

Processing Grief Through Picture Books

A Guide For Conversations

Dr. Sarah CB Norsworthy



This free guide, created in Maine, supports the power of picture books to nurture connection and conversations in times of grief.



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In grief, the depth of
our love
becomes clear.

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Why Picture Books?

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Images, words, and space on the page that we can fill with our imagination, combine to create the possibility of connections for all.

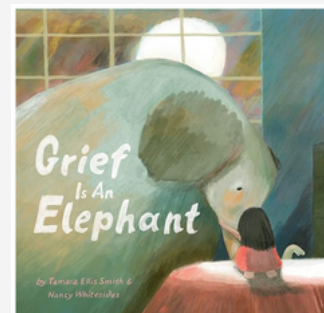
Picture books are defined more through form than function. They invite us to connect with ourselves, other readers, and the creators – the authors and illustrators – as well as with each page. Picture books foster belonging.

This guide is designed to support the power of picture books to nurture connection and conversations in times of grief. The language and imagery of picture books allow for wide understanding and also, through sharing, for personal grief to be held in community. By talking about grief through a story, we are able to sit beside our own stories. This can create even the tiniest of spaces for us from our own grief and increase our sense of safety in the conversation. This may provide support for all parties as each moves through their grief process.

The initial draft of this guide is intended to specifically support adults in holding space for students and children in Maine as they process the violence of the mass shootings that occurred in Lewiston on October 25, 2023. These words are dedicated to our local and global community as we grieve.

[Grief is an Elephant](#) (Chronicle, 2023) is a book-gift from Tamara Ellis Smith and Nancy Whitesides. It is a story about a child's relationship with grief. Grief shows up to the child as increasingly smaller animals, and as it does, the child's relationship with Grief shifts.

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Considerations For Conversations On Grief

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There is no right way to grieve. Grief has many layers and each person's responses to it are unique. It is also important to recognize that cultural background impacts grief. We experience grief, comfort, and processing in many different and overlapping ways.

Grief may be experienced collectively and personally. Having the choice to participate in conversations on grief matters. The stories held by others of their grief are theirs. Our stories are not owed.

01

Be Gentle

Being gentle starts with how you treat yourself. Notice what you need: rest, water, companionship, quiet. Listen to your body, your heart, your mind. Encourage others to do the same. Connect as desired. Connection can be quiet. It doesn't always require language.

03

Seek Help

Expert, informed grief care is available. In Maine, support may be accessed 24/7 through the suicide and crisis hotline: call or text 988.

If you are experiencing overwhelm or thoughts of harming yourself and/or others, seek help. There is a community around you that stands ready to support you. You matter.

02

Ground

Grounding means to orient to the present moment: in your body, breath, space, and safety. Because grief is a response to trauma – and a response to love and love lost – it can help to ground into the depth of that love (even in the absence of its object). We grieve because we love and value what is now gone.

Conversational Currents

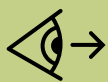
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A conversation might include one or more of these components. Each wave of the current carries the conversation further towards the abstract.

Note: Welcoming students to use the language they are most comfortable with matters. Translanguaging, moving between languages, contributes to belonging.

Notice, Think, Wonder, Feel, & Imagine



Notice

- What do you see that others will see too?
- What can you touch and tell about?

Why? Builds Connection



Think

- What are you thinking?
- What thoughts do you have about what you see?
- This is where we infer.

Why? Mindful Meaning Making



Wonder

- What questions do you have about what you are thinking ?
- What information do you need to make sense of what you see?

Why? Curiosity & Awe



Feel x 2

- How do you feel about what you see, think, and wonder?
- How do you feel about the way we are exploring this picture book?

Why? Feelings are complex +1



Imagine

- What actions can you imagine taking after exploring this book? With whom?
- What do you imagine the creators were thinking?
- What might be happening off of the pages?
- Who might you share this with? Why?

Why? Imagination & anticipation can activate hope & agency.

Selecting Picture Books To Support Conversations On Grief 5

When considering books to open up conversations about grief, it is important to remember that grief can present in a multitude of ways. Having a collection, or stack, of picture books with lots of variety in them increases the likelihood of finding a comforting match between book and reader.

