

Roger Neilson House Presents:

# A Web of Grief: Supporting Children's Grief while Navigating Your Own



Andrea Warnick, RN, MA  
[www.andreawarnick.com](http://www.andreawarnick.com)

# Goals

- Explore common barriers to supporting grieving children
- Identify 5 key strategies to support children who are grieving either their own illness or a sibling's illness
- Share a few favourite children's grief resources

“The greatest gift you can give your children is not protection from change, loss, pain or stress, but the confidence and tools to cope and grow with all that life has to offer them.”

Dr. Wendy Harpham

# Barriers

- Fear of saying wrong thing
- Fear of taking away hope
- Uncertainty regarding emotional reactions
- Concerns about increasing anxiety
- HCPs: Apprehension about getting on the wrong side of parents protective instincts
- Cultural backdrop



# # 1: Open the Conversation

- It is the responsibility of adults, not kids, to start the conversation.
- Get on the level of the child/youth.
- Start the conversation by asking what the child/youth understands until this point.



## Some Openers...

*“I’m wondering what you understand about what is happening to your [body] [sister]?”*

*“I’m wondering if you’ve heard other people talking about any information that is confusing to you?”*



## # 2: Use Simple & Correct Language

- Language is powerful
- Call the illness/condition by it's name
  - “cancer”
  - “seizure disorder”
  - “DMD”

# Stella





# Talking About Death

- Avoid euphemisms for death
  - Lost
  - Gone
  - Passed away/on
  - Expired
  - Sleep
  - With the angels

# Provide Kid-Friendly Explanations

- Start with the physical

“Died” means that a body has stopped working and will never work again. **The body** cannot move, breathe, think, feel, see, smell, talk... **The body** does not feel pain or hunger or fear.

"Strong and comforting!" —Booklist

# WHEN DINOSAURS DIE

A Guide to Understanding Death



LAURIE KRASKY BROWN AND MARC BROWN

FEAR

MEANINGLESS

WORRIED

RELIEF

DISBELIEF

WHY??

“GRIEF” is all the different feelings that occur  
when something really difficult happens in life

MAD

ALONE

CONFUSED

GUILT

SHOCK

HAPPY

SAD

STRANGE

# Words that help

- Wondering
- Nature
- Mystery

"Name it to tame it" (Dr. Dan Siegel)



# Language to try to Avoid

- “Sorry” (particularly with young kids)
- Praising for being “strong”
- Language that severs the connection with a person who died
- Language that leads into the fix-it trap

# #3: Address the “4 C’s” of What Children Want to Know

- Did I CAUSE it?
- Can I CATCH it?
- Could I have CURED it?
- Who is going to take CARE of me?



# #4: Encourage Questions

- Encourage kids to ask questions or share worries, reassuring that all are 'okay'.
- Make sure to understand the question that is being asked.
- Validate the question Answer honestly using simple, concrete language.
- Be honest when you don't have the answer.

"What do you think?"

"Can you help me understand your question better?"

"You would like to know...?"

"That's an excellent question."

## “Ask the Doctor”

What do you think is  
the right definition for death?

Is cancer contagious?

How do you burn some one  
ashes when they die ??

When someone dies where  
do they go?

How do you get  
cancer?

Is god real?  
Tell the truth



# “Be Right Back” Jars

- To create a safe and secure time to explore questions, worries, memories etc.



# #5: Teach Children about Grief

- Grief is a natural response
- Grief isn't a problem to be solved
- The goal is not to take away the heart break
- Once someone dies, the goal is not to “get over” the person

# The Power of Ritual

- Rituals provide guidance and order when life is disrupted by crisis
- *“Many impulses of a basically destructive and antisocial nature, instead of being acted out with social sanctions in a safe a structured sacred context, leak insidiously into our everyday lives and manifest themselves in a number of individual and societal problems.” (Grof & Halifax, p. 195)*



Day of the Dead - Mexico (Dia de los Muertos) Nov 1 & Nov 2



Mizuko Babies - Japan



# Research Findings

- Entwined nature of family grief experience recognized
- POSR (Partner Oriented Self Regulation): One partner's POSR is associated with an increase in his or her own grief AND an increase in the partner's grief.



