During this time of year, many people are setting goals and thinking about hopes and wishes for the year. That may be very difficult for families impacted by serious illness or grief and may cause an added sense of loss when children are wishing for things that a parent cannot make happen.

One way to honor a child’s desire for a wish to come true is to grant the wish in fantasy.

At about 6 years of age, children begin to understand the difference between reality and fantasy. They often realize that a wish is unlikely or impossible but it can still be a helpful form of expression. For a child who is wondering if their parents’ cancer treatment is working, fantasy can help them cope with uncertainty and fear of the unknown. Speaking their thoughts out loud and having a parent validate their feeling (even if it is not possible to make it happen) helps validate their emotions even if they are not physically possible. It helps them understand what they are feeling and not be afraid to express it. For example a child who is wishing for their inoperable brain tumor to disappear, speaking it out and having a parent say, ‘I wish that too,’ validates the emotion even if it is not actually feasible. As adults we often focus our energy on teaching our children about reality instead of joining them in their fantasy. Wishing and speaking out what a child is hoping for allows a child to practice being aware of and saying what they want, which are both valuable skills.

Take time this year to join your child in fantasy. You may be surprised by the outlet it provides. In addition, your child will feel accepted and understood by you, and you will both likely enjoy the experience!