Picture books are magic. They create space for us to make our own meanings, for meandering conversations, for language development, and for our capacities for understanding, compassion, and empathy to grow.

This guide focuses on and centers the processing of grief with picture books that either explicitly name grief or have themes which may lead to conversations on grief. As you explore the possible currents of conversations springing from these texts, and particularly from Grief is an Elephant, you may find other picture books calling you, or find you see old favorites in new ways. Embrace that and build your awareness of a collection of rich picture books. The children lucky enough to have you share picture books with them will be enriched by your ability to be responsive with your thoughtful selections.

Developmental bibliotherapy is a non-clinical practice used to strengthen our understandings of ourselves, and how we navigate our world. Developmental bibliotherapy can be used as a guiding practice, sharing picture books to center an identified topic, such as grief.



Stages of Developmental Bibliotherapy

1

Recognition of a connection between the reader and the character, which is sometimes a person.

2

Affirmation & release of tension, as the reader joins with the character and feels a oneness.

3

Insight, as the reader learns from the character – and compares and contrasts the ways in which they and the character navigate a similar experience.

4

Connection with infinite others, as the reader understands the commonalities of the human experience and the multitude of ways that people navigate our shared world.

These are also referred to as stages of identification, catharsis, insight and universalism.

Preparing For Conversations On Grief Using A Picture Book

In this section, we will go through the planning process of a conversation centering grief using [Grief is an Elephant](#) created by Tamara Ellis Smith & Nancy Whitesides, published on October 24, 2023 by Chronicle Books.

01

Read The Book For Yourself

To be human is to have a relationship with grief. As you read this book, think about your response to it. What resonates for you? What might you share? What do you notice in the words and in the images?

In a noticing conversation, out loud, you might say ...

“I notice that the character seems to be alone with their grief.”

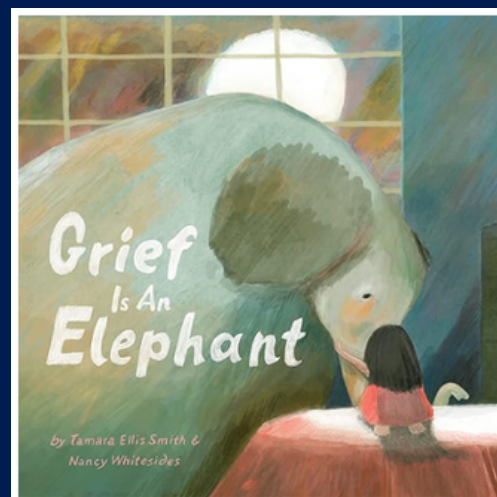
“I see that the animals the creators call Grief get smaller and smaller and smaller.”

“I notice that on each page, the child is comfortable getting closer and closer to the animals.”

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Internally, noticing might sound like ...

I remember the suffocation of grief when my father was dying and died. That was years ago, it feels different now. I wonder who this character lost? Why are they, a child, alone with their grief?



Take A Picture Walk

Picture books often tell two or more related stories. The images extend the words. Read the book again, only this time, read the images. What are you thinking?

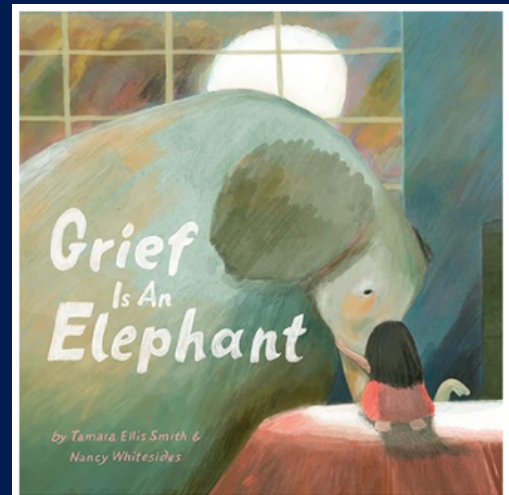
In a thinking out loud conversation, you might say ...

“I see the elephant on many pages. I think that the heavy feeling of grief might pop up over and over again.”

“I see that sometimes the animals are together, I think that maybe the child might feel more than one way at once.”

