

ONWARD

WISHES, BONDS, & MEMORIES AFTER THE DEATH OF A PARENT

Disney Pixar's animated movie *Onward* follows the quest of two elven brothers, Ian and Barley Lightfoot. The teenage brothers try to fix a spell so they can spend one last day with their father, who died when they were too young to remember him.

Many people wonder if grief is even possible when a child barely knew, or never knew, their parent or sibling before they died. *Onward* shows that children who have experienced a death so early in life do grieve as strongly as other children who suffer a death.

Running through the movie is a sense of the major loss that many children feel after losing a parent at a very young age. This loss is filled with the emptiness of never having known that parent, and the yearning for a relationship with them. It is also coupled with the sadness, and sometimes the resentment, of not having had enough memories – or any memories – of that person.

The wish that magic was real, just so the child could spend even one moment with their person, is not limited to elves. Children grow and reach important milestones year after year – the first day of school, making the team, starring in a dance recital, learning to drive, going to homecoming, graduating, getting married. As each of these important events happens – and as they are dreamed about years in advance – there is always a sense of what these occasions might have been like if their important person were there, and of what the child is missing out on without them.

While Ian and Barley Lightfoot have magic to guide their quest to spend



one more day with their father, the rest of us don't have that to fall back on. However, there are other things that families can do to help children create meaningful experiences, memories, and bonds with their parent or sibling who died.

WISHES

After the death of someone important, we all find ourselves wishing for many things. The biggest wish of course is the wish that our person hadn't died at all. Children often have lots of other wishes along with this one – *"I wish I could spend one more day with them," "I wish I could tell them about my day," "I wish I could go back in time and see what they did."* Or a wish like Ian's, who wishes he knew what his father was like in order to be more like him himself.

Wishes aren't simply impossible dreams that we can just ignore. We can help children talk about their wishes in a way that feels supportive to them, that helps them to process and find an outlet for their emotions, or helps them to understand some of the deeper feelings that they're experiencing. Taking some time to explore what they're trying to say in a wish can be helpful for children's healing.

We might say, for example, *"You wish you could tell daddy that story because you're missing him, and I wonder if that makes you sad?"* Or, *"You really wish you could share that drawing with mommy; I wonder if we can write her name on it and put it in her memory box?"* Or, *"I wish I could tell that to daddy too. I wonder if we could pull out a photo of him and talk to him together?"*

CONTINUING A RELATIONSHIP

It's important for us to remember that while a death disconnects us physically from our loved one, that doesn't mean we can't have a continuing relationship with them. Many people, young and old, are made to feel ashamed or uncomfortable or embarrassed if they talk to their person or believe that they're still with them in some way. Let children know that it's completely normal to find ways to stay connected.

In *Onward*, Ian talks to his dad's voice recording as a way to stay connected. This is one way for children to continue their relationship with their person. They can also share stories, look through photos, watch videos, listen to voice recordings, read letters, write letters or messages to or from that person, etc. All of these activities can help them to feel that connection with their loved one after their death.



MEMORIES

One of the things we hear often at the Highmark Caring Place from children who experienced the death of a family member at an early age is that they wish they had more memories of that person. They feel that it's unfair they didn't get a chance to have any memories (or as many memories as an older sibling). A distinct theme in *Onward* is Ian's acute awareness of his older brother's three memories of their dad. You can see Ian's longing to have at least one memory of his own.

While we can't go back in time for children, that doesn't mean the children have to remain without memories of their person. We can help children make new memories of their person through storytelling, creating memory boxes, sharing that person's mementos and personal items, and in other ways passing on to the child what was important to their loved one. This can help children know who they were and share in the family memories of them.

As shown in *Onward*, Ian knows Barley's memories of their father. The brothers share in storytelling, Ian posts many pictures of his father in his room, and he wears his father's sweater, all as ways to know who his father was and to create memories.

DISCUSSION IDEAS FOR FAMILIES AFTER WATCHING ONWARD

Onward brings up a lot of questions and ideas that children and adults might want to follow up on about their own family history. Here are some discussion topics that families can bring up at home in order to help children talk about their own wishes and feelings, share old memories and make new ones, and continue the relationship with their special person. Some questions that you can ask your child or children are:

- If you could spend one more day with them, what would you like to do with them?
- If you could ask your special person a question, what would you ask them?
- What more would you like to know about your special person? Is there someone else we should ask about these things too? Some questions that can be talked about:

PERSONAL HISTORY

- What's their full name?
- When is their birthday?
- Where did they grow up?
- Did they have brothers or sisters?
- Did they have pets?
- Who was one of their best friends?
- What was their job?

FAVORITES

- What was their favorite food?
- What music did they like?
- What holiday or holidays did they enjoy?
- What was their favorite color?



- What hobbies did they like?
- What was their favorite TV show?
- What did they like to do?

APPEARANCE

- What did they look like? Tall or short? Long or short hair? Eye color?
- What kind of clothes did they wear?

STORIES & BELONGINGS

- Do you know any funny stories about them?
- Do you have anything that was theirs?
- Did they have a nickname?
- How are you like your person who died?
- What else would you like to know about your special person?

ACTIVITIES TO DO AFTER WATCHING ONWARD

Here are some activities that families can do from home in order to help children talk about their wishes and feelings, create memories, and continue the relationship with their special person.

- If I Could Tell You Letters
- Memory Boxes
- Giant Chain
- Feelings Face Paper Plate
- Memory Lane

