

Helping Children, Families, and Communities Cope with Grief

Melissa Lin: Today we have with us, Dr. Miriam Hernandez Dimmler, Dr. Gina Samson, and Mr. Antonio Freitas presenting. Mr. Robert Harris will join us later to moderate the Q&A. Now I'm going to turn it over to Miriam to kick us off.

Miriam, OK, there you are.

Miriam Hernandez Dimmler: There I am. Thank you. Thanks, Melissa. Thanks, Miss Lin. Thank you to all those behind the scenes who are making this webinar happen. All of us, all the panelists, are part of the National Center for Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety (NCHBHS), and Dr. Samson ... I will show you our pictures again, so you know who the panelists are. Dr. Sampson and I are based out of a clinic called the Child Trauma Research Program. We're located at the University of California in San Francisco.

The families we support come to us because their grief after stress and trauma is overwhelming. Our work is science-based. It's relationship-focused, family-centered, and culturally informed. We train mental health clinicians and providers who work with young children, to learn ways that children, families, and their communities can heal after trauma.

For the one in 12 children who experienced the death of a loved one by age 18, grief may never really completely go away. But there are things we can do, naming the presence of grief, even when it feels unspeakable, and spending time with family and friends to help cope. Our presenters from NCHBHS today will dedicate their hour to exploring how grief affects our Head Start children and families. We'll explore ways to support your neighborhood with resources for caring in your community.

We'll begin today's presentation by exploring what grief means to each of us, then we'll consider how children understand grief and think through ways we can respond to grief. In the second half of the hour, we'll dive into Sesame's newest resources on helping children understand death and identify ways to help cope with grief. These resources can support your work across Head Start spaces. We'll close with a reflection exercise and call to action before our Q&A.

I love seeing many people from far and wide together. Thank you for sharing where you're from in the chat. First, we'll set the stage for our conversation today. Our bodies and minds are designed to remember past experiences, especially memories made at a time when we felt very strong emotions.

Our topic of grief may bring up feelings today, feelings in your body and bodily sensations, from our own past experiences with grief. It would be very expected for this to happen. I invite you to remind yourself to stay present.

You can acknowledge strong feelings and emotions that may come up for you and name that these emotions are emotions and may stem from a topic that we're talking about today. Perhaps you're being reminded about past or even current events. Sometimes this recognition alone may be enough to find that it calibrates you.

But if you find yourself still getting activated, turn to what works for you to settle yourself, taking a break, stretching, drinking water. Let's take care of each other, too. During this time together, we're in community. Let's call in kindness and compassion with each other as well during this, what may be for some, a very challenging topic.

Let's look inwards for a moment, and let's center our own experiences of the topic that brings us together. Reflect on your first thoughts that come to mind when I ask you some questions. Perhaps even write them down, so you can go back to them later.

What does grief mean to you? Think about it. What messages have you received about death? Is it part of the life cycle? Is it something to fear?

Is it something you can talk about with ease, or is it something you just don't talk about? Is it normalized? Our personal feelings and beliefs are important to examine, because they can shape how we treat ourselves and how we respond to others who are grieving.

The best predictor of how children grieve in healthy ways is the degree to which the grown-ups think about and manage their own grief. It's important to take this moment and center yourself with your thoughts and feelings about grief.

Children will be exposed to grief in different ways. It will touch some children more closely than others, but most children will be impacted in some way. This will lead to questions about death, what it means, what happened. It's important to think about how we respond to it.

What is grief? It's the response to the loss of something important to you, particularly the loss of someone or some living thing that has died, to which you've formed a bond or feel affection for.

It is inevitable that individuals from different cultures and communities will have different attitudes and different beliefs about how to respond to grief. However, there is something that is universal, and it unifies us all. And that is the fact that loss and the grief that results from loss will be experienced by all humans during our lifetime.

When children experience a loss and the thoughts and feelings that come up for them, they may not know how to manage these emotions. Children usually turn to their close grown-ups to try and name the feelings, explain what happened, and to make sense of it. When we grieve as adults, we may likely to avoid sadness. We're wired to push away what doesn't feel good.

However, when adults are able to lean in, grief may be an incredible learning opportunity for children when we share our feelings and the way we cope. It's a wonderful example for children to see it through us.

Young children will show us their experience of grief in very different ways. Here's a list of some different ways. How they express grief can vary depending on their age as well.

For example, infants may be harder to soothe. They may cry harder when strangers try and pick them up. They may refuse to eat. Toddlers learning to speak may become really quiet, or they may get really dysregulated more often. They may even show more extreme behaviors like biting, pushing, or shoving others.

Preschoolers who may be more verbal may actually be able to name, I'm sad. They may be able to be direct, or they also may withdraw, and they may isolate themselves as well. They become more aggressive when the feelings of frustration and sadness grow big in their bodies.

