



Accessing Spiritual Strength in Children:

The Power of Changeless Love

There is an innate ability within all of us to move through life's challenging experiences with grace and strength. This includes the child. The proper environment or "healing space", coupled with spiritually empowering activities, allows a bereaved child to successfully move through the life experience of grief. The child discovers empowering inner strengths that last a lifetime.

The "proper environment" to support a bereaved child starts with seeing the spiritual wholeness of the child, then opening up a dialogue that supports, validates and empowers:

- *Every child is a spiritual being on the early path of discovering what it means to be human. As a spiritual being, the child is seen as possessing wholeness and inner strength.*
- *The period of grief is a "teachable moment"¹, a specific moment of time in a child's life which can occur at any time after the death of a loved one. Weeks, months, and years can pass, yet the child will show us when s/he is ready for processing his grief.*
- *The experience of grief is Universal, even though each bereaved child has his or her own unique set of circumstances such as family structure and religious beliefs. The experience of grief catapults every child into the unknown, as s/he starts searching for an understanding about life and death. No matter how dire the circumstance, it does not serve the child to see him or her as anything less than capable of healing. The child has the natural ability to "self-lead" on his or her own right and perfect path. S/He moves through grief; each one's own personal answers are within.*

- *A “healing space” is where the bereaved child is given the opportunity to speak to others without any judgment, receiving validation for his or her many feelings and thoughts associated with grief. As a dialogue opens up, the child begins the process of leading themselves through healing.*
- *Eventually, the grieving child is open to receive an understanding that all the thoughts and feelings of grief are a “normal” part of life. The child gives audience for a compassionate adult to support and lead him or her in finding their inner strength to heal. Understanding this lead role is a critical ingredient to the spiritual and emotional growth of the child.*

Once the healing space has been created, the opportunity is then set to introduce self-empowering activities. Specific grief-related activities are needed in order for the appropriate dialogue to open up. *Kids’ Grief Relief* was born out of the idea of creating new, spiritually empowering materials for bereaved children. My husband and I created this non-profit with the mission of providing tools and programs, that nurture a child’s spirit for children ages four to adult. This includes schools, hospices, churches, professional organizations, and families alike. We offer many free materials from our website, www.KidsGriefRelief.org

For example, in *Reflections*², we touch upon a specific empowering principle *Kids’ Grief Relief* shares with children: you don’t have to feel like a victim of your grieving experience. You can learn how to choose what to think and how to feel. You can know your own personal power to move through grief. The following section addresses spiritual strength.

“There are no right or wrong answers, as your journey through grief is a personal experience. Yet, the way through grief is based on some universal ideas.

- *Your true nature is to feel and to express love.*
- *Your thoughts and your feelings together create your own experience of what is going on in your life.*
- *You can choose your thoughts and choose your feelings.*
- *Through choosing loving thoughts and choosing loving feelings, especially for yourself, you create a peaceful and fulfilled life, even as you go through grief.”*

This idea is also presented to younger children with the book and workbook , *For the Love of Emrys*³. Young children are encouraged to uncover “trash thoughts”, and create new ideas reflecting positive feelings for themselves and for others. There are also various activities that help younger children identify and express the different feelings associated with grief.

We have found that spiritually empowering activities support a bereaved child in finding their own way to access their inner strength and move through grief, and ultimately any difficult situation. In addition, these activities have been extremely useful in launching a “compassion dialogue” with children who are *not* grieving, broadening their understanding of what grieving children are going through.

Initially, I was trained in child bereavement through a local hospice program. The hospice uses many materials from Alan. D. Wolfet, Ph.D.⁴, along with other resources. I am proud to be a member of a great group of highly trained volunteers who have worked with over 1000 bereaved students in the Beaufort, S.C. public school system since the program’s inception. I am greatly inspired by how the children react to the program. We consistently receive high evaluations from our students – who say the greatest gift is having a “space” where they can freely express their thoughts and feelings about their grief experience.

Kids Grief Relief acknowledges the inherent spiritual strength of the child. My husband and I, along with others on our bereavement team, have used *Kids’ Grief Relief* materials successfully with children in the public school system.

Our books and activities revolve around a likable, compassionate character, named Mystie, the mystical dragonfly. She affectionately shares her ideas with children, using the tag line:

“What’s Dragon-You-Down?”

This prompts a child to explain what they are thinking and why they are feeling the way they do.

The empowering ideas which Mystie shares with children come from her “personal” story, as she tells it in her own words in *Diary of A Mystical Dragonfly*⁵. This story is specifically geared for ages 9 to 18. At the end of the story, a section titled *Reflections*² is provided for the student to explore the many facets of grief. This can be done alone, then with an adult s/he has chosen.

A major theme behind all our materials is **the Changeless Power of Love**. The bereaved child feels secure knowing that in the midst of any life-changing circumstance, Love is something on which to rely! It's inside each of us all the time and can be accessed every moment of the day. As a child processes the difficult thoughts and emotions associated with grief, love all-ways triumphs. Our society is greatly blessed by compassionate children who grow up loving themselves and others.

Sound too challenging for children? It's not.

Statistics indicate a child's exposure to grief is almost certain:

Approximately 90% of students will experience the loss of a close or special person before finishing high school.⁶

I believe the personal ability to move through grief, along with the ability to feel compassion, is vital to creating a world that works for everyone.

Footnotes and Personal Comments

¹ Teachable Moment - The concept was popularized by Robert Havighurst in his 1952 book, *Human Development and Education*. In the context of education theory, Havighurst explained, "A developmental task is a task which is learned at a specific point and which makes achievement of succeeding tasks possible. When the timing is right, the ability to learn a particular task will be possible. This is referred to as a 'teachable moment.' It is important to keep in mind that unless the time is right, learning will not occur. Hence, it is important to repeat important points whenever possible so that when a student's teachable moment occurs, s/he can benefit from the knowledge."

² Barbara Ann Simone, (2012) *Reflections from Diary of a Mystical Dragonfly*.

³ Barbara Ann Simone (2011) *For the Love of Emrys*, Balboa Press.

⁴ Alan D. Wolfelt; Ph.D. Author, educator, and grief counselor, Dr. Alan Wolfelt is known across North America for his inspirational teaching. Founder and Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, Dr. Wolfelt presents numerous educational workshops each year for hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes, community groups, and a variety of other organizations.

⁵ Barbara Ann Simone (2012) *Diary of a Mystical Dragonfly*.

⁶ Shane R. Jimerson, Ph.D.; NCSP (2002) *Grief Support For Children*, WSPA Summer Institute.