

# Kai's Journey

## 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 can be challenging or even painful, especially when we engage with our family members for the first time. Such dialogue is important for everyone, 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 all 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 say 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 to 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 also strengthen memories as a source of comfort and growth for the family.
- ♥ **Be descriptive:** Explain and describe grief to children. And, as they grow, you will have to talk about death and grief again ... and again. As they mature, 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 the special person—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 remind him of important life lessons his father shared with him. The sweater helps keep these important moments present in Kai's life. This, too, is part of grieving; lasting memories 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 family members and friends who have died, and having up or down days is expected. And finally, remember to take care of yourself, so you can take care of your family.

# Kai's Journey

## READING AND TALKING ABOUT KAI'S JOURNEY WITH YOUR FAMILY

Books open new worlds for children and the caring adults who read with them. While Kai's Journey book series is about loss and grief, it is also about life, hope and resilience, memories and friendships. In fact, the story of Kai, his family and friends is a lot like the experience of thousands of grieving families across the country.

Sharing and reading books with children open new ways to connect with each other. The story is a bridge that links words and images that both adults and children share and explore. 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 difficult subjects. The three books in Kai's Journey series will provide a number of opportunities for families to share remembrances, stories and grieve as they grow.

There are many important themes that surface on the pages of *The Golden Sweater*, *The Girl with the Locket* and *The Fishless Lake*. Readers see that Kai's grief is not a singular emotion but an array of feelings, from sadness to joy to excitement to pride. And, like all children, they will revisit those feelings in the future. Ask yourself, what did you or your child learn from Kai, his friends and his mother? What would children say to Kai if they were friends? Chances are, children will know the answers.

Here are a few ideas to consider as you prepare to read the books that take you and your family on Kai's Journey.

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- ♥ **First, take the time to read the book by yourself. Think about the words and images and what they mean to you and your family.** There may be parts of the story that have great significance for you and are worthy of self-reflection before exploring with your children.
  - ♥ **After you read the book, think about the themes that came to your mind.** Kai, his mother and his friends express similar yet different moods, emotions, and memories. They may or may not be the same as yours or the children in your life. This is natural and very common in families.
  - ♥ **Find a quiet time to read the books with your child.** Minimize distractions and avoid bedtime. Each of the three books of Kai's Journey initiates 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 books. Remember that younger children may find it difficult to express their own emotions and thoughts.
  - ♥ **What experiences in the book are similar to those in your family?** Think about how Kai is like or unlike the children in your life. Take time to explore each page; take in the colors and details.

# The Golden Sweater

## DISCUSSING THE GOLDEN SWEATER WITH YOUR CHILD

The series begins with *The Golden Sweater*, which focuses on the newness of loss and getting your bearings in a world without that significant person in your life. This story shows how Kai's mom also adapts to her new world.



- ♥ Younger children may find it difficult to express their emotions and thoughts. In this story, a bear mirrors Kai's emotions. How does Kai's bear reflect his emotions—including sadness, disappointment, joy or excitement? Is it the bear's expression, the colors that bathe his fur or his hiding spots on each page that best reflect Kai's emotions? Use this story to help your child name his or her feelings. Is there an object or image that symbolizes a feeling for your child?
- ♥ Kai's experiences in this book are similar to those in your family. 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.
- ♥ Kai's grief is not a singular emotion but includes a range of feelings, from sadness to joy to excitement to pride. 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 bonds 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 adviser.
- ♥ Was there a particular activity your child shared with their special person? Maybe it was a sport, game, biking or playing music. Remembering activities helps keep memories strong and can be another source of comfort. In this story, Kai loved to play tennis with his dad.



# The Girl with the Locket

## DISCUSSING THE GIRL WITH THE LOCKET WITH YOUR CHILD

The Girl with the Locket centers on a new experience for Kai, a weekend bereavement camp. While he is somewhat anxious about the prospect of meeting new people, it doesn't take him long to make new friends. Elle is a young girl who struggles to talk about her own loss. Kai reaches out to her and finds that he has something to share with young people who are just like him.

- ♥ **Children may experience some anxiety or concerns when starting a new activity.** Kai goes to camp for the first time and naturally has some misgivings. Grieving children have the additional worry about being different. But bereavement programs and camps add a layer of comfort for children who know that their peers have had similar experiences of loss and grief. When you recognize these emotions in your child, be reassured that these feelings are commonly experienced. Don't hesitate to talk to your child about how they are feeling when beginning a new activity.
- ♥ **Children reach out to other young people — perhaps not at first but as they feel more comfortable.** At camp, Kai reaches out to the girl with the locket and assures her that it's okay to be sad. After all, he has similar feelings. Once they connect, they share experiences and memories. Adults can appreciate these caring responses and assure children their actions are sincere.
- ♥ **Children are capable of feeling empathy.** Kai notices Elle, another camper who appears sad and uncomfortable. Children are very observant of peers who are having similar feelings and behaviors, especially bereaved children. Kai even recognized symbols of love and family (a locket). Observe your child in new situations, and share your observations later in a casual way, such as, "I noticed the girl with her mom and dad who was holding something in her hands." And don't assume that you are seeing the same things as your child!
- ♥ **Children are trusted friends.** As we see in The Girl with the Locket, Kai reaches out and becomes Elle's friend. When children share their thoughts, memories and feelings with each other, they often form caring relationships. We can explain that they are trusted friends because they are good listeners and care about others. We can remind them that we are compassionate when we help others, and we actually help ourselves, in turn.



