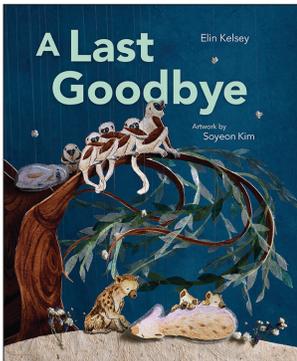


# A Last Goodbye



A Guide for Teachers: Grades K–4

Guide by Dr. Vicky Timmermanis, school and clinical child psychologist,  
and Dr. Nina Vitopoulos, clinical psychologist



Book written by Elin Kelsey  
and illustrated by Soyeon Kim

## About the Book

How do we say goodbye to a loved one after they die? This book broaches a difficult topic in a heartfelt way by exploring the beauty in how animals mourn. From elephants to whales, parrots to bonobos, and lemurs to humans, we all have rituals to commemorate our loved ones and to lift each other up in difficult times. New from the award-winning team behind *You Are Stardust*, *Wild Ideas* and *You Are Never Alone*, this book gently recognizes death as a natural part of life for humans and all animals. Written in spare, poetic language and illustrated with stunning dioramas, it ends on a hopeful note, showing how we live on both in memories and on the planet, our bodies nourishing new life in the Earth and the oceans.

## About This Guide

The discussion topics in this guide are written to allow for broad conversation of loss and grief with all students. Loss can refer to the death of a loved one, as depicted in the book; yet we all experience many different kinds of change and loss throughout life. Examples of loss can include moving to a new home, leaving your classroom at the end of the year or a friend moving away. The discussions in this book are meant to foster social-emotional learning, including skills such as identifying emotions, coping with emotions, and empathy.

Some parts of the guide are also appropriate for situations in which a student in your class has experienced a loss. When talking about loss, it is important to remember that you may or may not know which students have experienced it. Even when you are having a general discussion, consider that one or more of your students might have experienced a loss recently or in the past. For this reason, be sensitive when talking about loss and notice how your students are reacting. If there is a child who appears upset after reading the book, you might want to check in with them individually or seek support from your school guidance counsellor or support personnel (e.g., social worker, psychologist, child and youth worker, etc.)

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### CURRICULUM LINKS:

Language Arts: Skills and Strategies  
Science: Life Science; Animals;  
Environment; Biology; Life Systems

### READING LEVELS:

Grade: 2–5  
Fountas & Pinnell: O  
Lexile® Measure: 610L  
Common Core: RL, L, RF, SL, W

### NEXT GENERATION SCIENCE STANDARDS:

3-LS1, 3-LS2, 3-LS3, 3-LS4



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## Discussion Topics for Students:

### Section One: What is Loss?

**Question 1:** Sometimes we experience the loss of things we love; these can be places, objects, pets or people. We are often sad about these losses because we really loved something or someone. Feeling sad about loss is also feeling love. What are some examples of losses people experience?

**AIM:** To help students define loss and the various forms it can take. Loss is a part of all of our lives and this discussion can assist in recognizing that everyone has these experiences.

#### Sample student responses:

- Moving to a new neighborhood or home
- Saying goodbye to your teacher and classroom at the end of the year
- Changing schools
- A friend moving away
- Misplacing a special toy or favorite object
- A pet dying
- A person you love dying

**Question 2:** When a loss happens, we can have a lot of different feelings. There are no right or wrong ways to feel. What are some of the feelings we might experience?

**AIM:** Students can experience different feelings in response to a variety of losses. These feelings are often called grief. During this discussion, help students realize that different people will experience different feelings as part of grief. It is important to know and convey that there is no right or wrong way to feel in response to loss. All emotions should be acknowledged and validated. This question helps students to notice the feelings associated with grief.

#### Sample student responses:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Worry
- Happiness (remembering a pet, person, place or thing we love)

**Activity:** Help students to recognize these feelings and to promote self-awareness by asking them to notice different sensations in their body. Provide students with a simple blank outline of the body and then ask them to:

- Choose a color that best represents their feeling
- Draw the sensations where they experience them on the body. For example, they could draw a butterfly if they feel discomfort in their tummy when worried. They could draw a frown if they feel tense or scrunched face muscles when angry.