Across the age span, whether it's from infants to school-aged children to youth and adults, appetite and sleeping disturbances are one of the most common changes we see following a loss. It's important to have that in mind. Most children will express their grief in indirect ways, because they're not actually able to make the connection that their struggle to control their bodies and their overwhelming feelings are actually related to their loss.

Grief can also interfere with children's ability to learn, because their systems are overloaded with trying to cope. They can't really take in new information and process it and hold it in the same way. Their brains are focusing more energy on their survival and emotional centers after a loss rather than the front parts of their brain, which are more dedicated to learning and higher-level thinking. Remember, the young child brain is still growing, this amazing part of our brain that makes us human.

Children may also regress, and skills they've mastered, like speaking, potty training, crawling, walking, learning, all that may get set back a bit. Loss can also interfere with how children relate and connect to others. They may become more clingy and dependent, while others may actually withdraw, push away, or have a greater challenge connecting.

When there is even a slight change to structure and routine, children who are scared or grieving may unravel a bit. They need that predictability more than ever. The developing child relies on the protection of their grown-ups and attachment figures. The experience of loss can disrupt their sense that these attachment figures can keep them safe.

Children may also worry or expect the loss of another grown-up since it's already happened. We must not forget that some children may look like they're not grieving at all. They may express their grief at a later time.

Grieving through play. The ability to connect experiences with feelings and express this connection through words, it's a rather sophisticated process in the brain. Children's brains are working hard to build the neural pathways for this process to even be possible, to be able to commit words to how they are feeling. What children's brains can do more easily is use play to express their inner worlds. This type of symbolic play that I'm speaking of typically happens a

little bit more around the toddler times, especially as you get two and a half, three, four, five, and up.

Playing out experiences that children have witnessed or seen can be very helpful for them to organize their feelings related to the event and lead to a sense of mastery. They may even use play to express their fantasy, about their wish, about what could have happened, or what could happen to make them feel better. Ultimately, play can give children a sense of control over what they have been through.

For example, I worked with a two-and-a-half-year-old girl whose mother died, and she was being taken care of by her grandmother. This little girl would find really creative ways to include socks in her play socks, what you put on your feet. She would also sleep with a sock in her hand.

She would stash socks in her stroller to play with at different times, and this actually frustrated grandma a lot. Grandma said it was hard to find a clean pair of matching socks every morning, and she was having to purchase more and more socks because they would just go missing.

After a few weeks in treatment, the grandmother tearfully came into session one day, and she said she realized what was happening. Grandma observed her granddaughter going around the house, touching objects with socks, and the grandmother had a flash of seeing her own deceased daughter cleaning the house with older socks. It was a memory, and grandmother realized holding on to socks was one of her granddaughter's ways of keeping her mother's memory alive and with her.

Another example is a four-year-old who witnessed community violence. He focused most of his play on putting the animals that were behaving badly is what he would say, and he would place these animals in a corral and protect them from the other animals. He would do this over and over.

Yet another example is the five-year-old who would see extreme family conflict. He always made sure that there was a superhero nearby to save the day, and this was his way of wishing and fantasizing about what could happen to take care of him and his family.

Here are just some tips on how you can play with children and follow their lead. For example, you should join if you're invited by the child, and don't try and take over or change the story. Sometimes the story can feel really profoundly sad, and we may want to impose fixing things right away. That may not be what the child needs at that moment.

Just join the play and try not to force them to answer questions or even talk too much. Just let them flow. If you do speak and interact, try and ask open-ended questions related to the play. Try not to connect their play to the reality of what happened in that moment when they're playing.

This we see again and again often shuts children down when it's not timed right. You should wait until a different moment, when they're not playing, to make the connection about how

what they're playing about may be related to their loss and their feelings. Asking questions like, what happens next? Without suggesting something like, how does it get better? It is OK to observe out loud what you see as long as it doesn't interrupt the play.

Next, we'll hear from Dr. Samson who will talk more about how adults can relate to children who experience grief through words, actions, and helpful tips.

Dr. Gina Samson: Thanks, Miriam. As Miriam has already expressed through those examples about how kids play, we know that children are extremely aware and perceptive of the world around them. At the same time, adults are often extremely protective of young children. We want to protect them from the hardships of the world.

Because of this, adults may feel that it is best to provide vague, unclear, or actually untruthful explanations when a death has occurred. Although this is usually in an effort to protect children, this type of uncertainty can actually be very confusing for little ones who are trying to make sense of the world and what has happened. For example, telling a child that the person who died is traveling or that they left can actually cause more confusion and lead to unrealistic hopes in the child.

