

The Golden Sweater

INFORMATION FOR GRIEVING FAMILIES

Talking about the death of a family member can be difficult. It's no surprise that many of us hoped we wouldn't need to have this conversation with young children. Discussions about death feel challenging or even painful, especially when we engage with our family members for the first time. This dialogue is important for everyone, including both adults and children. Open communication is the cornerstone of growth and healing for grieving families.

Grief is a universal and unique human experience. Age, life experiences, and circumstances of the death can influence how we grieve. Remember that grief is not a singular emotion, but a constellation of feelings, physical reactions, thoughts, and behaviors.



- ♥ **Be clear:** When talking to children about death, it's better to use clear and explicit words. Phrases such as "passed" or "passed on" or "gone away" may be easier to understand for adults but can confuse children. Say "death" and "died."
- ♥ **Be supportive:** Support from other people—family, friends, or colleagues—provides encouragement and assistance as we grieve. Both adults and children have a network of people in their lives who can fulfill this important role. Just as Kai connected with his mother, children can talk to another adult, brother or a sister, a close friend, or even a new friend who has also lost someone important in their lives.
- ♥ **Traditions and activities:** Kai also reminisces about the activities he shared with his father. For adults, it may seem easier to avoid these events as a way of keeping upsetting feelings out of mind. Children may not share those same opinions. Remember that children have lost an important person in their lives and all the activities and events they shared. Continuing these special activities, although altered or changed, can strengthen memories as a source of comfort and growth for the family.
- ♥ **Be descriptive:** Explain and describe grief to children. As they grow, you will have to talk about death and grief again...and again. With maturation children gain a greater understanding of death and emotional experiences and will ask new questions, wanting to know more.
- ♥ **Objects of reminiscence:** There are many things that will remind you of your loved one—a photo, a blanket, or even something they wore. Children and adults may decide to keep these special objects, putting them in a safe place. This is healthy and helps grieving children maintain meaningful connections to the person they lost. Kai finds his father's sweater and draws comfort and courage from it. Touching and smelling this golden sweater reminds him of important life lessons his father shared with him. The sweater helps to keep these important moments present in Kai's life. This too is part of grieving—having lasting memories that endure and guide us as we grow older.
- ♥ **Self-care:** Remember that you are grieving too. When your children see you become emotional, explain that this is natural for everyone, even adults. Let them know that talking with friends, sharing happy and sad memories of loved ones, and having up or down days is expected. And finally, remember to take care of yourself, so you can take care of your family.

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DISCUSSING THE GOLDEN SWEATER WITH YOUR CHILD

Books open new worlds for children and the caring adults who read with them. While “The Golden Sweater” is a book about loss and grief, it is also about life, hope, resiliency, and family. In fact, Kai’s story is much like the experiences of the thousands of grieving children across the country.

Sharing and reading books with children open new ways to connect with each other—the story is a bridge, as words and images are shared and explored by adults and children. Both reader and listener express their own thoughts and ideas. It is the story and the sharing that make it just a little easier to talk about a difficult subject. Here are a few ideas to consider as you prepare to read “The Golden Sweater” as a family.



- ♥ **First, take the time to read the book by yourself.** Think about the words and images, what do they mean to you and your family? There may be parts of the story that have great significance for you, and therefore worthy of self-reflection before exploring with children.
- ♥ **After you read the book, think about the themes that came to your mind.** Kai and his mother express similar yet different moods, emotions, and memories. They may or may not be the same as yours or the child in your life. This is natural and very common in families.
- ♥ **What experiences in the book are similar to those in your family?** Think about how Kai is like or not like the child in your life. Take time to explore each page, the colors, and details. Children will be sure to notice the framed photo in Kai’s bedroom, the all too familiar box of breakfast cereal, the intriguing basement begging to be explored, and friends laughing and eating popcorn.
- ♥ **Find a time to read “The Golden Sweater” with your child that is not busy, filled with distractions, or at bedtime.** “The Golden Sweater” begins a conversation that will continue and prompts new questions. Be open and allow children to ‘find their voices’ and tell you what they think. Remember there isn’t a right or wrong way to interpret “The Golden Sweater”.
- ♥ **Younger children may find it difficult to express their own emotions and thoughts.** In this story, bears mirror Kai’s emotions. How do Kai’s bears reflect his emotions—sadness, disappointment, joy, or excitement? Is it the bears’ expressions or the colors that bathe their fur or their hiding spots on each of the pages that reflect Kai’s emotions? Use this story to help your child to name their feelings. Is there an object that symbolizes a feeling for your child?
- ♥ **Kai’s grief is not a singular emotion but includes a range of feelings, from sadness to joy to excitement to pride, and like all children he will revisit those feelings in the future.** Kai and his mother recognize the importance of memories and honoring those who have died. The bond that Kai and his father shared in life not only survive but serve to heal Kai and allow him to grow. Kai becomes the reader’s and listener’s friend, role model, and even a reliable advisor.
- ♥ **Questions to discuss with your child:**
 - What are the objects that signify special memories of their person? How are these objects included in your child’s life? What item would your child like to keep as a connection with their person?
 - What part of the book is significant to you and your child?
 - What do you want to express to your child?
 - Ask yourself, what did you or your children learn from Kai and his mother?
 - What would children say to Kai if they were friends? Chances are, children will know the answers.
 - How does your child feel about Kai and the story? Identify the feeling and name it.
 - For young children, you may want to encourage them to draw to help them express their emotions.