# The Fishless Lake

## DISCUSSING THE FISHLESS LAKE WITH YOUR CHILD

In *The Fishless Lake*, Kai realizes that some of his memories of his father are slipping away. Kai's mother remembers one of their family traditions and re-introduces Kai to the annual fishing trip that Kai and his dad took every September. Although they don't catch any fish, they do capture countless warm memories, shared stories and a way to keep those family traditions alive and evolving as the family grows.



- ♥ Remembering a deceased family member can produce a wide range of emotional responses, from sadness to happiness and even joy. These bittersweet memories can ebb and flow in unpredictable ways. When painful memories begin to recede, positive memories can also fade. Kai experiences the full range of emotions throughout the three books. In *The Fishless Lake*, he becomes aware that the memories of his father are not as vivid or as frequent as they used to be. He fears he will forget him, a common concern for both bereaved adults and children. Sometimes when children have happy memories, they might feel ashamed or confused. Reassure them (and yourself) that grieving means having both sad and joyful memories. It doesn't mean that you do not love your special person any less or are forgetting about them. In fact, it means just the opposite: You are embracing your person and all you shared with them for the rest of your life.
- ♥ Parents and caregivers can use a number of strategies as they help children remember their special person. When talking about a deceased family member or friend, use words that fully describe them and their physical appearance—hair and eye color, height, voice, favorite clothes and mannerisms. Place them in events they shared with children, again, fully describing those moments. This not only helps children remember the appearance of their family member, but also the context of events, both large and small, they shared. Be mindful of your child's age at the time of the original event so as not to frustrate young people because they "can't remember." You can help them build those memories.
- ♥ Don't hold back to wait for the "right" time. The time is right when you recall an occasion spontaneously, the calendar reminds us that a holiday is coming, or your child asks you about an event or occasion. Although it may be difficult to talk about these memorable or joyful times in the early days following a loss, these recollections are an essential part of grieving.
- ♥ Children can remember times and events they've shared with their special people. Kai has faint memories of the fishing trips with his father. These "glimpses" or "fleeting" images of events may be hard to remember fully, with clear conversations and images. But when cued by images and sounds associated with these meaningful events—trees, a landscape, or the sound of the crowd at a sporting event, details often fill in. Remember that children may experience anxiety when revisiting a special activity that they shared with their person. As Kai sat in the boat he saw the landscape of the area surrounding the lake, and he began to recall more details of his fishing trips with his dad. When children begin to share their own memories, you can take the opportunity to gently prompt them and even share your own thoughts and recollections.
- ♥ Parents, caregivers, family members and even friends can play a major role in helping children remember those who have died. Kai's mother is ready for this moment in her son's life. She realizes that keeping important memories present for her son is challenging, and so she draws on her own memories of her husband and child. Adults help very young children, especially those who are pre-verbal, when they tell stories about their special person. What's more, showing them photos and videos and memorabilia can build a "history" of their relationship. Mementos can include a favorite piece of clothing, hobby equipment, sports gear or even the wrapper of a favorite candy bar. Listening to and supporting your child will encourage them to continue talking and strengthens memories of these meaningful times.
- ♥ These special memories can provide comfort in the face of more painful moments. They are tools children can keep with them at all times (as Kai says, "The memory of Dad would always be stitched in my heart"). Supplement these conversations with photos and other physical memorabilia and mementos.



# Kai's Journey

YOUR JOURNEY. YOUR STORY

When an important person in your life dies, uncertainty is all-consuming. As a parent, you struggle to find the right answers to the question, 'What can I do to support my child?' There is no best solution at any one point in time; you do your best with the information you have at the time. The journey of life is filled with ups and downs for both you and your child. You can explore and walk together on this journey. Keep in mind that emotions are rarely simple. Like a kaleidoscope, their multiple hues reflect on each other, in complex and ever-changing ways. As you read Kai's Journey, we encourage you to have open conversations with your children, remembering your person and keeping their memory alive in your life.

## PROMPTS FOR PARENTS

- ♥ What are the objects or mementos in your child's life that have meaning and represent special memories of their person?
- ♥ How are these objects or mementos a part of your child's life? Do they keep them in a special place, wear or display them?
- ♥ Which of the three books or parts of the three stories are significant to you and your child?
- ♥ Is there a "girl with the locket" in your child's life? And, if your child is comfortable, encourage him or her to share who the person is and how they became friends.
- ♥ Is there a "fishless lake" adventure in your child's life? When and where was it? What memories surround it?
- ♥ Ask yourself, 'What did we learn from Kai, his mother, his friends and other campers?' What emerged as the most teachable moment for you? How about for your family?