Children are also incredibly aware of the adults around them and their experiences of different events and their feelings. They can actually read the sadness in their caregivers and might blame themselves if they're not provided an explanation of what has happened. Despite our desire to shield young kids from harm, telling the truth is always best. We just have to think about how to share accurate information in a developmentally appropriate way.

Because young children often blame themselves when things go wrong, they're also more likely to create false stories that actually might come from a place of fault and guilt when they're not exposed to the truth. For example, children might think, for example, he left because I was bad, if they're not provided an opportunity to understand what really happened.

An example of this is Miriam's who you just heard from her daughter's birthday is March 14th. In 2020, in the midst of all the COVID lockdowns, she was turning four years old. About a week after her birthday, she turned to her mom and asked, Mommy, why did my birthday cause COVID? Nobody expected that this little girl would feel the guilt and blame for the lockdowns, and luckily, she had someone to turn to with those big feelings.

Yet she still felt as though this big negative situation was somehow her fault. We can think about how loss can impact little kids when it comes to self-blame and guilt.

As I've highlighted, when explaining death to young children, honesty is always the best policy. We do want to make sure that the information we are providing is developmentally appropriate, as easy as possible to understand, and realistic. Some examples of things you could say are, his body doesn't work anymore, or, the doctors tried to help him, but they couldn't. This also helps to elevate the helpers in the situation.

We also want to use really clear language so that the child knows exactly what is being communicated. Saying, she died, versus, she passed away, is clearer language that's easier for a child to understand.

Unspeakables, as you heard Miriam reference earlier, are the painful facts, events, memories, and even histories that we may avoid to try to protect ourselves and our loved ones from pain. As Miriam mentioned, we're psychologists who work with young kids who've experienced trauma. In our work, we have found that many caregivers and other adults often have difficulty verbalizing, saying what the child has actually experienced.

There's many reasons for this, including the fact that we've already talked about that adults badly want to protect little children from difficult things. That's because we hope children will not be impacted. We often hear grown-ups say, they're little. They probably won't remember.

But the truth is that our youngest children have the least resources to protect themselves from negative or scary experiences, and they're completely dependent on their adults for safety. Their little nervous systems are not yet fully established to protect them from overwhelming things. They really need adults to translate their experiences into words and stories, to help them create a narrative of what they've been through.

Sometimes unspeakables even can refer to things that happened before the child was born or difficult experiences that the child's parents, grandparents, or ancestors have been through. The child may still carry those experiences. We can imagine a mother, for example, who is unable to respond to her baby crying, because her caregivers weren't available to respond to her cries when she was little.

This can become an unspeakable in the family if we do not know how to acknowledge it within the family system. Grief and loss can often become unspeakables when we aren't sure how to address it within families or when we don't feel comfortable being able to speak the truth to young kids.

We urge you to speak the unspeakable. Speaking the unspeakable helps bring to light or bring into the open the darkness that sometimes we are trying to avoid, even if it's in an effort to avoid feeling pain. When we are able to help the child and the family make sense of what has happened and create a story that makes sense, they are often much better able to actually heal and move forward in a healthy way.

As Miriam mentioned, by age children express grief differently. Some helpful tips for our littlest children, our infants and toddlers, are to provide physical comfort and affection. You might do this by holding them, cuddling them, patting their back. We also want to do our best to be calm and speak calmly around them. Loud voices or noises might feel especially activating after a type of loss.

We want to try to provide familiar comforts such as favorite blankets, favorite snacks, stuffed animals that they love that are soft. When possible, we want to maintain consistent caregiving.

If there are caregivers that the child knows that are available, we want to make sure that the child is exposed to those caregivers and remains in their care.

We want to maintain routine structure and predictability as much as possible. Trauma and definitely loss often create inconsistencies and unpredictabilities. By reestablishing these, you are actually counteracting the effects of the trauma.

Finally, consider naming the young child's distress, even if you think they might not understand completely. For example, you could say to a baby, going to sleep might be hard, because you miss your mommy. She did not want to leave you. I am here with you to help your body feel calm so that you can rest.

When we're thinking about our slightly older ones, our slightly older little ones-, our preschoolers, here are some helpful tips for them. We still want to provide physical affection. This might look like hugs or encouragement or holding their hand while you're walking down the street or even holding hands at other times, maybe tickling their back. You can also talk about who is caring for them now and who is keeping them safe now. This, again, helps to elevate the helpers and reinforce the child's sense of safety.

We want to keep the child close to trusted adults who they know are safe and who they know will keep them safe. Reading children's books together, as I saw people reference in the chat as well, about death and grief and explaining that death is a part of life, using things that the child sees all the time and can understand things like plants or insects or maybe pets can be really helpful. We want to help children learn and use words that describe their feelings. Then we want to normalize what they've expressed to you, we can help them say, I feel sad, and say, it's normal to feel sad after someone we loved has died.