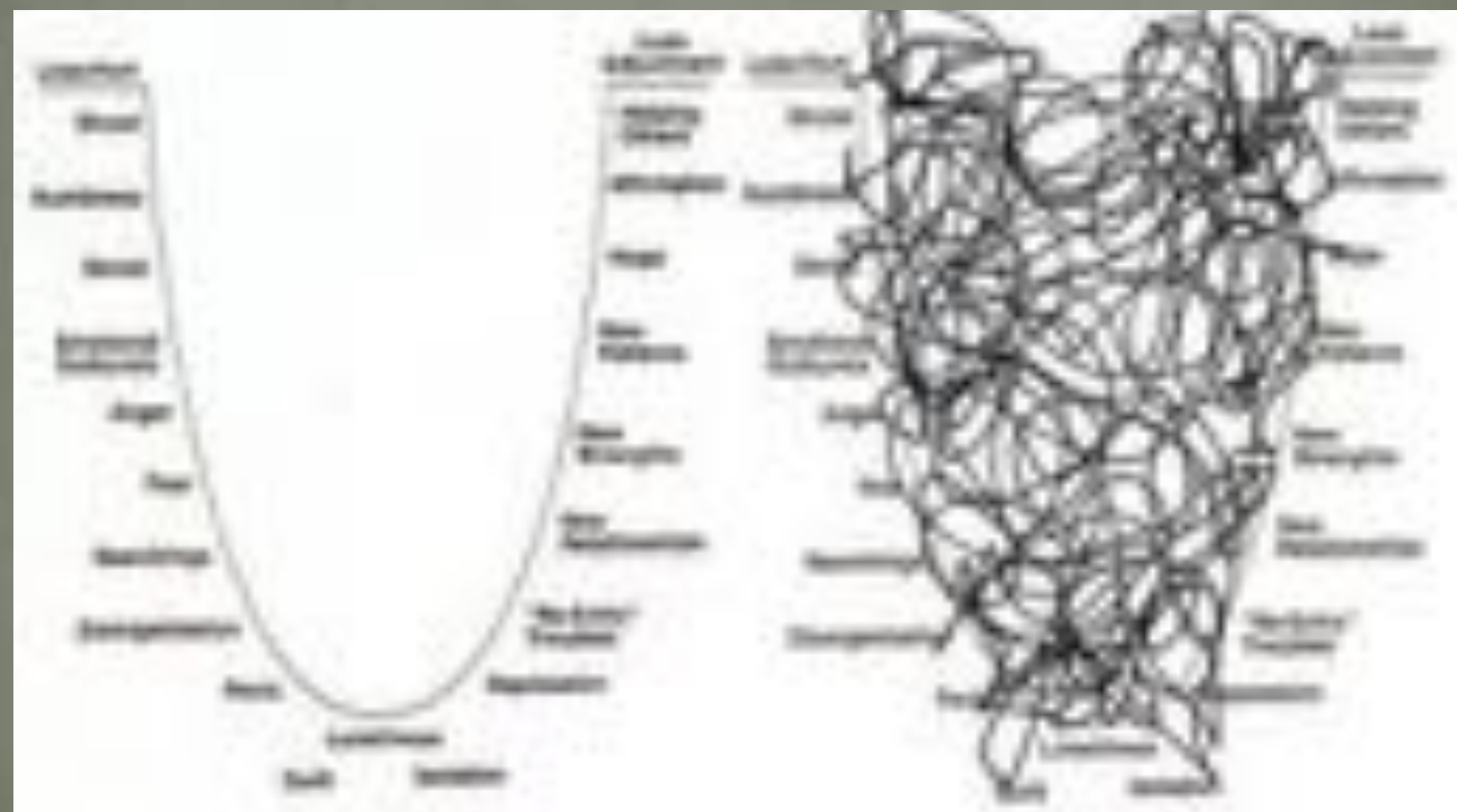
# Grieving Styles

Intuitive



Instrumental

(Doka and Martin)