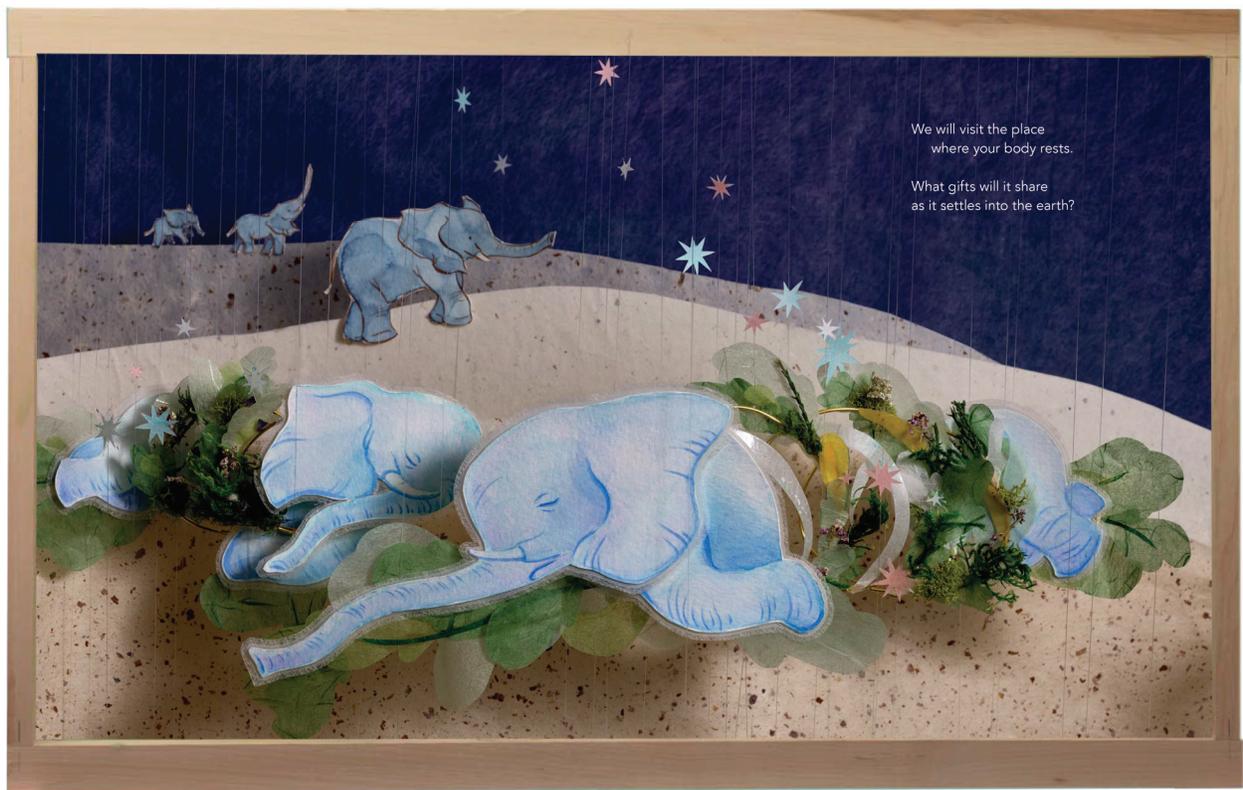
**Question 3:** When losses happen, we might express our feelings through our behavior in lots of different ways. In the book, what are some of the things the animals do after their loss?

**AIM:** To help students realize that people can have different reactions to loss and notice that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Note: This discussion is an extension of the previous question and it is more appropriate for older students (e.g., Grades 3-4).

**Examples from the book:**

- Cry out in sorrow
- Family and friends will gather (some will travel long distances)
- Place wreaths
- Visit the place where your body rests
- Miss you forever
- Think of you and feel joy
- Remember you in places you napped
- Wish I could play with you

Help students realize that there are lots of different things that we might do after loss. For example, some of us want to talk to our friends about it and some of us don't. Some people want to take time to be at home with our family and some of us want to go back to school. There are no "right" or "wrong" ways to act after loss.



## Section Two: Care and Compassion

**Question 4:** Animal families show care and compassion in the book. Ask students to find some examples. Think of the ways animals and humans care for each other. What do they have in common?