We want to follow the child's lead and play, as Miriam discussed, as a way to express and release some of those big feelings that children might be having. We want to help the child know that it is OK to think about their loved one who died, and it's OK and normal to value the memories that you've created together. You can do so in tangible ways for kids so that they can know what you're talking about. For example, creating a little box, a memory box, that you might put pictures in or other loved memories.

With those tips, I'm going to pass the floor to Antonio from Sesame Workshop, and he's going to discuss some resources that are available to help children, families, and truly ourselves cope with grief, loss, and the overwhelming feelings that they can bring.

Antonio Freitas: Awesome. Thanks much, Dr. Samson and Dr. Dimmler, for grounding this conversation with such an intentional way to consider the feelings, the experiences, the needs, and the wants across all of our communities experiencing trauma. My name is Antonio Freitas, and as the senior director of educational experiences here at Sesame Workshop, I'm honored to share with you all some of the newest resources we've created here to share and help children, their families, and providers that care for them through grief that comes with losing a loved one.

Antonio: We know that grieving may never completely end but that working through difficult feelings can get easier with time. Through support, open conversations, and finding ways to keep the person's memory alive, families can begin to heal and to introduce Sesame's newest resources connected to grief, let's take a quick moment now to watch together the video Elmo learns how to deal with the loss of a loved one.

[Video begins]

Louie: [Laughs]

Elmo: (Laughing) Yeah.

Louie: That's where I learned to swim.

Elmo: Really?

Louie: [Laughs] Yes, sir. Oh. Oh. Look. That is my favorite picture of you and my brother.

Elmo: Boy, Elmo really misses Uncle Jack.

Louie: So do I, son.

Elmo: Yeah.

Louie: Sad feelings can come and go, and it's OK to talk about it.

Elmo: Yeah. You know, Daddy, Elmo likes to look at pictures of him to remember him.

Louie: Me too.

Elmo: Yeah.

Louie: Oh, let's see what we got here.

Elmo: OK. [Laughs]

Louie: Oh. Oh. Oh.

Elmo: Oh, do you remember this, oh, when Elmo and Uncle Jack were playing baseball?

Louie: Uh-huh.

Elmo: Do you remember what Uncle Jack used to do when we played baseball? [Laughs]

Louie: I sure do. He'd step up to the plate real serious, wave that bat around and yell--

Louie and Elmo: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Wha, wha, wha, wha, wha. [Laughs]

Elmo: Oh, boy,

Louie: Silly Uncle Jack.

Elmo: Yeah.

Louie and Elmo: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Wha, wha, wha, wha, wha. [Laughs]

Elmo: Oh, Daddy. [Laughs]

[Video ends]

Antonio: Using the power of the Muppets, Sesame has begun to be able to step gently into conversations with children about the death through the story of Uncle Jack and his daughter, Jesse. For context, Jesse is Elmo's cousin and the daughter of Jack and Jill. Her uncle Louie helps her cope with the death of her dad in the original special, *When Families Grieve*, an initiative that we began here at the Sesame Workshop back in 2010 that provided resources and emotional support to military families.

The hour-long, prime time television special featured Katie Couric and Sesame Street Muppets, and it presented personal stories about families coping with the death of a parent as well as strategies that have helped these families move forward. Since that time, we've continued to build onto those original resources with three foundational principles, and that includes the idea of navigating change, of enduring connections, and of open conversations with everyone touched by this loss. It's our goal that we can help children explore how they can understand and manage their way through grief, using family, friends, and strategies like the one that you saw there of sharing memories and looking through old pictures.

For context, grief is one of our oldest topics here at Sesame Street, and it began all with our work in military families and that *When Families Grieve* physical toolkits. We know that grief and loss affect all families everywhere, and what we now have the resources to help children and their families talk about death, we also knew that there was an opportunity to do more.

Because when someone close to us dies, that loss can have ripple effects over time, we wanted to explore with experts ways that we can tease out ideas about how grief can stay with us for a lifetime but in healthy ways. We wanted to create resources to accompany children and families along their grief journey. In online interviews and small group discussions with caregivers and providers, we worked with our research team to understand how young children grieve, what kinds of challenges families may face as they grieve and learn about some of the strategies and resources that we can share that would cope.

Connected to that, some of the resources reflected on this page and across your screen hit home some of those big ideas that we are aiming to do through the resources that we're going to share. This includes examining how the challenges experienced by grieving families evolved over time, learning about these resources, and then working with caregivers to understand their reactions to these resources, to continue to refine them. That you can use them with everyone in your circle of care.