Internal thinking might sound like ...

I see that the animals appear and reappear in the images. The elephant shows up differently on different pages. I think that this may be showing us the way grief sneaks up on us in unexpected places, in unexpected ways.



In initial conversations, you may find yourself doing most of the talking. This is important modeling. You are thinking about, as well as talking about, grief.

Focus On Words & Phrases

Read the picture book aloud to yourself and/or to others. Notice how the words feel in your fingers and hands as you sign them, in your mouth as you say them, in your head, and in your heart. Consider the word choices the creators made – nothing is in a picture book by accident. How do the words chosen for use in the text impact your thoughts & feelings on grief?

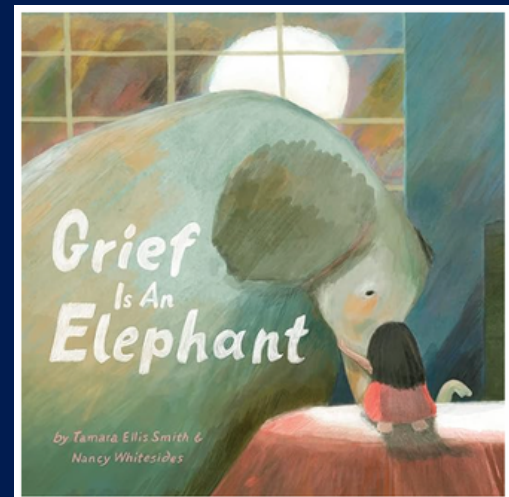
Internally, wondering about words might sound like ...

Hmmm... the words describe talking to Grief and telling her things. The child is encouraged to share, with Grief, the way that they trumpet, bound, bay, and squeak. What does it look or sound like when people trumpet, bound, bay, and squeak? How might squeaking sound, for people? Are there squeaking words or squeaking sounds we make?

In a wondering out loud conversation, you might say ...

“I wonder if when grief feels like an elephant, the child is more likely to move their body in big ways and/or trumpet or to move their body in small ways and/or squeak?”

I wonder what sorts of things the child might say to Grief?”



Movement is a powerful way to process emotions. You might act out, with your hands, or your whole body, what words feel like or mean. You might wonder to the group how words that describe sound can also be movement words. For example, how might it look or feel squeaking around a room?

Focus On Feelings

Spend time sitting with, noticing, and naming your feelings. Consider how it feels to reflect on grief and to prepare to talk about grief with others, especially in your position as a teacher, a caregiver, or a parent.

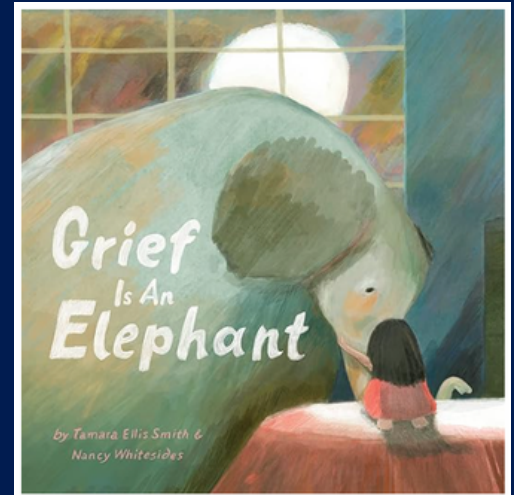
Think about what you need to feel even and calm in this conversation. Our self-regulation helps regulates others. Co-regulation is a practice, and adults do not have a magical capacity to always be regulated. Be gentle with yourself.

In a feeling conversation, you might say ...

“When I read this book, I remember how sad feels, and I remember how sad changes.”

“Sharing this story with you, gives us a chance to feel sadness together. You might enjoy this connection, I do. You might also need to take a break — you can do that.... (name the space) — and rejoin us later, when you are ready.”

Choice in participating in conversations about grief matters. Encourage children to notice how they feel about the book AND about the conversation you are having. Name where they can go, if they choose to leave the group.



Internally, feeling your feelings and talking about feelings might sound like...

