drop your child at kindergarten, or attend their wedding, parenting demands we grieve.

Martine Prechtel, native author and teacher, writes, *“Grief is praise because it is the natural way love honors what it misses.”* He says we cannot praise or love something sincerely without the grief that comes from acknowledging that we will someday lose it. Our grief, in turn, reveals the depth of our love.

Perhaps children cry over the loss of a cupcake because their capacity to love has not yet been dampened. Maybe the gift and demand of parenthood is learning to love profoundly by growing our capacity to grieve. When parenthood is at its best, it transforms us into people who can no longer turn away from others’ grief because we understand the stakes and the gifts.

So grieve with your children, and let others grieve parenthood with you. Your children need this from you. Your heart needs this from you. Others need you as well. Whether it’s parents trying to protect children from violence or a family grieving in your community, to grieve with others is a profound act of love.

—With love, The Revolutionary Love Project Team

Defining grief

To grieve with others is to share their pain, without trying to minimize or erase it. Grieving with others requires a willingness to be transformed by their experiences, especially those who have suffered trauma and violence. Grieving collectively and in community gives us the information to build solidarity, to fight for justice, and even to share in one another’s joy.

“Grief has no end really. There is no fixing it, only bearing it. . . . When we are brave enough to sit with our pain, it deepens our ability to sit with the pain of others. It shows us how to love them.” (Kaur, 2020, p. 43-44)

For more exploration of grief, get **the Revolutionary Love Project Compass guide**.

Practices to foster grieve

Regularly and informally, talk about what grief looks and feels like

One of young children's great strengths is the authenticity and intensity of their emotions. As a result, a crucial task of early childhood is learning to grapple with intensity.

Children do this partly by learning vocabulary, concepts, and skills for intense feelings. The more people talk with children about emotions, what they are, how they manifest, and what to do when they arise, the more tools they will have. Talking with children about sadness and grief in various ways is crucial.

Ask them what sadness feels like in their body. Over time, this will help them recognize and tend to sadness when it arises. Usually, however, it's easier to reflect on intense feelings after the fact. *I noticed you were really sad when Grandma had to leave. I'm wondering what that felt like in your body. What were you thinking about?*

You can also help them understand grief by talking about others' sadness: how and why others might be sad and what might be done for them. For example, if someone gets hurt at the playground, you can narrate the situation: *They fell and hurt their knee. I bet it hurts, and they might also feel sad that they fell. Look, their dad is giving them a hug and a bandaid. I wonder if they need anything else.* You can also talk like this about characters in media or books.

Children are often curious about adults' inner worlds, so you can talk with them about your own experiences of grief. These could be current or things you felt when you were a kid. Just be careful not to unintentionally send the message that it's your child's job to cheer you up or that you rely on them to make you feel better. This can be too much pressure. The intention should be to share in order to help your child understand how to tend to sadness and grief.

Offer ways to care for one another

Children often want to know how to care for people who are hurt or sad but don't know how. You can offer simple methods, such as having special ice packs for when someone falls or paper and pens to make notes for sad family members. While the methods won't always make people feel better, they will allow children to practice responding to others' pain.

Create family grief rituals

Children often love ceremonies and rituals, so creating a family grief ritual can be a lovely way to practice being with one another's sadness. There are many ways to go about it; feel free to be creative. Consider pairing a repeating action with an op-

portunity to share some sadness. For example, you might invite each person to say something, and after they are done, you light a candle or pour a little water into a bowl. If you've got space, you do the ritual around a fire and toss in a stick for each person who shares a grief.

Children will likely need help thinking of what to share. When you introduce the ritual, offer a range of options.

You might share something you are sad about: someone you miss, something you wish had happened, something in the world that makes you sad. You can also talk about something you know someone else is grieving. Maybe there is a friend at school who is having a hard time.

When it's your turn, share authentically, but also model how and whom one might grieve.

If there has been a tragic event in your community or the world, and your child knows about it, consider including a space to grieve with the people affected. Even if your child rarely shares on their own, being part of the ritual will build the capability and value for grieving with others.

Invite extended family, friends, or neighbors to your grief rituals. This will not only give others a much-needed space to grieve together, but it will communicate to your child that being in grief in the community is something your family values.

Don't fear children's negative feelings

Adults often feel like they've failed if young children are unhappy. Grief, disappointment, and anger are essential parts of childhood. While we want to support children through hard times, we don't unintentionally want to convey that they must rush through sadness. Find ways to help children digest their feelings without making the feelings a problem. One way to do this is to offer reflection: *"It looks like you are sad you didn't get the doll you wanted."* This helps the child feel understood and less alone without making the emotion a problem. Often, stating the feeling is all the child needs because it lets them know you understand and are accompanying them as they sit with the feeling.