One of the biggest resources we use for this is something called a grief interactive. Before I share it with you, I want to tell you a little bit more about what it looks like. Then I'll name for you what it looks like as we go through it.

We know that the complex journey of grief encompasses the emotional, mental, and physical reactions that you might feel or anyone might after experiencing a loss, like that of the death of a significant person in your life. The death of an important person can lead to many changes, both big and small, for both children and grown-ups. To that end, we at the Sesame Workshop have created this digital interactive to explore the ways to reflect and to respond on grief, and we're calling it Growing as We Grieve.

When you first begin to scroll and click into the interactive game, you'll see that framing language helps to share the start of a journey that explores what we see as the seasons of grief, with a gentle reminder of its ebbs and its flows and the exploration of how grief has affected other families and what has helped them cope, thrive, and find joy. This interactive game is responsibly designed to meet the need of each individual user so that we can take as long or as short in each component if we wanted to experience all of them.

Our goal in building this tool was to create a quiet, calming space to share tools that might feel helpful to you and the people that you care about through challenging situations. Now, following that introduction, users taking a look at this interactive game have the ability to continue to self-select those individual stories and vignettes from a wide variety of experts and families who can share strategies and ideas connected to their own experiences. You can see here that the ways that we can anchor the idea of loss into that natural progression of life includes experiences and ways to address the themes of understanding, coping with change, connecting and continuing, as metaphors for seasons.

You click through each of these different, varied seasons, experts in each share moments of reflection with strategies to address death and grief with children. These might include things like finding words and positive ways to express feelings and the time, attention, and presence that can provide little ones with reassurance and comfort. I think it's important to note that across these videos, we've tried to reflect the nuanced approaches to grief from a wide variety of identities and ages and created opportunities for short, interactive applications animations, like breathing out, to highlight those three main ways to help a child that we've seen, to provide assurance, to model as adults, healthy ways of coping, and to work with children to stick to routines.

Over these next few minutes, we'll explore the different seasons of grief and the matching resources that you can embed into the fold of programming, play, and work with children and families. Within that first season of grief, we can learn to understand, to process, and to cope with grief through articles that highlight the distinct types of grief and how to address these experiences with children from a variety of ages. Redefining grief as an experience rather than as something to fix can help us better meet the challenges to come.

The articles reflected here, tied to the section, help give you a better sense of how to address and name grief for those around you. After the initial, primary loss, those experiencing grief may face changes ranging from big to small and from long-term to short-term. The article of, *The Complexity of Loss*, addresses as a secondary loss that can be complicated by grief, that includes adding stress and anxiety.

When we at Sesame Street have talked to experts, they've named for us that secondary losses might include things like finances, when there are changes to your financial situation, that could require you to change or to get a new job and to figure out how to create or build new financial systems. It might also reflect a secondary loss related to a way of life, where there are changes to daily routines, moving to a new location, or type of home, or even switching to a new school for young children.

Things like relationship changes and identity call into question for members of our community experiencing loss how we identify or see ourselves as a widow, as an only parent, as a child, or as an amalgamation or a combination of all of those things. But understanding and recognizing secondary losses can help us all grow as we grieve. In that digital, discovering ways to grow as we grieve, that I just showed you, the winter season provides short documentary-style vignettes of people that share those different components as well as some unique strategies.

As you think about that, I'd love for you to use the chat window and share for us some of the different ways that you've been able to communicate and help others around you understand grief, that we may learn from them more than 567 people in this room on some of the ways that you've been able to build community in times of stress and trauma.

Moving on to the next season of spring, we know that a person's death can change many aspects of our lives. In spring, we can cope with changes by finding positive ways to navigate them with changing together. We know that while we can't control many things, we can decide how to move forward, choosing what to keep, like memories and traditions, and what to release, like resentment or identities that no longer reflect who we are.

Grief can come and go throughout life for both children and grown-ups, and sometimes small things like falling leaves or flying a kite, can remind us of a person who has died. And that might bring up big feelings in little ones. In this video, Jesse and her mom, Jill, share memories of Jesse's dad and talk about feelings as they grieve together. Let's take a minute and watch.

[Video begins]

Jesse: The leaves are falling. Did you see the leaves fall? Aren't they pretty? The colors? Mom, the leaves.

Jill: What?

Jesse: Do you like them?

Jill: Oh. Yeah. Yeah, Jesse, the the leaves are beautiful. I was just I was just thinking about your dad, and I'm feeling a little sad.

Jesse: I don't want you to feel sad, Mom.

Jill: Oh, Jesse. Jesse, I know you don't, but, you know, sometimes these feelings, well, they just come up. And when the leaves start to change colors like this, well, I start to think about your dad.

Jesse: Yeah. I miss him.