I feel so very sad as I read this book. I am familiar with the suffocating feeling of overwhelming grief – and when I read this book, it comes up for me. I know this is an important conversation to have, and it still feels hard. I am going to read slowly and focus on my breath as I read, and, if tears come to my eyes, I will breathe through them. If they are noticed, I'll share that yes, adults have big feelings too. I will also note that like in this book our experiences tell us that our feelings will change. They always do. Feeling sad is okay. Grief is about missing something that we love, value, and aren't sure what to do without.

The Gift Of Imagination

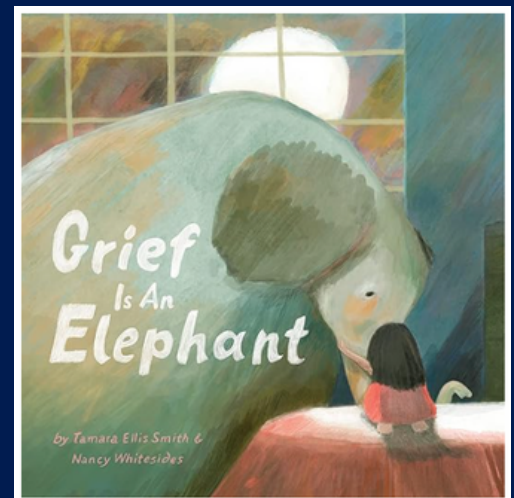
Throughout this guide, you have imaged sharing Grief is an Elephant or perhaps another book that might lead to a conversation on grief with someone you care about.

It is likely that you imagine this book supporting them in the processing of their grief. In this imagining, you are activating anticipation and hope. These are healing feelings.

Picture books leave a lot of room for imagination. You might imagine what is happening in, or around, the pictures or imagine taking actions that the picture book has inspired.

Imagining might sound, in your head, like...

I see in the picture, with the house, that there are two bicycles. I imagine that when the child is riding a bike with someone else, grief feels differently than it does when they are alone.



In an imagined conversation, you might say out loud ...

“When I look at the picture of the house, I see two bicycles and imagine the joy of riding a bike and feeling wind on my face.”

“I’m imagining how it looks when there are fireflies in the sky, little spots of light when darkness falls. Maybe as grief shows up and brings memories with it, those memories could be spots of light for us.”

Reinforce the idea that sometimes we might share out loud in a group what we imagine and other times we only feel comfortable sharing out thoughts in our heads. Provide options for artistic expression to support the processing of grief.

Using the Gift of a Text to Describe Our Feelings

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How Metaphors Help

Metaphors allow us to be a bit adjacent to our feelings.

The metaphors in this book describe feelings in a way that may permit sharing that wouldn't otherwise be comfortable or even possible.

“Right now my sadness feels like a firefly.”

Feelings are grounded in perspective, time, and place — and they are always changing. When we talk about “the” or “my” or “our” or “their” sadness, our feelings about the sadness shift.

When we talk about sadness as an object, we remove it from our core identity. It is something we carry or feel as a sensation — it is not who we are.

Leverage Picture Books For Emotional Communication

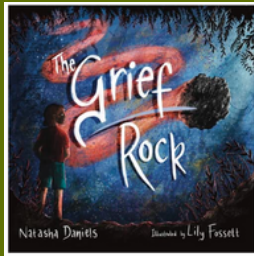
You might share how your feelings are sometimes elephant feelings and other times deer, fox, mouse, or firefly feelings. Encourage others to describe their feelings using the animals in [Grief is an Elephant](#) — and imagine other animals they might use to describe their joys, their peacefulness, love, and sadness.

How else might feelings be described? Are their colors, textures, plants, shapes, rhythms, or tastes that might describe our feelings? Revel in the awe that we experience our world in infinite ways.

Spend time developing emotional language. Feeling wheels and word ladders can help. English has thousands of words for emotions but, on average, we use about 20.

Other Picture Books You Might Explore...

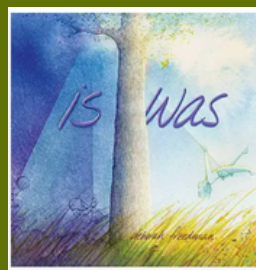
Books designed to teach directly about grief often including explicit strategies for processing grief.



Books that teach some of the science behind our emotional expressions.



