

Healing Through Art: A School Based Grief Intervention
Handouts to accompany slide deck
Sue Ann Blach, LMFT, ATR-BC/sueann.blach@desertsands.us
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Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Cut the altar pattern

- This will fold into your altar.

2. Create portable altar

- Lay fabric flat.
- Place altar pattern on fabric.
- Trace with light colored marker or hold/pin and cut out altar shape.

3. Make Interior Pockets

- Cut a smaller rectangle
- Sew or glue it onto one inside panel (bottom and sides only).
- This becomes a pocket for small items.

4. Add a Flap or Cover (Optional)

- Add a small flap above the pocket if you want items extra secure.
- This can simply fold down or be stitched on one side.

5. Decorate Your Altar

- Use markers, stitching, or glued items to add:
 - Symbols
 - Words or affirmations
 - Names or dates
- Keep it meaningful but not bulky.

6. Add Closure

- Attach ribbon or string to the outer edges so you can tie it closed.
- Alternative: sew a loop + button, or use elastic.

7. Fold It Up

- Fold into thirds.
- Tie or secure it closed.

Inside your portable altar, you can place:

- A small photo
 - A written intention or prayer
 - Tiny natural items (leaf, stone)
 - Tokens connected to memory or healing
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Core Developmental Differences

Children (approx. ages 5–11)

- Think more concretely (literal understanding of memory, loss, symbols)
- May not fully grasp permanence of loss (especially younger children)
- Express emotions through play, art, and sensory experiences
- Need structure, safety, and permission to express feelings
- Shorter attention spans

Adolescents (approx. ages 12–18)

- Think more abstractly and symbolically
 - Exploring identity, meaning, and beliefs
 - May experience intense emotions but regulate unevenly
 - Sensitive to peer perception and judgment
 - Strong need for choice, voice, and privacy
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Facilitation Considerations

1. How You Introduce the Activity

Children

- Use simple, concrete language:
 - “This is a special place to keep things that remind you of someone or something important.”
- Normalize a wide range of uses (not just grief)
- Give clear examples

Adolescents

- Frame with meaning and autonomy:

- “This can represent memories, identity, beliefs, or things that ground you.”
- Avoid being overly directive
- Invite personal interpretation

2. Emotional Safety

Children

- May need help identifying feelings
- Watch for signs of overwhelm (withdrawal, silliness, behavior shifts)
- Offer grounding options:
 - “You can take a break anytime”
- Keep tone gentle and reassuring

Adolescents

- May mask emotions or disengage
- Respect privacy—don’t require sharing
- Acknowledge complexity:
 - “Some feelings might show up unexpectedly”

3. Choice & Autonomy

Children

- Provide limited, guided choices (to avoid overwhelm)
 - “Would you like to draw or use stickers?”
- Offer templates or partially pre-made structures

Adolescents

- Offer open-ended choices
- Encourage personalization and originality
- Avoid “one right way”

4. Symbolism & Meaning-Making

Children

- Focus on tangible items
 - Photos, drawings, small objects
- Help connect meaning:
 - “What does this remind you of?”

Adolescents

- Can engage in abstract symbolism
 - Colors, textures, metaphors
- Invite reflection:
 - “What does this represent for you?”

5. Group Dynamics

Children

- Benefit from shared experience
- May enjoy showing their altar
- Keep sharing structured and brief

Adolescents

- Peer awareness is high
- Offer:
 - Optional sharing
 - Small groups or journaling instead
- Avoid putting anyone “on the spot”

6. Time & Pacing

Children

- Shorter activity chunks (20–30 min)
- Build in movement or breaks

Adolescents

- Can engage longer, but may need processing time
- Allow quiet, independent work time

7. Cultural & Family Context

Both groups (important difference is how it’s explored):

- Be mindful of belief systems around memorialization
- With children: keep explanations simple and respectful
- With adolescents: invite discussion about beliefs, identity, and culture

Trauma-Informed Considerations (All Ages)





- Never assume the altar is about death—allow broad meaning
- Avoid forcing disclosure or storytelling






- Provide opt-out alternatives
- Be prepared for unexpected grief responses
- Have support available if strong emotions surface

Key takeaway: With younger children, we scaffold the experience—more structure, more concrete, more guided. With adolescents, we shift toward autonomy—more choice, more meaning-making, and more respect for privacy.”

