

# Hollywood Grapples With Grief

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With a wave of recent film releases featuring plotlines related to grief it is important that parents be well informed consumers. Current films including “Hugo,” “The Descendants”, “We Bought a Zoo” and “Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close” all feature stories about families that have experienced the death of one of the parents. This holiday season, many an unsuspecting grieving family ventured out to see a movie and was surprised to find that there was death related content in the most popular family fare.

Children and teens don’t have the ability to tolerate intense emotions as well as adults. A sudden, unforeseen reminder of death can be a trigger for both grieving children and adults, and may be followed by a strong emotional or behavioral reaction. The intensity of the grief reaction both parents and children experience can be mitigated by preparing children in advance if the choice is made to take them to a film with a death in the storyline.

Death and grief is a theme is one that has been featured in family oriented films as long as there has been a movie industry. Walt Disney studios, the primary purveyor of family fare, consistently distribute films with central characters that are grieving. A quick inventory of Disney films include early examples like “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Cinderella”, and “Bambi” followed later by “Lion King” and “Finding Nemo”. In all these examples there is a bereaved, surviving parent left to muddle through parenting on their own while they too are grieving. Grimm’s Fairy tales also feature dark, grief related story lines.

Since death is the last taboo in our modern society these stories offer the storyteller and the viewer the opportunity to emotionally grapple with the inevitability of death. These films also offer grieving families the opportunity to see that they aren’t the only families who have experienced a death. Adults get the chance to see how their “peers” cope with their own grief as well as their children’s grief. Unfortunately, and far too often, these grieving parents are portrayed as deeply flawed and different than non-bereaved parents such as June Cleaver, from “Leave it to Beaver”. One such example from television is Nancy Botwin of “Weeds”, the bereaved and deeply flawed parent who turns to the Marijuana industry to support her children after her husbands’ death. We have to dig far and deep to find an exemplary single parent besides Atticus Finch in “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

First and foremost these movies often contain a strong, positive message and can offer hope to a grieving family. They can see that the pain felt by film counterparts eases and reason that they too can go on to lead happy lives. Secondly, the films also provide a context for families to later discuss thoughts and feelings related to their own losses.

In addition, it behooves parents to be informed and prepare children so that they aren’t overwhelmed or shocked by the grief related content in popular films. Parents can follow these simple steps to avert a negative reaction and to encourage communication with their child.

1. First, if your child asks to see a particular family oriented film, investigate the plot on the internet through sites such as Netflix.com, IMDB.com and Rottentomatoes.com.
2. If the movie does include a death and grief prepare the children in advance. Start by saying:
3. “This movie is about a family after the mother (or other family member) has died. I hear it is really good and we can go if you want. Afterwards we can talk about the movie and the ways it is similar or different from our family.”
4. Check in with your child during the film to make sure that they are coping.
5. Be prepared that they may need a diversion during the film. The trip to the snack bar or restroom offers a chance to take a break from their grief.
6. After the movie ends determine if the child has any questions or concerns or would rather have some time alone before discussing the film. Children may need comfort and reassurance that their parent is there for them if they want to talk at another time.

For more information for parents of grieving children visit [www.OurHouse-Grief.org](http://www.OurHouse-Grief.org) where books including “Children Grieve too: a handbook for parents of grieving children” can be purchased.

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