Jill: Oh, I miss him, too. Now, you know, your dad and I would sit right here on this very bench, and we'd hold hands. And we'd watch the colorful leaves twirl in the cool, fall air on their way down to the ground.

Jesse: Well, Mom?

Jill: Uh-huh?

Jesse: We don't have to look at the leaves if they make you feel sad.

Jill: Oh, Jesse, Jesse, that is so kind of you, But, you know, it is OK to feel sad sometimes. You know, ever since your dad died, we have felt a lot of big feelings, and they are all OK.

Jesse: Yeah. I remember feeling happy and then kind of sad when I saw someone playing with a kite like the one Dad and I used to fly together.

Jill: Oh. Yeah, you know, I remember that kite. It was - let's see. It was blue -

Jill and Jesse: And yellow and red.

Jill [Laughing]: That's right.

Jesse: Yeah.

Jill: Oh, you two had so much fun making it fly.

Jesse: Yeah.

Jill: You know, your Daddy loved us a lot.

Jesse: Yeah, he sure did. Mom?

Jill: Uh-huh?

Jesse: I know something else he loved.

Jill: Well, what's that?

Jesse: Drinking hot apple cider on a fall day like today.

Jill: Oh, you're right about that, Jesse. You know, that would be a special treat. Why don't we go have some right now, huh?

Jesse: Really?

Jill: Yeah.

Jesse: Oh, I'd like that a lot.

Jill: Yeah, let's go. Come on, honey.

Jesse: OK [Laughs]

[Video ends]

Antonio: Because of you that have shared some great suggestions, in addition to that, you saw reflected in the video things like talking, like journaling, like drawing, like sharing photos and memories and even time together through a shared experience or something like a drink that everyone collectively loved are great ways to continue the conversation with someone once they're no longer with us and have passed away. But with that death, we've also been able to continue their life with memories and good stories from the times that we all had with them.

We know that in addition to that, and as we continue along to the summer, that death and grief can affect how we see ourselves and how we relate to others-- essentially, how we move through life. Change may leave us feeling shaky and uncertain, and as we take on different roles and learn new things, we may feel like a beginner. We all know that's never easy.

The summer of grief really centers on how we can focus on our inner value and the ability to connect with ourselves. When we tune in with our values, with our abilities and our dreams, we can connect with ourselves and others and find joy in the reasons for hope. Children often express their big feelings as they play. When Elmo's cousin Jesse has some grief-related feelings during play, Jesse's mommy and Elmo's daddy notice and help her feel more calm and confident.

We're going to take a moment to watch together. And after, I'd love if Dr. Dimmler and Dr. Samson can come on to the call and share with us some thoughts that you have of this video, along with friends in the chat window. Let's take a watch together.

[Video begins]

Jill: Ah. Thanks so much for having us over, Louie. You know, with my new job and all the changes to our routine, Jesse and I could really use a family night.

Louie: Oh, anytime, Jill. We're always happy to have you.

Jill: Well, we appreciate that.

Jesse: OK, I think I I'm just going to make one adjustment right here. Oh. Oh, no,

Elmo: It's OK, Jesse. Could you help Elmo with his block tower?

Jill: Well, OK.

Elmo: Yeah.

Jesse: OK, maybe if I put this right here. [Gasps] Oh, the blocks keep falling.

Elmo: Oh, well, maybe Elmo and Jesse could build another block tower.

Jesse: But the blocks keep falling.

Jill: Oh, Jesse, blocks fall all the time when you're building a tower, honey.

Louie: That's right. You just need to stack 'em right up again.

Jill: Uh-huh.

Jesse: Dad would know how to build the blocks so they wouldn't fall. He would know how to do it.

Jill: I know. I know. Your dad was really good at building block towers.

Jesse: Just things are different without him, mom.

Jill: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I know that when your dad died, there were lots of big changes, and there's still more of 'em now.

Louie: Yeah. Sometimes big changes can feel like everything is kind of wobbly, like - like a tower of falling blocks.

Jill: Yeah.

Jesse: Yeah.

Jill: Hey, Jesse?

Jesse: Hm?

Jill: Jesse, do you remember what we learned to do at grief camp when we have big feelings? Remember?

Jesse: Uh-huh.

Jill: You wrap your arms around yourself, and you give a nice, tight squeeze. And then you say one thing that makes you special, OK? I'll start. [Takes a deep breath]

Now, even though things have changed and some things may never be the same, I am still me. I am strong.

Louie: Oh, that's a good one.

Elmo: Oh.

Jill: Thanks, Louie. Hey hey, you can go next, Louie, huh?

Louie: Oh. All right, let's see. Oh, oh. Even though things have changed and some things may never be the same, I am still me. I am kind.

Elmo: Oh, yeah, Daddy is kind.

