

Memory & Legacy Activities for Grieving Children

Hands-on ways to remember and heal

Why Memory Activities Matter

Children who are grieving need tangible ways to process their loss. Research on legacy-building interventions shows that creating physical objects, writing, drawing, and participating in remembrance rituals helps children maintain a healthy continuing bond with the person who died — a bond that supports rather than hinders healing.^{1,2}

Continuing Bonds Theory, first articulated by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, proposes that bereaved individuals maintain emotional connections with deceased loved ones as part of healthy grief processing. For children, these connections are often made concrete through objects, rituals, and creative activities. A national survey of children's hospitals found that nearly all offered legacy-making activities to dying children and their families, with perceived benefits including tangible mementos, opportunities for self-expression, and coping support for both patients and family members.¹

A 2022 study in *Seminars in Oncology Nursing* found that legacy-building activities — including journals, drawings, handprints, and creative projects — provide emotional comfort for families following a child's death, and that nurses and other caregivers play an active role in encouraging these activities.²

Before You Begin

- Let the child choose which activities interest them — never force participation
- It's okay if the child cries, laughs, or feels nothing. All responses are normal
- Activities can be done once or repeated over weeks, months, or years
- An adult should be available nearby but does not need to direct the activity
- These activities complement — but do not replace — professional grief support when needed

Activity 1: Memory Box

Recommended ages: 4 and up (with adult help for younger children)

A memory box is a dedicated container where a child keeps items that remind them of the person who died. It creates a physical 'home' for memories — a place the child can return to whenever they need to feel close to their loved one. The charity Winston's Wish, which has worked with thousands of bereaved children, considers the memory box one of the most effective tools for helping young people stay connected to their memories.³

What You Need

- A sturdy box (shoebox, wooden craft box, or plastic container with lid)

- Decorating supplies: paint, markers, stickers, fabric, photos, glue
- Items to place inside (see list below)

How to Make It

Step 1: Choose a box together. Let the child pick the size and style — some children want something small and private; others want a large box they can keep adding to.

Step 2: Decorate the outside. Cover it with things the person liked — their favorite colors, images of their hobbies, photos, or words that remind the child of them.

Step 3: Fill it with treasures. There are no rules about what goes inside. The child decides what feels right.

What to Include

- Photos of the person, especially photos with the child
- A piece of the person's clothing (a scarf, tie, or handkerchief)
- Jewelry or a watch that belonged to them
- A written note or letter to the person
- Ticket stubs, programs, or souvenirs from shared experiences
- The person's favorite recipe, written by hand
- A small item from the funeral or memorial service
- A drawing of a favorite memory together
- A stone or shell from a meaningful place
- Anything else the child wants to keep

Activity 2: Letter Writing Prompts

Recommended ages: 7 and up (younger children can dictate to an adult)

Writing a letter to the person who died gives children a way to say things they didn't get to say, express feelings they're struggling with, or simply 'talk' to someone they miss. Research shows that writing about difficult experiences reduces depressive symptoms and supports emotional processing.¹

For Children Ages 7–10

- 'Dear _____, I want to tell you about my day today...'
- 'The thing I miss most about you is...'
- 'My favorite memory with you is when we...'
- 'If I could ask you one question, I would ask...'

- 'Something I want you to know is...'

For Preteens Ages 11–13

- 'I wish I had told you...'
- 'Something that happened since you died that I want to share with you...'
- 'The hardest part about you being gone is...'
- 'You taught me this about life...'
- 'When I think about you, I feel...'

For Teens Ages 14–18

- 'Here's what's changed since you left...'
- 'I'm angry about... and I need you to know...'
- 'The way your death changed me is...'
- 'I carry you with me by...'
- 'If I could have one more conversation with you, I would say...'
- 'What I want to do with my life because of knowing you...'

Note: Children can keep the letter, place it in their memory box, leave it at the gravesite, release it as part of a ceremony, or seal it in an envelope. There is no wrong choice.

Activity 3: Drawing Activities

Recommended ages: 3 and up

Drawing allows children who cannot yet write — or who struggle to express feelings in words — to externalize their inner experience. Art therapy research demonstrates that creative expression reduces stress hormones and provides a safe container for difficult emotions. No artistic skill is needed.

Drawing Prompts by Age

Age Group	Prompt
Ages 3–5	'Draw the person you miss.' 'Draw a time you were happy together.' 'Draw what makes you sad.' 'Draw your family.'
Ages 6–9	'Draw your favorite memory together.' 'Draw what you would do if you had one more day together.' 'Draw how your heart feels right now.' 'Draw a picture for them.'

Ages 10–13	'Draw before and after — your life before and after the loss.' 'Create a map of your grief — what it looks like inside you.' 'Draw a place where you feel closest to the person.' 'Design a memorial or tribute.'
Ages 14–18	'Create a visual journal page about how you're feeling today.' 'Make a collage of images that represent the person.' 'Illustrate a quote or song lyric that captures your grief.' 'Design a tattoo that honors their memory (on paper).'

