

Movies That Help Parents and Children Understand Grief and Loss

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I recently had a discussion about movies with my colleague Debra Oryzysyn. A bereavement counselor with [Visiting Nurse Service of New York Hospice and Palliative Care](#), Debra uses movies as part of her toolbox to help children and families grieve and cope with the loss of a loved one.

Movies are as full of loss as they are of love, unspooling the human experience in all its dimensions. They can provide a wonderful springboard for conversation about all manner of emotions — including the complex, confusing, and often isolating feelings associated with the loss of a loved one.

Movies can create a safe space for conversation, especially for families. It may be easier — or more accessible — for children to talk about what little Nemo ([Finding Nemo](#)) or Simba ([The Lion King](#)) is going through than what they themselves are going through. In fact, they may well not *understand* what they are going through and what the future holds, and it can be very comforting — and revealing — to talk about the feelings and the journey of a fictional character.

“Movies are a wonderful way to begin a discussion,” says [Nell Minow](#), who begins movie discussions almost every day on her popular [Movie Mom](#) blog on [Beliefnet.com](#) and has written a [guide to family movies](#). “With children, especially little kids, it gives them an emotional vocabulary. How does this character feel — happy, sad, confused?”

While some might want to protect kids from movies that are “too sad” or “too difficult,” Debra and Nell say movies are a great way to expose kids to the challenges of life, love and loss. While Debra’s work puts her in close touch with children who are already grieving, Nell casts a wider net to all families — and she recommends opening the channels of communication early and often. “Movies are a good gateway to open up difficult topics,” says Nell. “Ideally, you want to get this topic on the table for kids before they’re confronted by a devastating loss.”

GUIDED FAMILY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Debra, who is a certified cinema therapist, and her colleagues at [KORU Bereavement Program](#) — VNSNY's special grief support service for children, teens and their families — have informally compiled a list of movies and general guided discussion topics that apply to many movies on the list. Begin by asking a child to identify his or her favorite character and favorite or least favorite scenes in the movie. This will give you a window into the child's point of view and a good starting point.

Here are five questions and guided discussion topics (which you can tailor to most of the movies listed below).

1. What does the main character discover about himself?

With movies that have a profound loss at their center, the journey is often not about getting to a happy ending so much as soldiering on and finding inner strength. Watching the journey played out on screen can be an enormous comfort when you're at the beginning of that journey: Life goes on.

Nemo, for instance, discovers that he is strong under pressure. And his father, Marlin, discovers that he is in fact brave and intrepid enough to complete one of the biggest adventures a humble clown fish has ever had. In *The Lion King*, Simba spends years running away from his loss only to discover in the end that he is brave and strong enough to lead his rightful kingdom.

This question can help children — and adults — begin to think about their own inner resources that they can call on in grief.

2. What good things happen in the movie? What new opportunities come up following the loss?

This question introduces the idea of external resources. In addition to finding an inner strength and resiliency, characters often form new friendships, find new communities or discover other interests as they begin to make a new life.

In *Nemo*, Marlin, the father, forges an unlikely friendship with Dory, who adds a dimension of comfort and fun to his life and Nemo's. Nemo made friends in the fish tank in Sydney, friends who loved him, protected him and revealed to him his inner strength. And Nemo learns that his father will go to the ends of the earth for him. Perhaps there will be more adventures for the well-traveled threesome.

At the end of Pixar's [Up](#), grieving widow Carl (Ed Asner) forms a grandfather-grandson bond with wilderness explorer scout Russell, which suggests more adventures in the future. "The older man is transformed," Debra notes. "He realizes that he's not the only one in pain and that he can be there for the boy. These are the transformational gifts of grief."

In the 1957 classic [Old Yeller](#), which tops Nell's list of parental movie wisdom on the theme of loss, Jim (played by Fess Parker) allows that his son Travis's loss of Yeller is "not a thing you can forget." Jim encourages the boy to hold on to the memory but begin — if and when he's ready — to accept the good with the bad, to begin looking for new opportunities. "I'll tell you a trick that's sometimes a big help. Start looking around for something good to take the place of the bad. As a general rule, you can find it."