**AIM:** To help students notice the universality of caring across the animal kingdom and notice that that the human and animal worlds are connected.

### Sample student responses:

- Elephants give hugs with their trunks and humans give hugs with their arms
- Whales help their friends swim, the way humans might help their friends walk if they are injured
- Apes tuck their loved ones in to bed and touch their hair, the way humans do
- Animals also have rituals for loss: some cry, some travel long distances to be together, some place wreaths or flowers and visit special places to remember their loved ones, just like humans do

**Question 5:** What are the ways that we can comfort a friend who is feeling upset (sad, worried, stressed, etc.)?

**AIM:** To help students identify strategies that they can use to support others who are distressed or upset. This fosters empathy and the ability to respond to others' emotions. These strategies can be used when someone they know has experienced a loss. They can also be used when a friend is upset, stressed, worried or sad for other reasons.

- Listening to them: Some kids like to talk about what they have gone through. This can be a good time to introduce active listening skills (e.g., staying focused, showing you are listening with your body language, not interrupting). Remember that some kids might not want to talk about it — and that's okay!
  - For older kids, you might introduce the idea of "validation" — that means acknowledging someone's feelings. For example, they might say, "That's tough" or "You love your dog! It's scary that he's sick."
- Spending time with them: This could include doing their favorite activity together (e.g., going to the park, playing a favorite game). Spending time with someone who is upset can make them feel better. Also, it can be helpful to take their mind off things for a little while.
- Comforting them: Different people like to be comforted in different ways. Some kids might like to be hugged or have an arm around their shoulder. Others might like someone to sit near them or to have more personal space.



**Question 6:** What are the ways that we can comfort ourselves when we are feeling upset (sad, worried, stressed, etc.)?

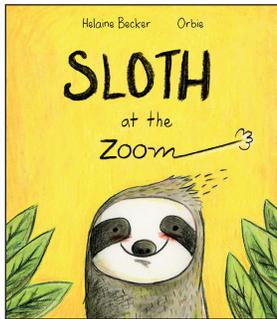
**AIM:** To help students identify strategies that they can use to help themselves feel better when they are experiencing negative emotions such as sadness, worry or anger. These emotion regulation techniques are sometimes called "coping strategies" or "self-care strategies."

- Do things that you enjoy doing (e.g., listening to music, art/drawing, playing piano, reading a book)
- Do something active (e.g., going outside, exercising, playing a sport, going for a walk)
- Spend time with friends and family (e.g., talking to someone about how you are feeling, hugging someone you love, playing with friends, snuggling with your pet)
- Think about something comforting (e.g., thinking about a happy memory, watching a funny video)
- Practice being thankful or grateful through a mindfulness gratitude exercise

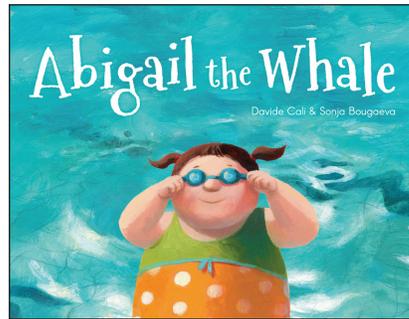
Ask students to take a minute to think of and name three things they are grateful for. This can be shared with the class, reflected on privately, or students can keep a gratitude journal. This can be done as a regular daily, weekly or monthly practice.

- Practice mindfulness and meditation: Mindfulness is noticing what are you experiencing in the present moment. It can help students learn to pay attention and to recognize what they are thinking and feeling. Common mindfulness practices include deep breathing, muscle relaxation, observing the world around you and visualization practices. For example, bubble breathing is a fun breathing practice where students are asked to blow bubbles (real or imagined) using slow and deep breaths. Ask students to notice the effect of this type of breathing on their bodies.
- For more information about mindfulness, try apps like:
  1. Calm
  2. Stop, Breathe, Think Kids
  3. Headspace for Kids

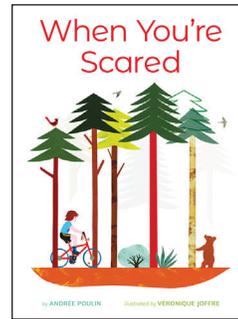
Or, explore these books:



