

Disney · PIXAR

COCO

A STORY OF IDENTITY AND FAMILY

Disney Pixar's *Coco* follows the journey of young Miguel to find his great-great grandfather in the Land of the Dead. *Coco* provides us with a strong reminder that despite death, family history can transcend the years and continue to shape our families for generations to come.

For families that may be grieving, we are reminded of many themes we've experienced throughout our own grief journeys. These themes include those of identity and family, explored here, as well as traditions and legacy, which are looked at in *Coco, A Story of Traditions and Legacy*.

DEVELOPING A SELF-IDENTITY WHILE HONORING OUR FAMILY LEGACY

"What if I'm not good [as a shoemaker]?" Miguel yells at his family at the beginning of the movie. He is struggling with wanting to become a musician, just like his great-great grandfather, and with disobeying his family's expectation to become a *zapatero*. As he journeys through the Land of the Dead, Miguel begins to feel bonded with his ancestors and eventually he is willing to give up the idea of being a musician, as a way to help save them. We see this push and pull between Miguel's desire to form his own self-identity and his desire to honor his family legacy throughout the entirety of the movie.

For many children who have experienced the

COCO, A JOURNEY THROUGH THE LAND OF THE LIVING AND OF THE DEAD

Miguel's adventure begins on *Día de Muertos* (the Day of the Dead), the one time of year when those who have died can visit their families, and the living can honor them through *ofrendas* (offerings).

For the Rivera family, their great-great grandfather's abandonment of young Coco (Miguel's great-grandmother) results in a generations-long ban on music. *Abuelita* (Nana) Elena, the current matriarch of the Rivera family, is strict in her insistence that Miguel cannot be exposed to music, and goes as far as threatening an innocent Mariachi with her *chancla* (sandal) when he hands Miguel a guitar.

The Riveras are also stern in their wish for Miguel to become the next *zapatero* (shoemaker), just like the rest of the family. For young Miguel, who aspires to be a musician instead, his adventure begins when his *Abuelita* finds his homemade guitar and smashes it. At this, he finally yells, "This is unfair! This is my life; you've already had yours." Miguel runs away and ends up in a *cementerio* (cemetery), stealing the great singer Ernesto de la Cruz's guitar, and is sent to the Land of the Dead.

This beautiful and *poco loco* (little crazy) story unfolds as Miguel meets his ancestors, encounters magical *alebrijes* (folk art sculptures), and discovers the true meaning of family.

death of a family member, there is a distinct shift in how they experience themselves before and after the death. For children this brings about many questions, such as:

- “Who am I? Am I the same person as before?”
- “Do I want the same things now?”
- “Should I change in order to honor my person?”
- “In what ways am I like my person/do I want to be like my person?”
- “What does it mean now that I lost my sibling...am I an only child? The oldest sibling?”
- ... and many others.

We can also see how the expectations of our families about who we are (as with Miguel) can create significant conflicts that may make children feel unheard or not validated. A death in some instances can create distance between family members due to these changing identities and shifting roles.

It’s helpful for children to create spaces where they feel safe asking all of their questions, even the ones without easy answers. We can do this by using active listening skills such as reflecting, summarizing, using open-ended questions or even being willing to just sit with “*I don’t know.*”

Additionally, it’s important to refrain from judgement, resisting the urge to offer advice or “fix” the problem by providing the answers for our children. At times, this may create more conflict as we navigate these new edges of who our children are, but children are helped when they feel that their own hopes and wishes for their future are honored.

NAVIGATING OUR FAMILY WHILE GRIEVING

Throughout the movie, we are struck by a strong sense of conflict between Miguel and the rest of the Rivera family, especially with Coco’s father, Héctor. We see Miguel struggle with *Abuelita* Elena and Mama Imelda’s disdain for Héctor, which is different from Miguel’s experience of him.

Many grieving families may be reminded of the experience of conflict which they too have experienced following a death. This may be especially true when family members had significantly different relationships with the person who died, or when the person who died was estranged, or when the means or circumstances of the death were complicated (as with homicide, suicide, or substance abuse), and in many other cases.

As adults, it’s important for us to understand that while we may have our own feelings and history, children may have had—or may have wanted to have—a vastly different relationship with the person who died. It helps children when they can feel a connection with that person, in spite of whatever feelings the adults in their lives may



have. Children have an inherent yearning to love and to be loved by their family members, even when unfavorable circumstances persist.

Even if a relationship wasn't positive in life, there is an opportunity to develop a new relationship with that person after death. Statements like, *"Daddy wasn't a good person,"* or *"Your brother brought this on himself,"* or *"You didn't even know your grandma very well,"* can feel hurtful or confusing for children.

What's helpful for children is to allow them to create their own relationship with the person who died and to remember them in ways that make the child feel heard, apart from our own feelings. As in most situations, being an active listener is helpful. This may mean that when a child asks questions, we are willing to answer them and be as neutral as possible in our responses. (For example, *"I know that at times Mommy did hurt us when she used drugs, and I also know that you loved her and wished for her to get better,"* or *"I know mommy and daddy didn't get along but we both love you very much."*)

If these situations are too difficult, we may need to find our own outlets and supports (such as therapy or peer support) to process the relationship we had with the person who died. In turn, we can create opportunities for children to talk about that family member with others (for example, their peers, other family members, or a therapist) who can be helpful to them as they find ways to honor and/or heal the relationship they had.

Coco is a strong reminder of the power of family, how our bonds and connections with those who died never end and how our traditions and stories keep our loved ones alive. To explore more about how this movie can shed light on our journeys of grief, see the companion article, **"Coco, A Story of Traditions and Legacy."** For additional support or information on grief-related topics, please visit us at highmarkcaringplace.com or follow us on social media.