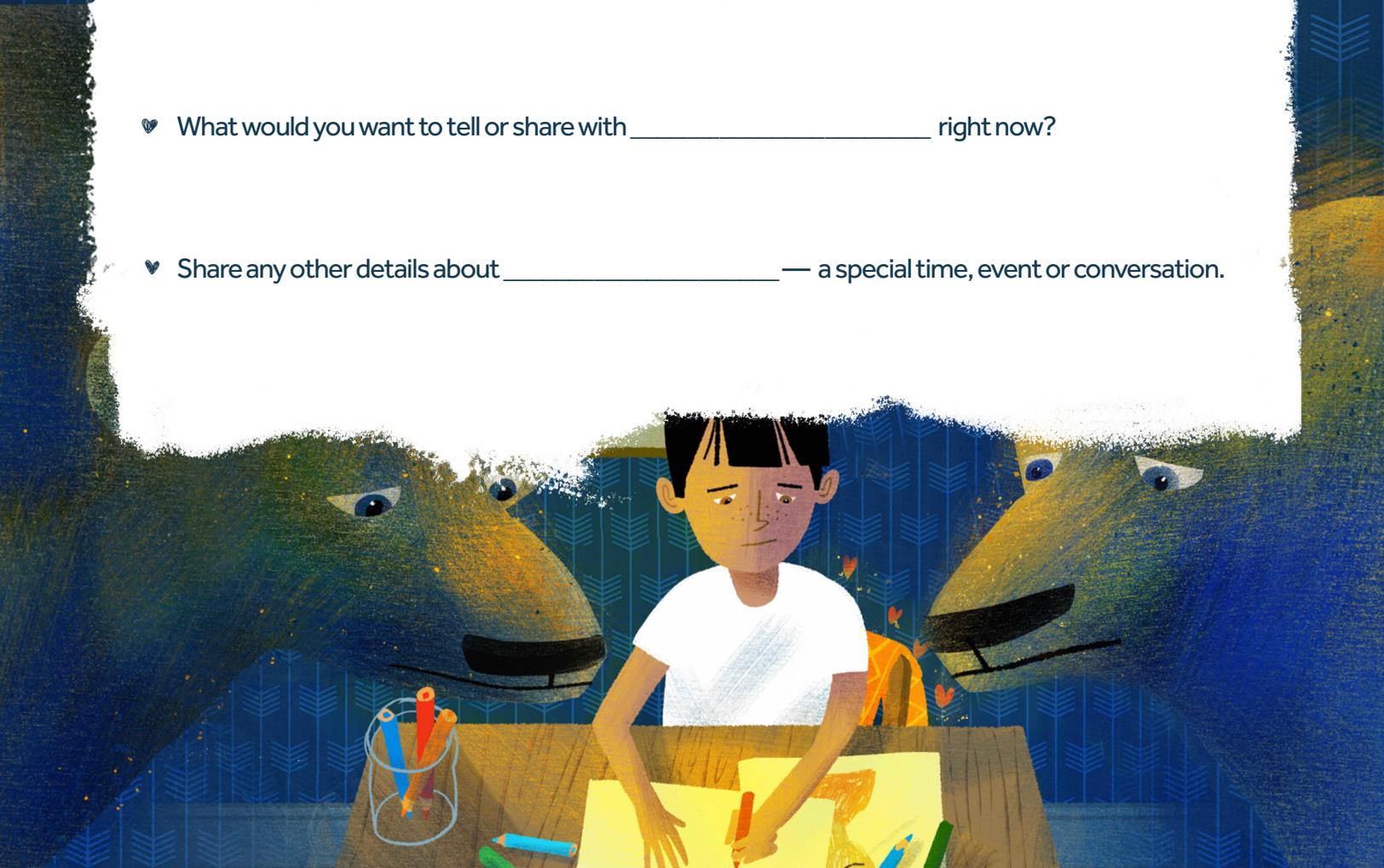
The next few pages are for you and your family to tell the story of your person and honor their 'moments' with you!

- ♥ Does your child have a "golden sweater" that belonged to their special person? Encourage them to talk about it and maybe write, draw, paint or photograph it.
- ♥ What would your child say or write to Kai if they were friends?
- ♥ What does your child think about Kai and his story? Suggest that they can write or draw their own stories that might parallel Kai's experiences.

# Your Journey

BEGINNING YOUR STORY...

- ♥ Name and describe the special person who has died.
- ♥ Describe a memory of \_\_\_\_\_, that makes you smile.
- ♥ Describe a time that you miss sharing with \_\_\_\_\_.  
Where were you and what you were doing?
- ♥ What would you like to know (that you don't already) about \_\_\_\_\_?
- ♥ What would you want to tell or share with \_\_\_\_\_ right now?
- ♥ Share any other details about \_\_\_\_\_ — a special time, event or conversation.



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