Jill: You're right about that. Why don't you go, Elmo?

Elmo: Oh, Elmo's turn. [Takes a deep breath] Even though things have changed and some things may never be the same, Elmo is still Elmo, and Elmo is, umm, oh, helpful.

Louie: Oh, you sure are, son.

Jill: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Jesse?

Jesse: Hm?

Jill: You want to try it, honey?

Jesse: Yeah. OK. Even though things have changed and some things may never be the same, I'm still me. I am caring.

Jill: Oh. You are caring, Jesse. And you know what else you are?

Jesse: Uh-uh.

Jill: You are loved, and that will never change.

Louie: Exactly. remember, you're not alone.

Jill: Uh-huh.

Louie: We are here for you.

Jill: That's right.

Louie: And you, too, Jill.

Jill: Yeah.

Elmo: And Elmo is here for you, too.

Jill: Oh, thank you.

Jesse: Thanks, everyone.

Jill: Uh-huh.

Elmo: Hey, do you want to try that block tower again? I mean, I could help you.

Jesse: Well, I would like that, Uncle Louie.

Jill: Hey, let's all help. Come on, everyone. Let's do this.

Elmo: Yeah.

Louie: All right.

Jill: Let's see what we got here.

Jesse: Oh, I dropped this one.

Jill: Yes, OK.

Jesse: Yeah.

[Video ends]

Antonio: Recognizing that's an extra-long video. We've, as you may have seen, tried to pack a whole lot of big concepts and messages into it. We'd love to hear from you, Miriam and Gina, those things that sort of popped out to you or things that could be easily replicated or concretized by the members of this Head Start community, that they could use in their work with children and families.

Miriam: I want to chime in, and as a mental health provider, as a parent, someone who works with parents, these videos are aspirational, too. Sometimes I just want to name that when that block of tower goes down, and the child is frustrated, if the grown up is also grieving and frustrated themselves, that beautiful, clean response may not come through. It may look more like, it's just a block of towers. Stop. It's OK. Get it together.

It may come out different, and to just have compassion for that. I think that what this video really does show is that when the grown-ups support each other and work on their own grief and name their grief and that process, they are more available and open to support the huge range of human emotion that the child may be experiencing, because their feelings will be magnified times 30, which is whether it's sadness, happiness, fear. Thank you for also ending with the love piece.

This video is striking and the reminder that there may be a loss, whether through death or as in the chat named incarceration or a caregiver who's been deployed, someone who may be missing or not present for a child. That doesn't mean the love hasn't gone away. Thank you for elevating that.

Gina: The only thing I'll add is one thing that I want to elevate in the video, is they do a regulation strategy with little Jesse, and they include everyone. Truly what they're doing is coregulation or managing feelings within the relationship with the loved ones. The way that they do that is beautiful, because if we tell a child to, like, go calm down or take a few breaths, that's really hard for young kids, because they don't have the capacity yet to regulate on their own. When we join a child in that strategy, we really help them to regulate within that trusted relationship.

Antonio: Great. Thank you both much for chiming in, and thanks to all of our friends on the chat window for articulating many of those things that we have tried to package in a short video that can hopefully bring a couple of different strings of conversation starters and hopefully tactics that you can use with children and families in your care.

Moving into our fourth and final season of fall, we know that emotions of grief are like waves coming and going, and that current feels strong, pulling and powerful. Other times, it might lap gently on the shores of our lives. But in that fourth and final season of grief that we've called fall, we underscore the importance of families creating, enduring connections with the people who died while growing around their grief and finding hope for the future.

We've been able to embed this in two specific resources. The first is that storybook called Something New, where Elmo's cousin Jesse helps remind children that big changes can mean new opportunities to learn and to grow. That second book that you see on the right side of your screen is called Growing as We Grieve, and it's essentially the printable paper copy of that digital, interactive game that we played a few slides earlier. It gives activities that children can do by themselves, that caregivers and providers can do together, and that everyone in the community can relax and respond to in ways that celebrate lives lived and explore how to keep those memories alive.

We've talked through a whole lot of different assets today and the ways through Gina and Miriam's guidance to foundationally begin to think about how this looks to you and the children and families in your care. The QR code reflected on your screen will take you directly to those resources that I've named today, and I know that Livia and members of our Head Start team have also been putting that PDF that have the hyperlinked resources that are there. Just note that across all of our resources to this topic page on grief, we've aimed to help explain and understand grief with articles like the complexity of loss and how children grieve and how to help.

In videos like Re-grieving as Seasons Change, and the articles, New Family Roles, we've challenged each other to keep what works and to release what doesn't. We know that across all of these different ideas that grief remains, but that in time, those positive and choices that we make each and every day will make space for laughter, joy, and hope, too. Friends, while we spent today's conversation centered on Sesame resources about grief, there are a couple more things that we'd love to point out for you.