3. How does the missing loved one stay with or return to the main character over time?

The relationship with a loved one changes over time and is particularly resonant at milestone events that mark the passage of time — a wedding, graduation, birth of a child. The [Harry Potter](#) series, which takes place over many years, offers a rare glimpse into how a child experiences the death of his parents over time. As Harry gets older and goes through different stages in his life, he revisits the mysterious deaths again and again. Along the way, he learns more about their lives and how they were connected to and reflected in him. They are, in many ways, with him as he grows up, which is a continuation of the relationships as he goes through new experiences.

4. What did you see in the film that reminded you of yourself or your life?

Open the door, to see if a child wants to talk about his or her own situation — while realizing that this question may be too difficult to answer. "They might not say anything that day," Debra says. "Respect their space, because maintaining that safety is crucial."

Most importantly, keep the door to conversation open. "Don't be surprised if they want to talk about the movie later," says Debra. "They might bring it up in a totally different context and even want to watch it again."

5. Topic for further thought: Guilt and loss

Many people feel guilty when they lose a loved one, especially children — who may not be able to articulate the feeling. A five-year-old might be mired in such thoughts: “Did Mommy die because I was bad? Or because I didn’t go to bed when I was supposed to?” (Guilt is not the sole province of children. Adults, too, think: “If only I made him go to the doctor earlier...” or, “If only I was there when he had the stroke...”)

A movie like *The Lion King* offers the chance to identify and explore that guilt, with an eye towards reassuring the child that the death was not his or her fault. You might begin, “Simba thinks it’s his fault that his father died. Do you think it’s his fault?” By talking about how Simba blamed himself, even though the death wasn’t his fault, parents can shed light — even obliquely — on a child’s own situation.

TIPS FOR VIEWING

Debra shares some tips if you’re watching a movie with a bereaved child (much of this is common-sense advice that applies to children in other situations, as well):

- Be honest about the movie, and ask the child if he or she wants to watch. You might say, “This is a pretty sad movie. I think someone dies. Are you sure you want to watch it?”
- Select age- and stage-appropriate movies; keep in mind the child’s age and maturity level.
- Watch with the child, and don’t be afraid to be emotional when the film moves you.
- Get comfortable, perhaps pop some popcorn. Although the movie may be illustrative or therapeutic, it is, first and foremost, entertainment.
- Check in with the child, especially if you notice agitation. Make it clear that the child can stop watching the movie at any time.
- After the movie, begin a discussion in general terms. *Did you like it? Who did you like best?* Gently stick with your questions, but be understanding if the child does not want to talk.

MOVIE LIST

Here is a sample list of movies in which the theme of loss is central and resonant for discussion (along with links to Nell's clear-headed reviews and discussion topics, when available):

Early Childhood (ages 4-7)

[Finding Nemo](#) — A widowed clownfish chases his son halfway around the world.

[Land Before Time](#) — Orphan dinosaurs travel the ruins of their lost world.

[The Lion King](#) — Following the death of his father, Simba, the cub who will be king, goes into exile.

[Up](#) — A grieving widow and young boy become reluctant adventurers together.

Middle Childhood (ages 8-12)

[Old Yeller](#) — Early Disney classic about the love — and loss — of a childhood dog.

[Bridge to Terabithia](#) — Based on the award-winning book, a magical story of the death of a friend.

[Fly Away Home](#) — Following the death of her mother, a young girl bonds with her estranged father by learning to fly with geese.

[My Dog Skip](#) — A boy and dog grow up in 1940s Mississippi (spoiler alert: in the end, the dog dies of old age).

[The Yearling](#) — This story revolves around the love and loss of a pet deer.

[My Girl](#) — An 11-year-old girl is surrounded by death — and transformational gifts.

Adolescence (ages 13-18)

[The Boys Are Back](#) — A young father and son go it alone after a tragic death.

[Hugo](#) — Two orphans solve a mystery in 1931 train station (and in 3-D).

[Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close](#) (mature teenagers) — A young boy's search for meaning after his father dies in the 9/11 catastrophe.

[The Descendants](#) (mature teenagers) — Total immersion into the complex, fraught emotional terrain as a wife and mother lays dying.