

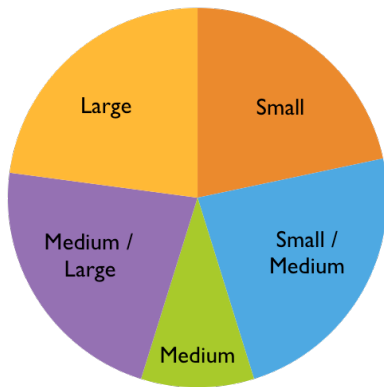


NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION



ASSOCIATION OF
CHILDREN'S
MUSEUMS

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Supporting Bereaved Children: Lessons from the Field

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In the US, one in 11 children will lose either a parent or a sibling by the time they turn 18 (Judi's House, 2025). Organizations across many sectors have created services and resources designed to help children work through the grief following bereavement. Through this work, community institutions are taking responsibility for matters related to death and dying.

Children's museums are increasingly becoming part of the movement to make bereavement care a collective responsibility. Through programs, exhibits, and events, they are creating new spaces for addressing loss, and normalizing the provision of grief-related care in community-based settings. With the support of the New York Life Foundation and the Association of Children's Museums, in November 2025, a cohort of ten children's museums hosted bereavement-related events and activities to honor grieving children. Known as "[Healing with Play](#)," the initiative coincided with Children's Grief Awareness Month, and sought to equip families with new tools, practices, and resources for dealing with loss. Through activities, workshops, performances, and the provision of informational materials, cohort members began integrating children's museums into emerging community-based bereavement support systems (Lichtenthal et al., 2024).

After hosting their events, Knology researchers conducted surveys and focus groups with museum staff, along with surveys of visiting families. This report shares key findings from our study, along with recommendations on how children's museums can confidently enter the bereavement space.

The evidence from our study suggests that children's museums are ideally situated to provide much-needed bereavement support and assistance to families in their communities. By leveraging their strengths as experts in playful learning and collaborating with others that specialize in grief-related care, children's museums can create fun, meaningful experiences that normalize discussions of loss and promote grief literacy. To achieve these goals, our study highlights the importance of taking an inclusive approach to bereavement, attending to local cultural practices around grief and loss, and obtaining support from community partners.

ACM TRENDS

#8.4

ACM Trends #8.4

Healing with Play Overview

Ten children's museums participated in Healing with Play. Most were new to the bereavement space. In the year leading up to their events, cohort members participated in monthly calls hosted by ACM. During these calls, museums familiarized themselves with bereavement-related resources, learned from bereavement experts, and collaborated on different aspects of the planning process.

In November, 2025, cohort members hosted special events focused on bereavement and loss. All events were held on a Saturday: some were all-day affairs, and others were held during specific times. Museums offered a wide variety of programs. Some did special storytime events, while others focused on craft-based activities, helping visitors make memory boxes, remembrance portraits, calming jars, and butterflies with special messages for loved ones. Some led children through grief-themed missions and quests, and many set aside specific spaces for quiet reflection (including reading corners and family break rooms). With the help of New York Life Foundation volunteers and local partners, each museum also offered a variety of grief-related resources to visitors.

Regardless of how they structured their events, museums reported that these were well received. Staff described visitors as “really engaged” and “excited to be here,” and reported that families “absolutely loved” the activities and “had tons of fun” completing them. “It was such a good turnout,” one museum said, adding that “many families were educated on a topic they had not

known much about before.” Even though this might have been an “unexpected” type of event, another museum said, “it still ended up being something that was really helpful and resourceful—a great event.”

Visitors also had a positive view of the events. As the table below demonstrates, caregivers strongly agreed that the events offered a safe place to experience emotions related to loss, that the information they acquired would enable further conversations at home, and that these events normalized discussions of loss. On a scale of 0-100 (with 100 indicating full agreement), mean scores across these topics ranged from 86.4 to 91.82.

Table 1. Summary Scores from Visitor Questionnaire

Question	Text	Mean Score
1	The museum environment provided a safe place for my child to experience emotions related to loss	91.82
2	The museum offered helpful resources for how we could continue to talk about loss at home.	86.4
3	The museum successfully created an atmosphere that helped normalize the difficult topic of loss.	89.89

Impacts

One thing that made these events so successful was the fact that they helped normalize discussions of death and dying. The act of spending time together inspired “many thoughtful conversations” around bereavement, and many families said they were grateful to have “the space to think about and honor somebody” they had lost. Staff were often surprised at how the activities spontaneously prompted children to “just kind of open up” about their experiences. “It didn’t take a ton of facilitating from our staff to bring those emotions out,” one staff member said, explaining how conversation “opened up naturally through play.” The

ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children's Museums (ACM) is the world's foremost professional member service organization for the children's museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children's museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

same was true for adults too. At one museum, staff observed caregivers talking about subjects that are “**not necessarily discussed**” in public places—including youth suicide rates. Museums also shared instances of caregivers opening up to children, noting that the activities “**sparked conversations about their memories.**”

Museums also felt that their events **helped build grief literacy**. Children learned that play is a highly productive way to work through grief, while caregivers learned that having a bereavement conversation with children can be “**as simple as playing a game with them.**” Caregivers also welcomed the opportunity to deepen their awareness of effective strategies for coping with loss, and often left their events with multiple brochures, pamphlets, and other informational materials in hand. Upon seeing these resources, one museum said, visitors often heaved “**a sigh of relief,**” telling volunteers things like, “**I didn’t even know something like this existed.**” Museum staff also came away from these events with new knowledge and skills—including the recognition that “**children can’t stay in any emotion for a long period of time.**”

Next Steps and Lessons Learned

On account of their successes, all museums said they were looking forward to offering future bereavement-related programs and exhibits. Across sites, there was a consensus that events like these “**should be an ongoing activity**” within their spaces. Voicing a common sentiment, one said they came away from their event convinced that “**there’s definitely an opportunity for the museum to be a space for these more sensitive conversations**”—and to “**provide resources and information on how to handle grief in your own family.**” Many said they had already begun brainstorming ways to integrate themes of grief and loss into regular programming.

With that goal in mind, museums shared a number of lessons learned that can benefit the field’s engagement with bereavement more broadly. In keeping with a key theme in previous Trends reports (see especially Bowen, 2025), many highlighted the importance of **taking an inclusive approach to bereavement**. By

incorporating various types of loss into their events, museums were able to create activities that applied to many different situations and circumstances. Related to this, the message that “**it’s okay to express yourself**” whether feeling “**happy, sad, excited, or something else**” resonated with visitors, creating an environment where families felt comfortable talking about their emotions “**regardless of the reasons behind them.**”

A second key lesson from these events pertains to the value of **incorporating local cultural traditions around grief and loss** into programs. Drawing upon these traditions helped museums create activities that felt similar to something participants were “**already a little used to doing**” in their day-to-day lives. As an example of this, a museum that did an ofrenda activity noted that the experience was “**not necessarily new**” to visitors, adding that their existing cultural practices around bereavement had already exposed them to “**the concept of letting somebody go and remembering the good things about the person.**” By increasing feelings of comfort and empowering participants to “**just be vulnerable,**” drawing upon local traditions can help make bereavement-related events and programs successful.

Along with that, participating museums agreed that **getting support from community partners** is critical. In addition to support received from ACM and the New York Life Foundation, they said that working with local bereavement centers and related organizations was essential. Given that children’s museum professionals are “**not the experts in going in and talking to people about grief,**” one museum shared, “**partnering with people who do this work every day is super important.**” Whether it be assisting with promotional efforts, doing grief training with staff, or playing a direct role in planning and facilitating programs, partners made invaluable contributions to museums’ events.

Key Takeaways

Many people struggle to locate information and services for coping with loss—particularly in connection with children’s grieving processes. As trusted organizations with a record of excellence in helping families and communities in times of need, children’s museums are effectively positioned to fill gaps in existing grief care infrastructures. Our interviews with members of the Healing with Play cohort indicate that there are a range of effective programs children’s museums can implement to equip families with new tools, practices, and resources for dealing with loss—and that these can be shared through enjoyable activities that align with the field’s goal of providing children with opportunities for playful learning.

To provide effective care and support to grieving families, children’s museums need neither bereavement expertise nor prior experience dealing with sensitive topics like death and dying. By harnessing the therapeutic powers of play and collaborating with local bereavement centers and grief care providers, children’s museums can create fun, meaningful experiences that normalize discussions of loss and promote grief literacy. Members of the Healing with Play cohort found that these conversations emerged naturally and spontaneously without any prodding on their part, and that families were grateful to have an opportunity to honor someone they had lost. Caregivers and children alike learned that games and other fun activities can help spark these conversations, and that play is an incredibly important part of how young people process grief.

The fact that visitors universally appreciated these events indicates that communities across the country will eagerly welcome opportunities to acquire new tools for dealing with loss (whether current or future) at children’s museums. To provide these tools, our study points to

three best practices: (1) **taking an inclusive approach to bereavement**; (2) **attending to local cultural practices around grief and loss**; (3) **getting support from local bereavement experts**.

Working with these practices in mind, children’s museums can perform a much-needed community service: ensuring that no child grieves alone, and that all families have access to resources for facilitating healthy grieving processes and positive grief outcomes.

About This Research

Research for this report was supported by the New York Life Foundation, and was conducted via surveys of museum visitors and interviews with executive leadership at the 10 children’s museums comprising the Healing with Play cohort.

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Started in 1962, the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. With more than 460 members in 50 states and 19 countries, we leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination.

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