

What Do We Tell the

# CHILDREN?

Talking to Kids about  
Death and Dying

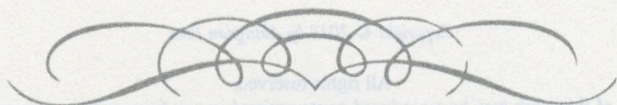
Joseph M. Primo

"A must read."

— Kate Braestrup, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Here If You Need Me*

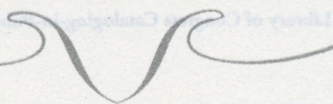


WHAT DO WE TELL THE CHILDREN?  
TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING

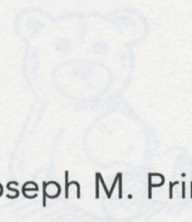


What Do We Tell the

# CHILDREN?



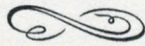
Talking to Kids about Death and Dying



Joseph M. Primo

Abingdon Press  
Nashville

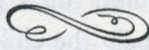




# Contents

Acknowledgments . . . . .	ix
Prologue . . . . .	xiii
Introduction: A Caregiver's Perspective . . . . .	xxi
1. Put On Your Own Oxygen Mask First . . . . .	1
2. Kids Feel, Too . . . . .	11
3. Myths . . . . .	29
4. Components of a Child's Grief . . . . .	53
5. What Do We Tell the Children? . . . . .	81
6. Listening without Lollipops . . . . .	103
7. On Death and Lying . . . . .	113
8. A Cultural Rebirth . . . . .	121
Notes . . . . .	129

Many mentors and dear friends supported me over this path of grief as I journeyed myself in death and dying. Although their love for the topic may have been less than mine, their support of me never



## Chapter 1

---

# Put On Your Own Oxygen Mask First

**B**efore we can proceed to talk about children and their grief, we need to know our own grief story. Our interactions with grieving children, our presence and responses, are skewed by many variables: our age, previous losses, religious beliefs, cultural heritage, and, of course, our profession and social role. It is important to understand these prejudices because they will influence our expectations of how a child should grieve or what a child's grief looks like. This is true for each of us, and unless we are willing to dive into our own grief experience and reflect on our grief story, we will not be able to identify those feelings and discomforts that affect our perception of other people's stories. Through our own careful examination of our fears, preconceived beliefs, deaths, disenfranchised grief, and the ways in which each of us achieves emotional safety through ideas that can become rigid beliefs that are not applicable to everyone, we are able to better support the bereaved, especially children.

When I train facilitators of children's support groups, I never start the training with children's grief, even though that's the subject



## *What Do We Tell the Children?*

the facilitators have signed up to learn about. We never dive right into childhood development or what grief looks like for a kid. Instead, I dress up like a flight attendant and take out a mock oxygen mask. "When this thing spirals, folks, you've got to put on your oxygen mask first. Then you can help the child next to you." Well, that makes sense to everyone. We all need to breathe, and it's better for us to prepare ourselves first so that we can help the children. So, many thanks to whoever came up with that life-saving advice, because that same teaching is crucial for successfully helping adults and kids with their grief.

On the first day of training I have everyone create a loss line. It is a simple task that is full of emotion, memories, and sharing. No matter how creative someone is (or is not), each trainee sits down with a large poster board and maps out his or her grief story. The trainees make collages that map, from birth to the present moment, dreams that never came to fruition, loves that fizzled, parents who died, unwelcome moves across states that left friends behind, the deaths of pets and friends, job losses, and all sorts of other things that are a part of life. If you have never done this exercise, take some time and do it now. Create your own loss line. What memories are stirred? Are there any patterns? What other important life events followed?

This exercise exemplifies our grief story. Reflecting on life, seeing the years that were full of grief or hope, and returning to memories that time has since silenced, the trainees build on their empathy and can more clearly see the ways in which their story might lead to judgments and assumptions that would make them less effective with others. I call this grief work. And doing grief work leads to grief knowledge.

Grief work is so important because, for the most part, we've forgotten how to do it. We no longer have transference of grief



knowledge from our elders to the next generation. The knowledge has been lost because a discomfort with grief and a denial of our mortality have silenced our stories. Our lack of socially prescribed ways of dealing with death as a community directly affects each of us, especially our children. Kids look to adults in order to learn, acquire knowledge and facts, and better understand life. When a grieving child—or any child for that matter—looks to an adult to gain a better understanding of death but no one is able to provide honest or clear responses, it is unsettling for the child.

I believe our ability to honestly engage our mortality and grief has shifted dramatically in the last 150 years from an intimate familiarity to a disconnect and discomfort with death. Both our expectations and rituals have changed. Up until the twentieth century we were a primarily agricultural society in which children and adults were routinely interacting with nature and the cycle of life, watching animals give birth as well as die. It was a day and time when the sick were cared for at home and the death of both the young and the old seemed like an ordinary, albeit often unwelcome, part of life. Although medical science offers many blessings, it has also led us to create new expectations about death. Nowadays, we like to think that death is specifically for people over ninety or one hundred. We are OK with them dying. That seems natural to us. They lived a long life. We may miss them, but we are not surprised by their deaths.

In large part, this shift in attitude and experience can be attributed to medical advancements, but it also has something to do with the rapid change of our death rituals. Rituals are a crucial characteristic of how adults and children alike understand and comprehend death. The American Civil War, for example, drastically changed our death rituals and our vocabulary for talking about grief.