

2026 DEC SFQC Infant/Toddler Conference

B2 Neely

On an otherwise typical Tuesday morning with her group of 4- and 5-year-olds, Angelina is joining several children in free play on the carpet and keeping an eye on the door for additional arrivals. Angelina hears Neely approach a few moments before she sees her. She hears crying, but, as most caregivers know, there are different types of cries, and this one is a sharp, anguished, frenzied cry that Angelina has never heard from Neely before. The crying intensifies as the door cracks open, and Neely's dad gently nudges her into the room. As Angelina approaches the family, Neely's dad looks at Angelina with wide eyes, clearly distraught himself. He doesn't fully enter the room but quietly says, "Our dog Duke was hit and killed by a car in front of our house this morning. Neely saw it happen and she's upset. Let me know if she needs anything today." He slips out the door and is gone. Noticing his absence, Neely scrambles toward the door. Angelina steps in front of her and offers a hug.

Usually a confident 4-year-old who jumps right into her morning with peers and active play, Neely instantly falls into Angelina's arms, alternating between crying and screaming, her body rigid and jerky at times, and limp at others. After about ten minutes, the assistant teacher arrives and inquires as to what is happening. Angelina tries to explain but begins to feel overwhelmed herself, barely able to get the words out and starting to cry. Angelina snuggles Neely in a bit more and takes some deep breaths as she rubs her back.

The other children, understanding that something big is happening, had given Neely and Angelina some space but now begin asking questions: "Is Neely okay? Why is she crying? Is Neely hurt?" Angelina's deep breaths have helped, and she is able to say that Neely was feeling very sad and noted that hugs sometimes help when you are sad. Angelina quietly asks Neely if she wants the other children to know what happened. Neely shakes her head "no" fiercely. Angelina lets the children know that Neely isn't ready to share, then engages them in a conversation about things that they need when they are sad. As the children share, Neely's crying slows and quiets a bit, and she appears to be listening. A child asks if Angelina can read a book to Neely, so Angelina suggests Neely's all-time favorite, a book about the eruption of Mount St. Helens. Still snuggled into Angelina's lap, Neely peeks at the book from time to time, with red eyes and a swollen face, looking exhausted.

As free play comes to an end, the assistant teacher offers to trade places with Angelina so that she can lead the transition to music class outside. Being passed from grown-up to grown-up is not the experience with deep, painful grief that Angelina wants for Neely, so she asks the assistant to lead the transition to

music/outside so that Angelina can stay with Neely. As the cleanup and lineup process unfolds, she gently asks Neely if she wants to go to music, and she nods her head. They walk outside together and sit together during music; Neely listens and watches but otherwise doesn't participate. After music, the group heads back inside for their morning meeting.

Angelina once again asks Neely if she wants to let the other children know what happened, noting that they look concerned and worried. This time she says, "Okay," and indicates that she wants Angelina to tell them. Angelina tells the group about Neely's dog, wondering out loud if it made Neely feel sad, surprised, afraid, or worried. The other children chime in about things that made them sad or frightened, and they also note their experiences with loss. Marie, whose father died two years before, tells Neely, "Maybe my dad will take care of your dog." They wrap up their morning meeting and move on to snack. For the first time that morning, Neely ventures away from Angelina's lap to wash her hands. Throughout the rest of the morning Neely gradually, visibly relaxes and is engaging with her peers in her usual way by midday.

Angelina and Neely talk about Neely's loss again from time to time across the next few weeks and months, especially when she spontaneously shares with peers about the loss of her beloved Duke, and together they remember the intensity of that grief.