

# The Power of Play:

## Using Games and Activities to Help Grieving Children



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### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Marianne Esolen has worked in a wide variety of environments with children and families for over twenty years. She has served as a Camp Counselor, Youth Program Director, Career Coach, Crisis Counselor, Oncology Camp Director, Education Specialist, Trainer and Consultant working with United Way, FECS, American Cancer Society, Camp Happy Times, Camp Hope, Camp Comfort Zone, CASA, Tuesday's Children, & New York State Education Department. In the consulting arena, she has provided technical assistance and customized trainings for camps, schools and agencies in many areas including: leadership, stress management, crisis response, resiliency, peer leadership, parenting, and community-building. As a licensed social worker, Marianne maintains a private practice in Huntington, NY where she works individually with young children, teens, and adults. She specializes in work with issues of grief, chronic illness, and managing life transitions. Above all else, Marianne believes first and foremost in fostering resiliency and promise in people & programs. Dedicated always to learning and teaching best practices, she believes that all that is RIGHT within every person will always be more powerful than any of the challenges they face.

"Do all the good you can  
By all the means you can  
In all the ways you can  
In all the ways you can  
In all the places you can  
At all the times you can  
To all the people you can  
As long as ever you can."

John Wesley

# **My Grief Rights: Ten Healing Rights for Grieving Children**

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Someone you love has died. You are probably having many hurtful and scary thoughts and feelings right now. Together those thoughts and feelings are called *grief*, which is a normal (though really difficult) thing everyone goes through after someone they love has died. The following ten rights will help you understand your grief and eventually feel better about life again. Use the ideas that make sense to you. Post this list on your refrigerator or on your bedroom door or wall. Re-reading it often will help you stay on track as you move toward healing from your loss. You might also ask the grown-ups in your life to read this list so they will remember to help you in the best way they can.

- 1. I have the right to have my own unique feelings about the death.** I may feel mad, sad or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved. I may feel numb or sometimes not anything at all. No one will feel exactly like I do.
- 2. I have the right to talk about my grief whenever I feel like talking.** When I need to talk, I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. When I don't want to talk about it, that's OK, too.
- 3. I have the right to show my feelings of grief in my own way.** When they are hurting, some kids like to play so they'll feel better for awhile. I can play or laugh, too. I might also get mad and scream. This does not mean I am bad, it just means I have scary feelings that I need help with.
- 4. I have the right to need other people to help me with my grief, especially grown-ups who care about me.** Mostly I need them to pay attention to what I am feeling and saying and to love me no matter what.
- 5. I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems.** I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.
- 6. I have the right to have "griefbursts".** Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes—even long after the death. These feelings can be very strong and even scary. When this happens, I might feel afraid to be alone.
- 7. I have the right to use my beliefs about my god to help me deal with my feelings of grief.** Praying might make me feel better and somehow closer to the person who died.
- 8. I have the right to try to figure out why the person I loved died.** But it's OK if I don't find an answer. Why questions about life and death are the hardest questions in the world.
- 9. I have the right to think and talk about my memories of the person who died.** Sometimes those memories will be happy and sometimes they might be sad. Either way, these memories help me keep alive my love for the person who died.
- 10. I have the right to move toward and feel my grief and, over time, to heal.** I'll go on to live a happy life, but the life and death of the person who died will always be a part of me. I'll always miss this special person.