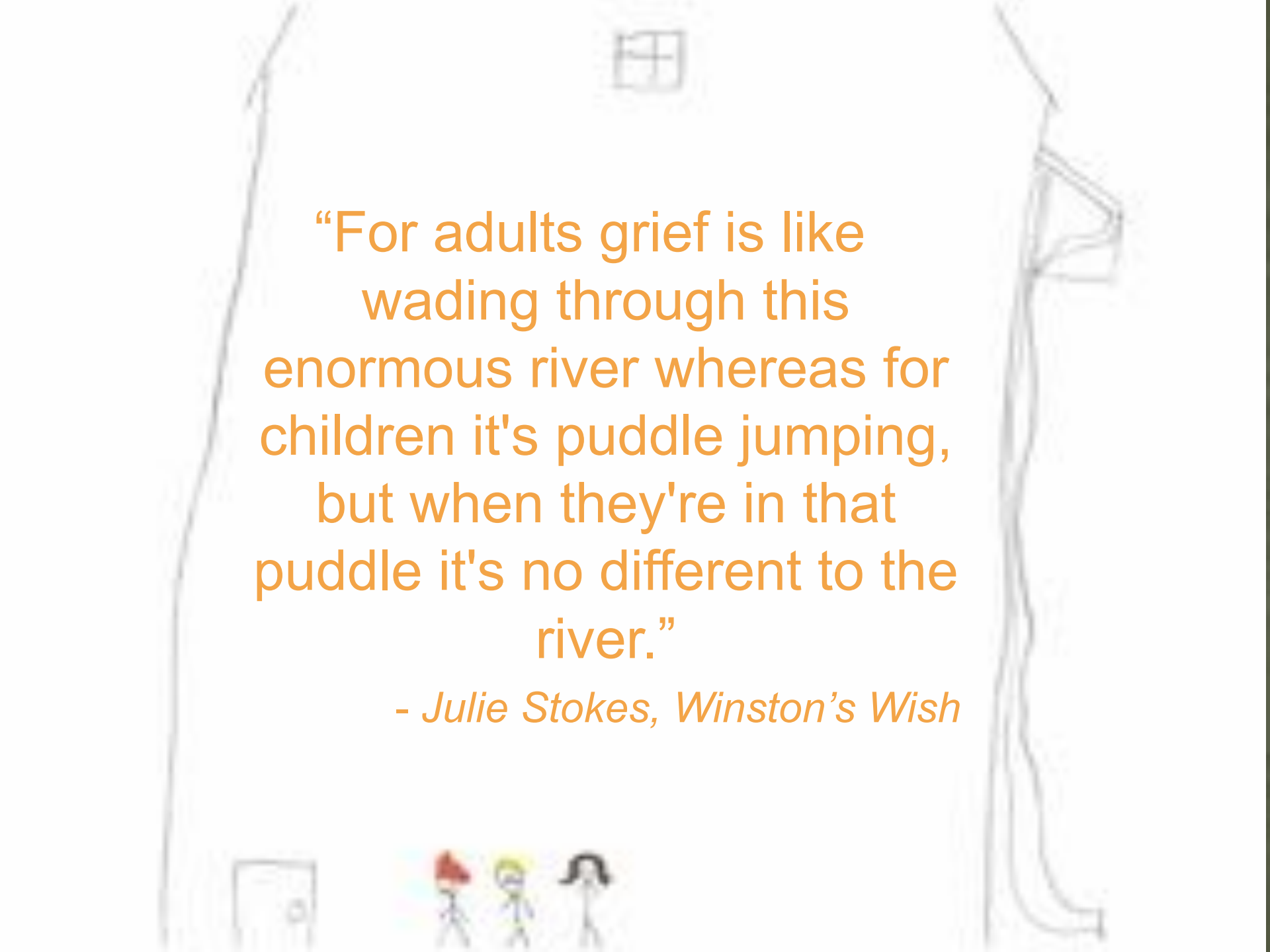
# Recognizing Children's Grief

- Tummy aches/head aches
- Sleep disturbance
- Irritability
- Regression
- Hyperactivity
- Anger
- Death play
- Repetitive asking of questions
- Loss of confidence/fear
- Increased need for affection

# Kids Grieve in “Chunks”

- No age rules
- Children’s grief changes as they enter new levels of development
- In “chunks” over the short and long term
  - “Grief bursts”





“For adults grief is like  
wading through this  
enormous river whereas for  
children it's puddle jumping,  
but when they're in that  
puddle it's no different to the  
river.”

- Julie Stokes, *Winston's Wish*



# The Many Faces of Grief



*Mad is often easier than  
sad*



# Model Grief & Teach Support Strategies

- When modeling grief reassure kids that you are still able to take care of them
- Let kids know talking about a loved one who is ill or has died does not inflict sadness
- Emphasize: Kids don't need to "fix" your grief

# Bearing Witness



# Considerations for Supporting Teens

- Do not try to “fix” their pain – bear witness to it.
- Model healthy grief. Don’t preach it.
- Be aware of the struggle for independence during a time of increased vulnerability.
- Offer opportunities to connect with other teenagers in a similar situation.