The first is a few more additional Sesame resources in the red column and the green column, the one on the furthest on the left and then in the middle, that highlight some of those different assets from our grief page that highlight disenfranchised grief. Elmo and Jesse remember Uncle Jack. The giggle game, something that families can play at home together to remember and to celebrate people that have passed. Then also a webcast called Supporting Grieving Native American Children and Their Families.

We have other aligned topic pages on our Sesame Street website, like traumatic experiences, children's feelings, and emotional well-being, that also tease out some broader concepts connected to the pain and sadness that comes with grief as well. Then for that third and final column called books, I'll pass the microphone back over to Gina.

Gina: Book recommendations that have actually I believe they've all been named in the chat already. Thank you for doing our job for us. But The Invisible String is one that is really great for separations of all kinds. It's a great tool to use therapeutically with kids.

You can read the book together, and then put a string on their wrist. And they can pull it when they're missing a loved one. A safe, trusted adult can also wear a string for a physical representation of always being held in mind.

The You Weren't With Me book is good for children who are experiencing grief related to separations, like, for example, foster care or incarceration, where the child will be reunified afterwards. It can help children to express complex feelings, and it can also help caregivers to really acknowledge the child's experience. The Goodbye Book is a great one for young kids to just normalize their feelings and experiences and really help them feel seen and heard.

This next slide links to a podcast that I would really recommend, and it's specific to Head Start. It talks about Head Start staff can support children and families when they experience a loss. If

you click on this web page, there are additional helpful resources that are linked at the bottom for your reference.

With that, we really want to thank you all for joining us here today. We all have the gift of working in early childhood and doing what I believe to be the most beautiful work in helping shape the lives of young children. It is also a really difficult task to be faced with, because there's the inevitability that children will experience traumas such as grief and loss, like we talked about today.

Thank you, for spending your time with us and dedicating it to this important topic. We hope you're leaving today with some new resources and skills. As we close out, we want you to take a moment to reflect in community with one another and be mindful of your own needs.

What has this brought up for you? Did resources stick out that you think are helpful and can be shared? And I'll let you think about those for a moment and hopefully after we end. But I'll pass it to Rob for a quick Q&A.

Robert Harris: Thank you all for such a wonderful webinar that provide us with a lot of information. I know we are tight on time, and just to our community for participating, I know our panelists will do their best to answer some questions in chat. But to our panelists, there's one question that stood out, I think could be really helpful. How do individuals, how can they address loss and grief for children when the person who they may be grieving, at least, for the adult, is not someone that they preferred?

The child is regretting or the child is grieving, but the adult may not have as strong a feeling about that adult. Do you guys have any thoughts about that?

Miriam: Yes, this happens quite a bit with our families, because sometimes the loss of a person, maybe someone that caused harm, perhaps, even, to the family, and what's really important in these moments is to center that the child has the right and privilege to feel their feels and connect with those feelings and really allowing space for the child to express. Sometimes maybe holding back a little bit about sharing too much to that child and maybe as they get older, things may become uncovered, for example, is usually what happens. But really honoring the child where they are and the adults finding other ways that they can manage and speak to perhaps other grown-ups about the challenges that they're feeling as they're allowing more space and openness for that child.

Robert: No, that was a great answer. [Laughs]

OK, thank you Dr. Miriam for answering that question. It sounds like I heard you say, address the child, meet them where they are. And as an adult, find spaces that are safe and healthy for you to address the complexity of your feelings. Thank you.

I know that there were tons of questions in the chat. We appreciate everyone leaning in. We'd like to encourage everyone to consider the resources that were provided in chat, also seeing

this webinar later on when it will be posted. I just want to thank our panelists again for a wonderful presentation. I'll be turning it back over.

Melissa: Thank you, to Rob and to Antonio, Gina, and Miriam today. Thank you to all of you for making this a very meaningful and sensitive webinar. Now, I'm just going to share a few reminders before we close out.

On the screen, you'll see the evaluation link. If you complete the evaluation, you will get a link afterwards, taking you to the certificate. If you have any questions, you can reach us at health@ecetta.info or go to MyPeers.

We thank you today. Thank you for spending a part of your day with us, and we wish that we could have continued the conversation longer. But we highly encourage you to continue this conversation with your colleagues on MyPeers.

As always, you can subscribe to our mailing list.

Stay connected with us on social media. As I mentioned, any questions after today's webinar, please reach out to us at this email address. You can find today's resources in the handout that we mentioned. There will be an email coming out to all who registered with the recording, the resources, the slides, all of the links that we shared today. Thank you for joining us today.