## Common Characteristics of Children's Grief:

- ✓ Children tend to grieve intermittently
- ✓ Children often act out feelings in play
- ✓ Children may seem overly concerned with daily life activities and routines
- ✓ Children may exhibit regressive behavior and separation anxiety
- ✓ Children may have trouble concentrating/difficulty with school work
- ✓ Children may act out or have problems with self-control
- ✓ Children may have reduced confidence
- ✓ Children may be uncomfortable around peers
- ✓ Children may feel secretly responsible

## REMINDERS OF THE DOS TO HELP GRIEVING CHILDREN

- Do know your own grief history and be aware of your own unfinished business
- Do remain PRESENT in child's life even if at times you don't know what to say, your presence is CRUCIAL regardless of whether the loss is discussed
- Do remain willing to talk about their grief and answer questions about your own beliefs and experiences - always BE TRUTHFUL
- Do share compassion, understanding, and unwavering support
- Do give kids permission to talk about it and create opportunities for them to share favorite memories, stories, and qualities of their loved one
- Do maintain normal routines as much as possible and let them know it's okay to still play, laugh, and go back to activities
- Do let the child be in charge of the pace and rhythm of their own grief journey - remember your role as COMPANION not counselor!

# Stress Management and Visualization Resources

## Helpful Websites

[www.stressmanagementtips.com](http://www.stressmanagementtips.com)

[www.stressfreekids.com](http://www.stressfreekids.com)

[www.kidsrelaxation.com](http://www.kidsrelaxation.com)

[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

[www.about.com](http://www.about.com) (special section on stress management)

Physical Relaxation Books for Children by Lori Lite [www.litebooks.net](http://www.litebooks.net)

Affirmation Weaver

Bubble Riding

A Boy and A Bear: The Children's Relaxation Book

The Angry Octopus

Sea Otter Cove

- When My Worries Get Too Big: A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety Kari Dunn Buron
- My Many Colored Days Dr. Seuss
- Fighting Invisible Tigers Earl Hipp
- Ready. . . Set. . . R.E.L.A.X Jeffrey S. Allen, M.Ed. and Roger J. Klein, Psy.D.
- The Joyful Child: A Sourcebook of Activities and Ideas for Releasing Children's Natural Joy Peggy Jenkins, Ph.D.

Audio Book/CDs

Indigo Dreams for Children

Indigo Dreams for Teens

Adventures Within CD

Wholesome Resources <http://relaxationstation.com>

Relax and Let Go Music CD

Brainwave Symphony [www.therelaxationcompany.com](http://www.therelaxationcompany.com)

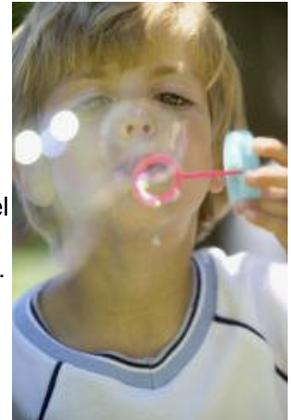
Jennifer Jazwierska has an Education Specialist Degree in school psychology and is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist. She is also a Certified Children's Meditation Facilitator and the creator of Adventures Within, LLC. Her vision is to teach and inspire children to use their inner creativity for establishing a strong mind/body connection. She lives with her family in Colorado. *You will find many, many wonderful games and ideas online at [www.kidsrelaxation.com](http://www.kidsrelaxation.com) to support wellness, stress management, and calm in children.*

## Worry Bubbles

This activity is designed to help children to let go of worry. It is a visual activity that combines thought and action to assist the child in letting go. The activity not only helps the child to visualize worries drifting away, but it also promotes deep breathing as they are blowing the bubbles. Deep breathing automatically sends a message to the body to relax and calm down.

**Explaining to kids:** Sometimes worry feels like little bubbles inside our mind. We can feel worry in our tummies, in our brains, or pretty much anywhere inside our bodies. This activity is designed to help us release worry bubbles so that we feel more calm and relaxed.

1. Find a bottle of bubbles.
2. Think about the worry that is bothering you and picture that you are blowing the worry into the bubble as you blow a bubble.
3. Picture the worry inside the bubble.
4. Watch it float away and pop, carrying the worry far, far from you.
5. Know that the worry has popped and is outside of you now, unable to bother you any more.
6. Keep blowing bubbles until you feel more calm and relaxed.