Activity 4: Planting Ceremony

Recommended ages: 3 and up (with adult assistance)

Planting something living in memory of someone who has died gives children a concrete way to participate in the cycle of life. Caring for the plant over time becomes an ongoing act of remembrance — watching it grow can symbolize the child's own growth and healing.

Planning the Ceremony

Step 1: Choose what to plant. A tree, flower, or herb that had meaning to the person who died. If no specific plant comes to mind, let the child choose something that appeals to them.

Step 2: Select a location. The garden, a pot on the windowsill, a school courtyard (with permission), or a community garden. Consider a place the child can visit regularly.

Step 3: Gather family and friends. This can be as simple as two people or as large as an extended group. Let the child decide who they want present.

Step 4: Create a simple ritual. Before planting, invite each person to say one thing they remember about the person, or one wish for the plant as it grows. The child places the plant in the soil.

Step 5: Care for it together. Assign the child the role of primary caretaker (with adult backup). Watering, checking on growth, and seasonal care become ongoing connection points.

Optional: Place a letter, drawing, or small object in the soil before planting — a symbolic way to give something to the person.

Activity 5: Digital Legacy Ideas for Teens

Recommended ages: 12 and up

For teenagers who live much of their emotional life online, digital legacy activities can feel more natural and meaningful than traditional approaches. These activities leverage technology to create lasting tributes.²

- **Create a memorial playlist.** Compile songs that remind the teen of the person — songs they shared, songs the person loved, or songs that capture how the teen is feeling. Platforms like Spotify allow collaborative playlists that friends can add to.
- **Build a digital memory book.** Use a shared Google Doc, Canva design, or Instagram highlights folder to collect photos, stories, and memories from friends and family. This can be an ongoing project.
- **Record video messages.** Invite friends to record short videos sharing a favorite memory. Compile into a private video montage using free editing tools.
- **Write a blog or journal.** A private blog or notes app can serve as an ongoing space to write to the person. Some teens find that processing grief in writing helps when talking feels too hard.
- **Create a dedicated social media tribute.** A memorial post, a private group for close friends, or a dedicated account that preserves photos and stories.
- **Design digital art.** Use graphic design tools, digital drawing apps, or photo editing to create a visual tribute that can be printed, shared, or kept private.

Activity 6: Family Memory Night

Recommended ages: All ages (adapt activities to each child)

A Family Memory Night is a planned evening dedicated to remembering the person who died — together, as a family. It normalizes talking about the deceased, creates shared rituals, and ensures children know that remembering is welcome and healthy.

How to Plan a Family Memory Night

Set a date. The birthday of the person who died, the anniversary of their death, a holiday they loved, or any evening the family chooses. Some families make it monthly in the first year.

Create a comfortable atmosphere. Light a candle for the person. Put out their photo. Cook their favorite meal or order their favorite takeout. Play music they loved.

Choose activities. Some ideas:

- Go around the table and each share a favorite memory
- Look at photos together — let children ask questions about images they don't remember
- Read a favorite book or poem of the person's aloud
- Watch home videos together
- Each person writes something on a slip of paper to place in a memory jar
- Work on a family art project: a collage, a painted stone, or a scrapbook page
- For younger children: use puppets or stuffed animals to 'tell' the person about their week

Allow all feelings. Some nights will be warm and funny. Others will be sad. A child may not want to participate every time — that's okay. The invitation itself communicates that remembering is safe.

End with a ritual. Blow out the candle together, say something you're grateful for about the person, or choose a star to look at as 'theirs.' Repetition of a closing ritual creates continuity and comfort over time.

Tips for Success

- There is no right or wrong way to remember — let children lead when possible
- Laughter is welcome. Happy memories are healing memories
- If a child resists, do not pressure them. Try again another time
- Include the deceased's name in conversation naturally — children need to hear it
- Activities can evolve as children grow. What works at age 5 will be different at age 15
- Consider involving extended family, friends, or mentors when appropriate

Sources:

1. NHPCO — National Survey of Children's Hospitals on Legacy-Making Activities, *Journal of Palliative Medicine*: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3353751/>
2. Weaver, M.S. et al. — Providing Palliative and Hospice Care to Children, Adolescents and Young Adults, *Seminars in Oncology Nursing* (2021): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9683514/>
3. Winston's Wish — How to Use a Memory Box with Bereaved Children and Young People: <https://winstonswish.org/how-to-use-a-memory-box-with-bereaved-children-and-young-people/>
4. PMC 11104402 — Helping Children Cope with Loss: Legacy Interventions for Bereaved Students, *Continuity in Education* (2022): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11104402/>
5. PMC 12405643 — Memory-Making Interventions for Children, *Palliative Medicine* (2025): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12405643/>