

## 'Up' has its down moments; here's how to handle them

By Heidi Stevens | TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Death is not a new theme for Disney. The kids' entertainment giant has always dabbled in the darker side—injecting countless fantasies with a dose of realism, from “Bambi” to “Finding Nemo.”

But “Up,” somehow, feels different. Maybe because the death involves a person (albeit animated), rather than a talking animal. Maybe because the movie gives the viewer enough time to grow attached to the dying character. Or maybe because, taken as a whole, the movie tackles a number of grown-up themes (aging, loss of a baby, dreams deferred, to name a few).

“Up,” which is rated PG, handles such topics with subtlety and grace, but youngsters are still likely to walk out of the theater with questions. That, says clinical psychologist Margret Nickels, is a good thing.

“It’s an opportunity for parents to help a child put difficult situations and feelings into perspective,” says Nickels, director of the Center for Children and Families at Erikson Institute. “They learn that feelings can be talked about, they can be managed, they can be lived through.”

At the start of “Up,” we see Ellie, wife of the main character, Carl, growing old and being treated in a hospital. Soon after, Carl is shown sitting in a funeral home. If this prompts questions about whether Ellie died, or why people die, experts urge parents to answer honestly.

“Kids get freaked out about things like death when people avoid discussing them in a straightforward way,” says Brett Berk, early-childhood educator and author of “The Gay Uncle’s Guide to Parenting.”

“The big thing is to reassure them that people usually don’t die until they get very old or very sick, and to let them know that you and they aren’t going to die for a very long time.”

And Nickels says it’s wise to avoid euphemisms.

“It’s important to not use words that coat over the word ‘death,’ like ‘passing on’ or ‘going to sleep,’ because that will communicate that it’s not OK to ask a question about death, that it’s so terrible we can not even talk about it,” she says. “It’s also incredibly confusing. They start to think, ‘Oh, so the woman went to sleep and never came back. Do I need to worry about going to sleep? Or worry about my mom or baby brother going to sleep?’”

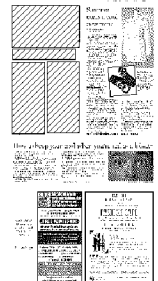
If the movie leaves you, the adult, a bit teary-eyed—it’s been widely reported to bring tears—don’t try to shield that from your child either.

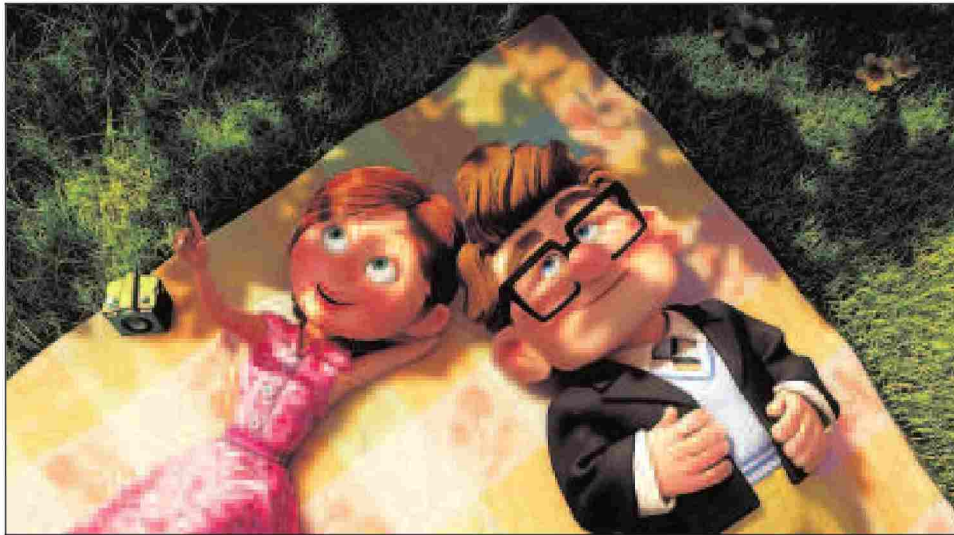
“Parents shouldn’t feel bad about showing that they have feelings,” says Nickels. “It helps a child understand that feelings are part of our life, and feelings are not anything to be scared of. Rather, they can be expressed.”

On the flip side, if your youngsters leave the movie imitating the talking dog and seemingly immune to “Up’s” darker side, don’t feel the need to counsel them about something you think they missed.

“Only answer questions the child asks,” Nickels says. “A child will tell you what they’re ready to take on. They may have made sense of it in their own mind, and that’s fine.”

*hstevens@tribune.com*





As Ellie and Carl grow older in the popular animated movie "Up," younger viewers might have questions about aging and death. Experts recommend giving straightforward answers.