## Laughter Milkshake

Watch the giggles explode as you drink many laughter milkshakes. Explain to kids that you are going to mix your own laughter milkshake. Hold your pretend glass in your hand. Imagine that you are going to pour in as many funny thoughts as you can. Think of times when you were really laughing hysterically, the funniest times you have had. Put those thoughts into your milkshake. Shake it all around. Now drink it up and feel your body start to laugh. Allow the laugh to take over your body. Laugh and laugh some more. Drink three laughter milkshakes and watch everybody else as they drink theirs and begin to laugh too. Mix one up whenever you feel the need for some laugh relief.



## Laughing Meditation: Different Kinds of Laughter

This activity is perfect for stimulating laughter in kids. As we know, laughter is contagious. You only have to observe the merriment of others in order to begin to feel it yourself. Experiment with these different kinds of laughs to get the giggles rolling.

1. Laugh like a hyenna.
2. Laugh like Santa Clause.
3. Laugh your squeakiest laugh.
4. Laugh your snort laugh.
5. Laugh like you're stuck in a hole in the ground.
6. Laugh your best echo laugh.
7. Laugh your silliest laugh.
8. Laugh like your nose is plugged.
9. Laugh like you are tied to a tree and someone is tickling your toes with a feather.
10. Laugh like you're the jolly green giant.

## The Happy Paint Brush

When we are doing things that we like, we feel a state of joy. This visualization gets kids thinking about the things they like that are linked to feeling joyful and/or happy. This activity can be used any time, but might be helpful when kids are feeling bored, disconnected, or a little distracted.



1. Find a comfortable position. Relax your body.
2. Read the following script with your child or [listen to the MP3](#) online:

Imagine a blue, blue sky above you. Notice the cool air. Breathe some cool air into your lungs. Pay attention to how the air feels as it touches the back of your throat and inflates your lungs. Looking down, you see a happy paint brush at your feet. It is for painting your happiness. Pick it up. As you swirl it through the air you see wonderful colors flowing behind it. You are painting the sky! Watch the brush as you swirl and twirl it around. Chop the air with it. Splatter paint with it. See what colors flow behind it as you swish it this way and that way. Watch what pictures appear from your painting. Know that you can paint whatever you would like. Think about what your happy paint brush would paint. It is your happy paint brush and it will only paint happy thoughts that you think. When you watch your paintings appear, notice the feelings that come along for the ride. Focus on those feel "good" feelings and know that you can hold onto them and keep them with you as long as you would like, even for the whole day if you choose!

## Flower and Candle

This activity is great for any moment when a child needs to pause and take a deep breath to relax. It is centering and uses imagery to increase his/her ability to focus in the moment.

1. 1. Hold the left hand in a fist. Ask the child to imagine that it is a flower.
2. 2. Hold the right hand in a fist. Ask the child to imagine that it is a candle.
3. 3. Breathe in and pretend to sniff the flower in the left hand.
4. 4. Breathe out and blow out the candle.
5. Encourage the child to breathe deeply, to really smell the flower. Then tell them to make sure they really really blow the candle out.

### Discussion -

- What does your flower look like?
- Could you imagine smelling it?
- When might you use this tool?

## TIPS FOR REDUCING YOUR CHILD'S STRESS LEVEL

- ❑ Be watchful of changes in children's behavior
- ❑ Make expectations reasonable
- ❑ Put limits on extracurricular activities
- ❑ Encourage physical activity as outlet
- ❑ Encourage supportive relationships with extended family members, friends, & neighbors
- ❑ Talk with your child, find out what's happening in their life, and help them identify coping strategies
- ❑ Be mindful to NOT burden them with your fears, anxieties, and stresses
- ❑ Be generous with praise and encouragement, and also consistent with boundaries and limits
- ❑ Use humor during stressful times
- ❑ Set a good example - model positive coping techniques
- ❑ Spend quality family time together - dinner 3 times a week without t.v.!
- ❑ Promote PEER support opportunities - groups and camp activities