Attend to children's grief when setting boundaries

When setting a boundary causes grief and disappointment, try being with children's suffering as you say no. If you ask questions about the grief that get them to say yes, you allow space for their desires while maintaining the boundary. *"I notice you really want ice cream now? Were you looking forward to having a treat? It won't work now so would you like to have some after dinner instead?"* In this strategy, you keep your boundaries while aligning with the child's disappointment. You are grieving with them.

Talk about the connection between grief and love

Grief becomes easier to bear when we recognize that grief and joy often go together. When we love something deeply, we grieve that we will lose it one day. When we grieve, we can feel just how deeply we love. Talking about the connection between grief and love with children will help them find this in their own experience. *You know, I notice that when I'm sad or disappointed when I'm grieving something, it's because I love that thing a lot. When I love something, I notice sadness that I will lose it someday. These two things go together. I know that my sadness can help me love, and my love can help me learn to feel my sadness.*

Grieve with other parents

Parenthood is full of grief. We grieve that we must let children go as they gain independence. We grieve that the world isn't what we want it to be for our children. We grieve when others or our children are unkind. Our love for our children is intense. Therefore, there is ongoing grief, too. Find moments to grieve with other parents. Talk with them about your grief, and listen to theirs. Consider setting up a parenting grief circle where you can get together to witness one of the ways parenthood asks you to let go. Your community might even attend public vigils or tragedies to grieve in solidarity with other parents.

Grieve with plants, animals, and landscapes

Some of the first ways children experience or discover death are insects. Children take great interest in the bodies of dead animals. It can be fruitful to spend time with dying bugs. You might ask your child what they think would make the animal or bug more comfortable as it passes. I once asked this of a child about a dying bee, and she surrounded the bee with flowers and spent twenty minutes accompanying it as it died. She wasn't grieving the bee's passing but became sensitive to its suffering. It was a beautiful way to practice grieving with others.

Include your child in moments of tending to others' grief

If you are cooking for someone in grief, consider including your child in the cooking or dropping off the meal. Whether they help or not, knowing that you are taking time to grieve with others will model that it's something that should be done.

Bring children to funerals and vigils

If appropriate, include your child in funerals and vigils. Participating in cultural grief rituals is an important part of experiencing communities grieving together. These creative and beautiful rituals often inspire children. Their presence is not only good for them, but it can also bring poignancy and joy to grief.

Children's books for grieve

- **The Dandelion's Tale** by Kevin Sheehan & Rob Dunlavey — A robin finds a dandelion grieving the loss of its seeds and accompanies it through its grief and ultimate death. It's a very touching example of grieving with others.
- **Everyone Feels Sad Sometimes** by Dr. Daniela Owens — A book about everyday sadness with tips on how to move through it.
- **Why Do I Feel So Sad? A Grief Book For Children** by Tracy Lambert — This book is for children who have experienced loss like death or divorce and helps them understand what and how they might feel.
- **Wherever You Are, My Love Will Find You** by Nancy Tillman — A simple board book that poetically reinforces the idea that a child is loved wherever they are.
- **The Goodbye Book** by Todd Parr — A book about saying goodbye to a friend and what one might feel. It's about a fish and implies the death of a friend, but it doesn't say it exactly. It could be used to talk about saying goodbye in general or about death.
- **Grief is an Elephant** by Tamara Ellis Smith — This book walks children through the way grief is ever present, but changes shape and intensity. It is a wonderful child-centered way to build a map for the process of grief.
- **Ladder to the Moon** by Maya Soetoro-Ng — A beautiful and poetic book about a little girl's desire to know her great-grandmother. It is a joyful and moving book about connection to ancestors.
- **Tough Guys Have Feelings Too** by Keith Negley — This is a book about the tender feelings of heroes, wrestlers, knights, and ninjas. It's a book targeted to counteract problematic gender messages. This would be a great way to help children understand that all kinds of people struggle with sadness.
- **Remembering** by Xelena González — A family remembers their dog through the Dia De Los Muertos rituals. A beautiful book about grief and ritual. It could be a way to have a conversation about building one's own family grief rituals.
- **The Bear and The Wildcat** by Kazumi Yamato — When Bear's best friend Bird dies, he can't find any other animal in the forest that understands his grief. Finally, he meets Wildcat, who plays his violin and accompanies Bear in his grief. This beautifully illustrated story is a great way to learn about what it means to accompany another in sadness.