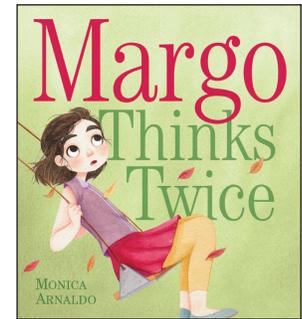
**Sloth at the Zoom**



**Abigail the Whale**



**When You're Scared**



**Margo Thinks Twice**

**Activity:** To create a visual reminder of all these strategies, your class can create a wall of coping techniques. Give each student one or two pieces of paper cut out as puzzle pieces and have them draw their favorite coping strategies. Then, put all the puzzle pieces on a wall and use this as a "go to" when students need a way to cope with strong feelings.

**Question 7:** In the book, the animals felt happy remembering their loved ones and their loved ones' favorite places. Remembering happy times with a person, pet or place may help us feel a little better after loss. Remembering can help us to still feel close to who or what we lost. What are some ways we can remember the person, pet or place we have lost?

**AIM:** To help students notice that remembering positive moments and experiences can help soothe after loss.

**Sample student responses:**

- Take some time each day to think of a happy memory
- Tell your favorite stories and share your favorite memories with others
- Look at pictures of the person, pet, place or thing and make a photo album
- Create a memory box or book of important items to help you remember
- Visit favorite places that you went to with the person, pet or thing you are remembering
- Wear a special piece of clothing or jewelry that reminds you of the person, pet, place or thing
- Celebrate birthdays and special anniversaries
- Do the person's favorite activity to celebrate them
- Listen to the person's favorite song
- Prepare and eat the person's favorite meal
- Watch the person's favorite movie or TV show

One or more of these activities may be appropriate to complete as a class. These activities do not have to be exclusively used in response to a death-related loss. For example, making a memory page at the end of the year, as students are saying goodbye to their current class and moving on to the next, can be helpful to recognize loss and remember the good times experienced together.



**Question 8:** In nature, there is a constant cycle of life. For example, when a tree dies and falls in the forest, it provides homes for bugs and animals, as well as nutrients for many more plants to grow. The book has other examples of this cycle in nature. Which ones can you find? Are there other examples in nature you can think of?

**AIM:** To help students realize that loss is a part of a cycle of constant change and renewal. Students can be encouraged to notice how all parts of nature (i.e. plants, animals, seasons) are connected by this cycle. Note: This conversation is meant to encompass the life cycle in nature broadly; this might be a more difficult conversation for children trying to understand the recent death of a loved one or pet.

**Sample student responses:**

**From the book**

- Tiny roots take hold and trees grow in the rich soil the animals' bodies nourish
- Under sea creatures get nutrients from the whale's skeleton

**Other examples**

- Trees lose their leaves in the late fall, are bare in the winter and bud again in the spring
- Over the spring and summer flowers grow, bloom and drop their seeds. In the fall and winter they die as the weather gets cold. Their dropped seeds allow new flowers to grow the following year.
- Worms eat dead plants which become compost as they pass through the worms' bodies. The compost is nutrient rich and can be used to grow new plants.

## About the Writers

**Dr. Vicky Timmermanis** is a school and clinical child psychologist who has worked with children, adolescents and their families in hospitals, community mental health centers, schools and private practice settings. Currently, she works at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). As part of her work at the TDSB, Vicky collaborates with teachers and other professionals to develop and deliver lessons related to identifying and managing emotions, making friends and navigating social conflicts. She believes that ongoing education and discussions about topics related to social and emotional development are essential to enhancing the well-being of the “whole child.”

**Dr. Nina Vitopoulos** is a clinical psychologist who works with individuals of all ages (children, teens, adults and their families). Much of her research and clinical practice has focused on supporting young people and families who have experienced stressful and difficult life events including loss. Nina has also developed programs for support personnel working with young people who have experienced trauma. Nina believes that with the right support and strategies, individuals who have experienced these difficult circumstances can learn, grow and thrive.



### Further Resources:

Explore the concepts in the book with these videos:

- Interview with registered psychotherapist and childhood grief expert Andrea Warnick about how to use this book
- Interview with illustrator Soyeon Kim, designer Alisa Baldwin, and editorial director Karen Li about how the illustrations for this book were created

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## NOTES:

