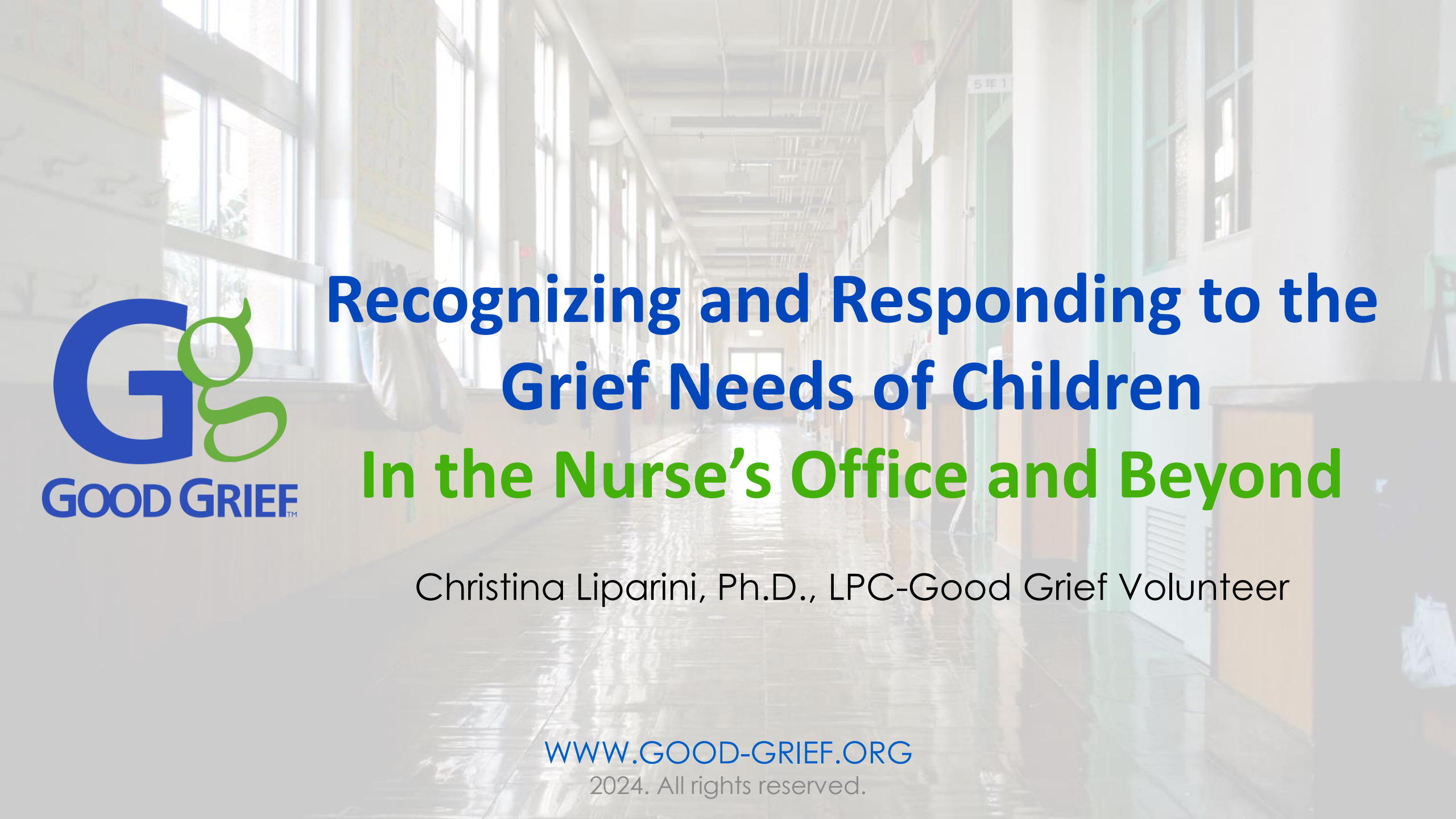

Recognizing and Responding to the Grief Needs of Children

In the Nurse's Office and Beyond

Christina Liparini, Ph.D., LPC-Good Grief Volunteer

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Good Grief's Mission

Good Grief builds resilience in children, strengthens families, and empowers communities to grow from loss and adversity.

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Our Work

- Family Support Services
  - Nights of Support
- Good Grief Schools
- Good Grief Spring Institute
- Professional Development & Training
- Parent & Caregiver Education
- Community Webinars

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Who am I?

My name is Chris Liparini and my pronouns are she/her. I have been involved with Good Grief since 2021, and I have been working in mental health since 2001.

Some other things to know about me:

- Mother of two
- Jersey born, raised, and educated
- Professor and Director at Saint Elizabeth University
- Thrifter and bargain shopper
- Former frequent visitor to school nurse's office

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TODAY'S TOPICS

- Explore the multidimensional nature of the grief experience and expand our definition of loss.
- Understanding what grief looks like in children based on developmental level.
- Name the skills and strategies you already have in your toolbox to support grieving children.

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Defining Grief

- Many still think grief is a **series of stages** that you need to go through to find "*acceptance*" or "*healing*" or "*closure*" and to **move on** with your life.
- Grief is a multifaceted response to loss.
- Grief is a compilation of emotions, but it is more…
  - An emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical response
- Natural, healthy coping response – not pathology.
- Grief is nonlinear.
- Grief is universal.

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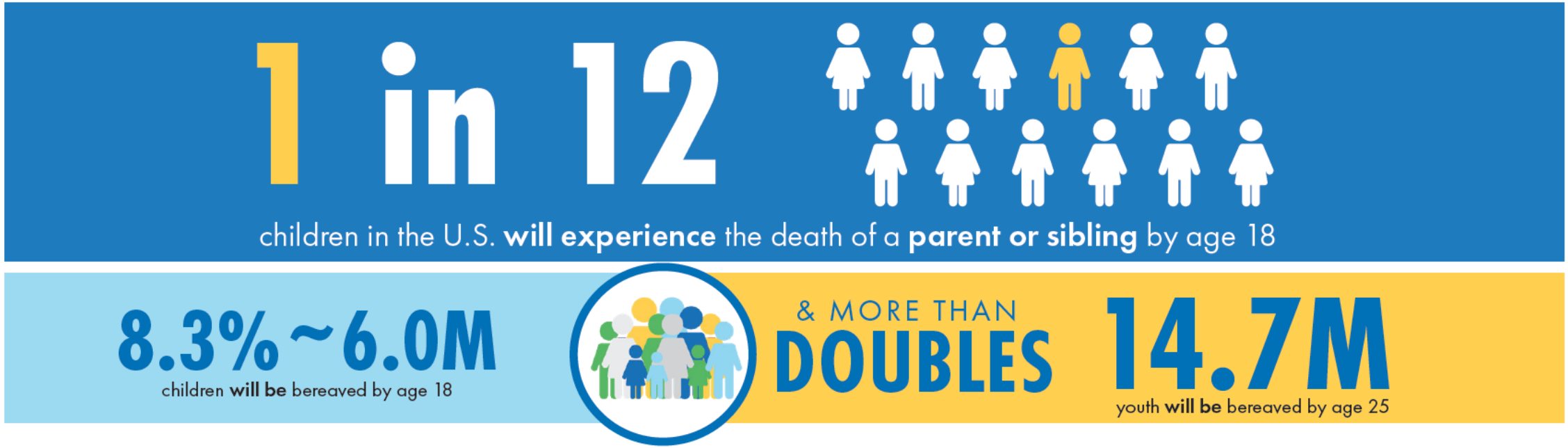
Childhood Bereavement in The US



Source: Judi's House JAG Institute https://www.judishouse.org/cbem

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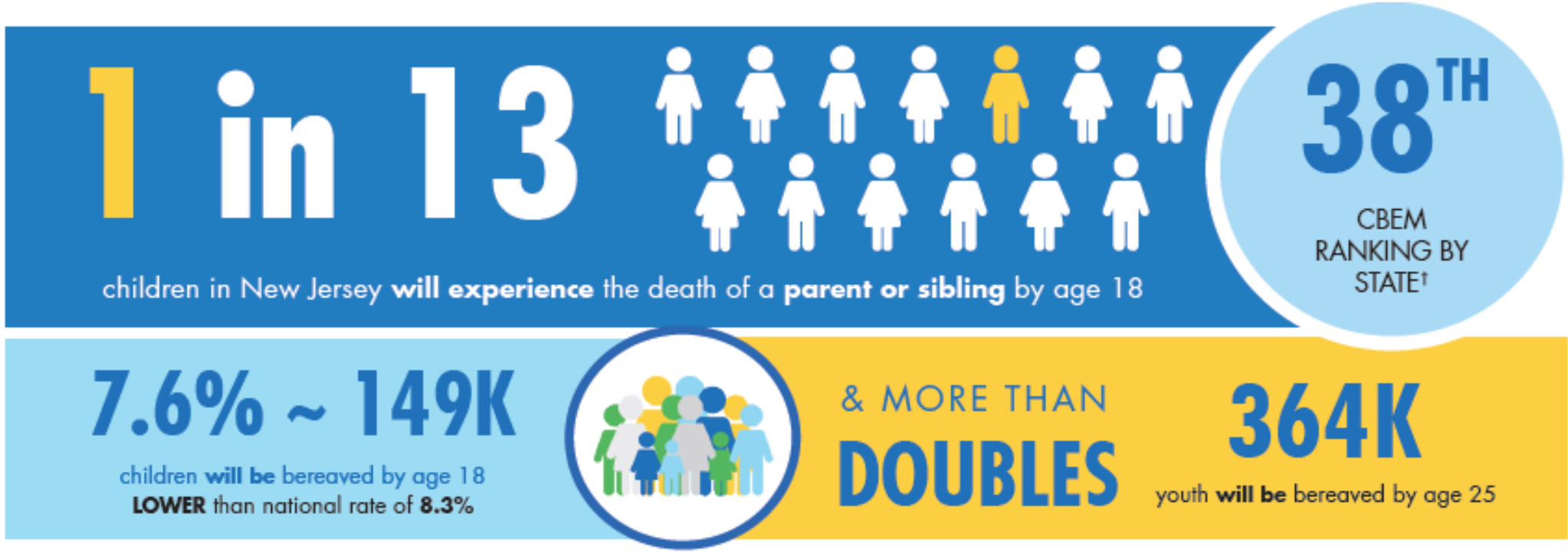
Childhood Bereavement in New Jersey



Source: Judi's House JAG Institute https://www.judishouse.org/cbem

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Grief in Children and Adolescents

- Grief is a natural response to loss
  - Emotional, physical, spiritual, social, and more
- Loss can include death, divorce, family changes, and significant life events
- Grief manifests differently in children and adolescents
- Nurses play a crucial role in recognizing and supporting grieving students

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Repeat Visitors

"You might fake an illness at home, but here, only a fever makes her a believer."

Developmental Stages and Reactions

- Young Children (3-7 years): may not understand permanence of loss; regress in behavior
- School-Aged Children (7-12 years): understand death; may feel guilt; may need reassurance
- Adolescents (13-18 years): have more nuanced understanding of death; may struggle with intense emotions; risk of isolating

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Common Signs of Grief for Students

- Physical Symptoms: headaches, stomachaches, fatigue
  - May be concerned about their own health now
- Emotional Symptoms: sadness, anger, confusion, anxiety
- Behavioral Changes: withdrawal, clinginess, aggression, changes in academic performance
- Cognitive Changes: difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness

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Your Role: Immediate Support

- Provide a safe space for the student to talk, say nothing, rest, or a combination depending on the day
- Normalize the grieving process and validate emotions
- Provide choices whenever possible
- Recognize and address physical symptoms
  - Can include breathing exercises and mindfulness interventions
- Offer breaks or quiet time as needed

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Your Role: Ongoing Support

- Continue with emotional support and reassurance
- Collaborate with school community
- Educate student and family
- Seek your own support as needed!

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Communicating with Grieving Students

- DO
- use simple, clear language
- Listen without judgment
- Validate their feelings ("It's okay to feel sad, angry, or confused")

- AVOID
- Clichés like "everything happens for a reason."
- Minimizing the loss or trying to "fix" their grief

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When to Refer for More Support

- Persistent depression or withdrawal
- Risk-taking behaviors or talk of self-harm
- Inability to engage with daily life over time

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Good Grief Resource Pages

www.good-grief.org/resources

www.youtube.com/c/GoodGriefNJ/

education@good-grief.org

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Q&A Time!

What questions do you have?

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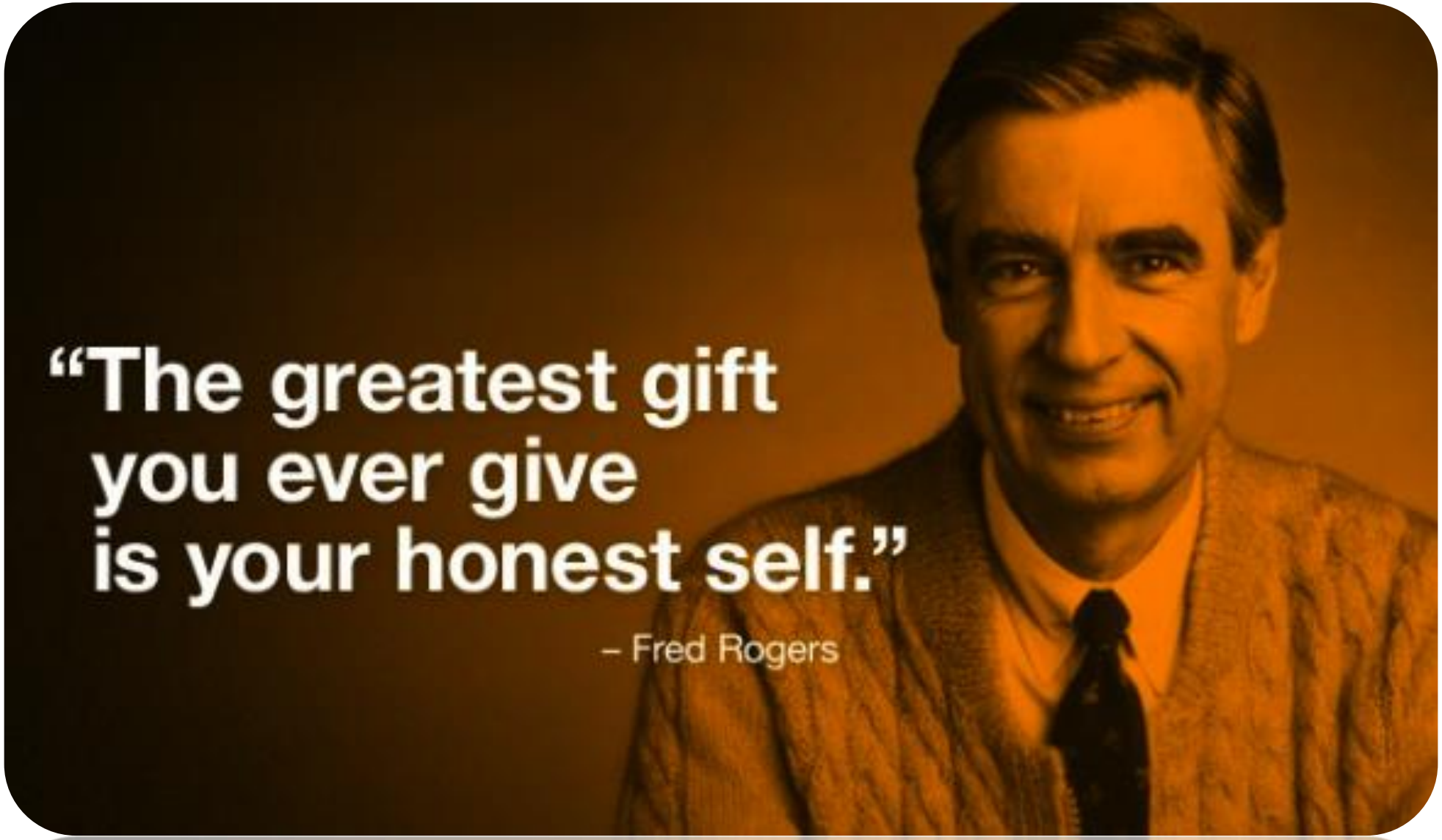
"The greatest gift
you ever give
is your honest self."
– Fred Rogers

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