Developmental Considerations for Portable Altar-Making



Children vs. Adolescents









| Area | Children (Ages 5–11) | Adolescents (Ages 12–18) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Cognitive Development | Concrete thinkers; understand through tangible items | Abstract thinkers; explore symbolism and deeper meaning |
|  Introduction of Activity | Simple, clear language; give examples | Open-ended framing; invite interpretation and personal meaning |
|  Emotional Expression | Express through play and art; need help naming feelings | May mask or intensify emotions; value emotional privacy |
|  Emotional Safety | Require reassurance, structure, and visible support | Need psychological safety without pressure to share |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Choice & Autonomy | Limited, guided choices; benefit from templates | High autonomy; encourage individuality and creativity |
|  Meaning-Making | Focus on concrete items (photos, drawings, objects) | Engage in symbolic meaning (colors, textures, metaphors) |
|  Group Dynamics | Enjoy sharing; benefit from structured participation | Sensitive to peers; prefer optional sharing or private reflection |
|  Pacing & Attention | Shorter time blocks; may need breaks or movement | Can sustain longer focus; benefit from quiet work time |
|  Cultural Awareness | Introduce simply and respectfully | Invite exploration of identity, beliefs, and cultural meaning |

Art-Making Considerations for Portable Altar Projects

Children vs. Adolescents

| Area | Children (Ages 5–11) | Adolescents (Ages 12–18) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Fine Motor Skills | Developing; may struggle with precise cutting, folding, and small details | More refined; capable of detailed work and intricate design |
|  Cutting Skills | Need pre-cut materials or simple shapes; may require assistance | Can cut independently; may enjoy customizing shapes and layouts |

| Area | Children (Ages 5–11) | Adolescents (Ages 12–18) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Assembly Skills | Benefit from simple construction (fold, glue, stick) | Can handle multi-step assembly (layering, stitching, complex folding) |
|  Preparation Needs | High prep: pre-cut fabric, pre-measured sections, partially assembled bases | Moderate prep: provide materials, but allow self-directed construction |
|  Material Selection | Fewer choices to prevent overwhelm; sturdy, easy-to-use materials (felt, thick paper, glue sticks) | Wider variety: fabrics, textures, mixed media, tools (needle/thread, embellishments) |
|  Images & Visuals | Provide simple, relatable images or allow drawing; avoid overload | Offer pre-printed images, magazines, symbolic visuals for collage and meaning-making |
|  Instruction Style | Step-by-step, modeled visually (“watch me, then try”) | Brief instruction; encourage experimentation and independence |
|  Pacing | Slower pace; allow extra time for each step | Flexible pacing; some may work quickly, others more intentionally |
|  Complexity of Design | Keep designs simple and achievable to prevent frustration | Encourage layered, personalized, and more complex designs |
|  Frustration Tolerance | Lower; build in success quickly to maintain engagement | Higher, but may disengage if activity feels too “young” or restrictive |

Facilitation Tips

- For Children:
 - Pre-cut fabric into altar shapes (tri-fold or bi-fold)
 - Use glue instead of sewing
 - Limit materials on the table at one time
 - Offer samples they can replicate
- For Adolescents:
 - Provide image banks, magazines, and symbolic materials
 - Offer optional advanced tools (needle/thread, layering materials)
 - Avoid over-directing—support creative ownership
 - Allow for different levels of complexity and styles

Key takeaway: “For children, success comes from preparation and simplicity. For adolescents, engagement comes from choice, variety, and creative freedom.”