Picture Books that show how things can change and remain the same.



Books which remind us that sometimes things change slowly.



And Picture Books That ... 13

Depict other experiences of communal grief and the work of the helpers, COVID being one example.



Reflect on the experience of sheltering in place in complex feelings of fear and grief.



Remind us that even in grief, we may still experience joy.



Illustrate the agency we have to share our messages with the world.



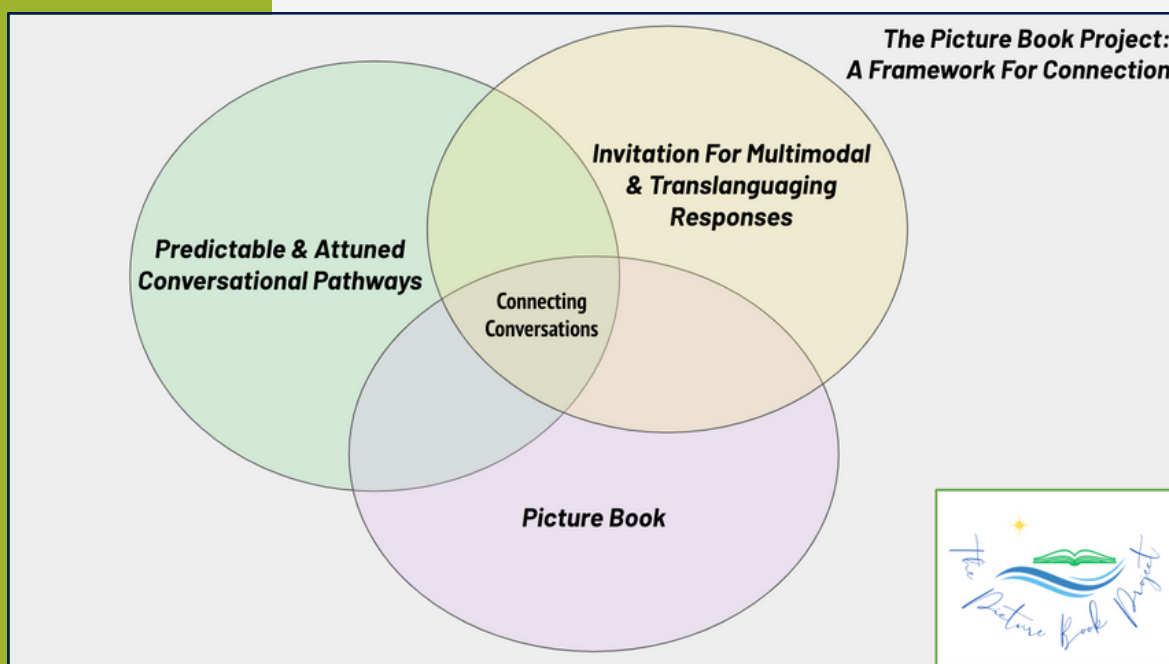
Our Framework

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Using Picture Books To Strengthen Communities

Picture books are special creations. Through their rich and love-drenched pages, imagery is often paired with words; we can create spaces for meaningful conversations to unfold.

Our framework is simple. Pairing picture books with predictable and attuned conversational pathways, while adding open invitations to respond, can create spaces that support conversations to connect us. In these connections, we strengthen our communities.



About This Guide

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This guide was written by Dr. Sarah CB Norsworthy, consultant at Linked Literacies.

My first day as a solo teacher was on 9/11. That day, I remember holding the news that would soon be known to the class of first graders I was with. I remember reaching for picture books, my words evaporating, as my mind and body went numb.

When my oldest child was in first grade — on their sixth birthday — I was numb again and searching for words to talk with them about what had happened in Newtown, CT, at Sandy Hook Elementary School. After a brief conversation, I turned to picture books once again.

In times of need, when words evaporate in the face of almost unimaginable tragedies, picture books carry us through.

The Picture Book Project is being developed by Linked Literacies, LLC to celebrate and activate the power of picture books.

This guide was created to support adults in schools, caregivers, and others in their conversations around grief in the days following the mass shootings in Lewiston, Maine.

This is a free community resource.

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Nothing that we do is ever done in isolation — everything springs from community.



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