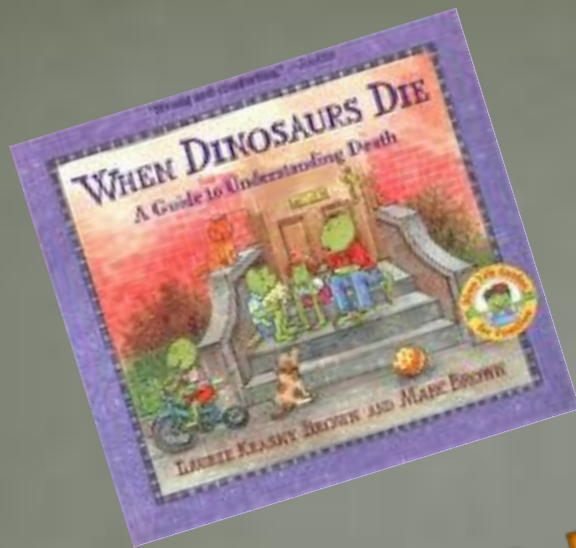
# When More Support is Needed

- Self-harming/suicidal thoughts or behaviours
- Chronic physical symptoms without obvious cause
- Persistent denial of death
- No signs of grief
- On-going sleep/eating disturbances
- Prolonged changes in typical behavior
- On-going concerns about the 4C's
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities



# Key Principles for Communicating with Children and Youth

- Open the conversation
- Be honest
- Foster an environment where children can ask questions
- Use simple but correct language
- Be prepared to not have the answer (wonder with them)



# RESOURCES



Monthly Webinar Series



presents

## KidsGrief Q&A

National children's grief expert,  
**Andrea Warrick** answers  
your questions. To register email  
[KidsGriefQA@virtualhospice.ca](mailto:KidsGriefQA@virtualhospice.ca)

Next webinar: October 3, 2017





# FOR TEENAGERS...

FOR YOU TO USE YOURSELF OR PASS ON  
TO A GIVING FRIEND

Here is a cartoon comic book about bullying and how to handle it. It has a pullout of a Pop! or more cartoon and small notes or cut out words to be a friend. You can use it as a resource to discuss with friends.



[http://help2makesense.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/teenagers\\_pullout.pdf](http://help2makesense.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/teenagers_pullout.pdf)

Help 2 Make Sense (Winston's Wish)

## **An interactive, self-directed web-based grief support available regardless of time or geography**

- Anticipatory grief and bereavement
- 9 evidence-informed, family-approved modules
- Personal narratives on a spectrum of grief situations
- Provides: education, support and hope
- Own pace, own place
- No cost
- Sensitive and responsive to cultural differences



## **Launches November 2017**

- Recognizing grief in children and youth
- Language to use and language to avoid
- Preparing children and youth for an impending death
- Talking with children about tragic community and world events
- Supporting children grieving a suicide death
- When kids may need more help
- Helping kids stay connected with someone after a death
- Available in English and French

# Andrea Warnick Consulting

Supporting Grieving Children, Youth, and Adults, through Education and Counselling

- web: [www.andreawarnick.com](http://www.andreawarnick.com)
- email: [aw@andreawarnick.com](mailto:aw@andreawarnick.com)
- Facebook: “Andrea Warnick Consulting”
- Twitter: “@AndreaWarnick1”
- Newsletter sign-up on website

*Mention my child's name you may  
make me cry.*

*Don't mention my child's name  
you'll break my heart.*

# Literary Resources for Children

Brown, L. K. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death.*     **Recommended for under ten**

Mellonie, B. (1983). *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children.*     **Recommended for under ten**

Schweibert, P., & DeKlyen, C. (1999). *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss.*     **Recommended for six and over**

Winston's Wish. *Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone Has Died.*     **Recommended for under ten**

Winston's Wish. *Out of the Blue: Making Memories Last When Someone has Died.*     **Recommended for teens**

# Literary Resources for Adults

Silverman, P. R. (2009). A Parent's Guide to Raising Grieving Children.

The Dougy Centre. (2004). *Helping Teens Cope with Death.*

The Dougy Centre. (2004). *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child.*

Winston's Wish. (2005). *A Child's Grief: Supporting a Child when Someone in their Family has Died.*



# Web Resources

Canadian Virtual Hospice: [www.virtualhospice.ca](http://www.virtualhospice.ca)

Coalition to Support Grieving Students:  
[www.grievingstudents.scholastic.com](http://www.grievingstudents.scholastic.com)

Dougy Centre (US Centre for Grieving Children): [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

Kids Help Phone Canada (1-800-668-6868): [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

Sesame Street “When Families Grieve”:  
[www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/topics/grief](http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/topics/grief)

Winston’s Wish (UK organization for grieving kids & youth):  
[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)