

Children & Grief

Nichole Stangel, MA, MS, LPC, NCC, CT
Bereavement Coordinator/CISM Coordinator
Children's Wisconsin

Deborah Monasterio, M.Ed.
Kyle's Korner
Executive Program Director
Grief Support Specialist

Understanding the Concept of Loss

Grief

- Is a result of loss
- Is natural
- Is expected
- Is a reaction that affects the entire human experience
 - Perceptions
 - Thoughts
 - Emotions
 - Behaviors
 - Relationships
 - Spirituality
- Purpose
 - To adjust to the loss so that we can live in the present
 - Constructive work
 - Can't not grieve and be healthy

Understanding the Concept of Loss

Children experience a variety of loss beyond the experience of death. Most of these losses are ambiguous. Ambiguous loss is experienced when there is grief mixed with confusion and the unknown. COVID-19 has created a lot of ambiguous losses.

- Examples of ambiguous loss:
 - Loss of relationships- parents, siblings, extended family, pets, friends
 - Loss of familiar places- school, neighborhood, favorite hiding place
 - Loss of times- bedtime rituals, holiday traditions, family birthdays
 - Loss of personal belongings- favorite toy/book/chair
 - Loss of family culture- daily routines, food, music, role in the family (an older sibling who played the role of another caregiver to a younger sibling living with special needs may feel loss of identity when the role is no longer needed)
- Other factors to consider:
 - Was it sudden?
 - Did the child have any preparation for the change/loss/move?
 - What messages did the child receive during the process?

How a Child Grieves

- Children will grieve differently than an adult, but they still experience the same grief work as an adult
- Children also grieve in doses or in cycles
- Children will grieve within the parameter and limitations of their developing abilities
 - A child may grieve again at different developmental stages
- A child may also grieve at major milestones in their lives or other trigger events

How a Child Grieves

Grief due to Death:

- A child's conception of death will also be influenced by their past experiences, cultural difference and exposure to multi-media
- A child has a mature understanding of death when he/she realizes the following:
 - Death is not temporary but permanent
 - Death is not magical or personified but a biological process
 - Death cannot be avoided or outsmarted which occurs to a selective few; it is universal

How a Child Grieves

Physical:

- Sleep disruptions
- Nausea
- Change in bowel and bladder patterns
- Changes in appetite
- Fatigue/hyperactivity
- Headaches
- Muscle weakness
- A feeling of emptiness in the abdomen
- Shortness of breath
- Increase in illness
- Stomachaches
- Pounding heart
- Tightness in throat

Cognitive:

- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Shock/disbelief
- Disorganization
- Confusion
- Low self-esteem
- Surreal
- Sensory perceptions erratic
- Self-destructive thoughts
- Difficulty with decisions
- Preoccupation
- Denial
- Paranoia
- Disbelief
- Incoherent thoughts

How a Child Grieves

Emotional:

- Sadness
- Longing
- Loneliness
- Sorrow
- Anguish
- Guilt
- Anger
- Frustration
- Hopelessness
- Fear
- Depression
- Helplessness
- Relief
- Shame/Embarrassment

Behavioral:

- Sleeplessness
- Crying
- Sightings/visions
- Clinging
- Regression/bed-wetting
- Loss of appetite/increase in appetite
- Nightmares
- Listlessness
- Over-activity
- Social withdrawal
- Extreme quietness
- Poor grades
- Absent-mindedness
- Excessive touching
- Verbal attacks
- Fighting

How a Child Grieves

Spiritual:

- Anger at God
- Question of "Why me?" or "Why now?"
- Questions about the meaning of life
- Confusion about where the person is who died
- Feelings of being alone in the universe
- Doubting or questioning previous beliefs
- Sense of meaninglessness about the future
- Change in values, questioning what is important

How a Child Grieves

The symptoms of ambiguous loss often mirror those of post-traumatic stress disorder. A child will commonly experience:

- difficulty with changes and transitions, even seemingly minor ones
- trouble making decisions
- psychic paralysis or the feeling of being overwhelmed when asked to make a choice
- problems coping with routine childhood or adolescent losses (last day of school, death of a pet, move to a new house, etc.)
- a sort of learned helplessness and hopelessness due to a sense that he/she has no control over his/her life
- depression and anxiety
- feelings of guilt

*<http://www.naacac.org/adoptalk/ambigloss.html>

Assisting the Child in their Loss

- Create an atmosphere where questions and emotions are allowed and welcomed
 - Use the "D" words: death, dying and dead
 - Talk about the person who has died
 - Let the child know that all emotions are normal and okay—it is okay to be sad, mad, glad, etc.
 - Answer all questions in an age-appropriate, open, honest and loving way
 - Don't leave out details about the situation to "protect" the child
 - Adults should be aware that they model emotions and how to grieve to the children
- Tell them what to expect when grieving, according to age and maturity
 - Explain that they may feel like crying a lot, or they may feel mad, etc.
 - They may not want to do things that they used to like doing, they may have a hard time concentrating at home and school, etc.
 - All of these feelings are normal and natural when grieving
- Explain about triggers and have a plan when the triggers occur—**Especially at school**

Assisting the Child in their Loss

- Create a caring relationship with the child
 - Respect the child's thoughts, feelings, wishes and expectations
 - Never say that what they are thinking or feeling is wrong or that they shouldn't think or feel that way, i.e. guilty over the death
 - Be sensitive to the perceptions and circumstances of the child
 - Be nonjudgmental of the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of the child
 - This does not mean that these behaviors are approved, just understood
 - Be aware of nonverbal behaviors and what they are saying to the child
 - Not making eye contact
- Assist the child in identifying a collaborative support network of people they trust
- Create a stable routine as much as possible

COVID-19

- Help the child to identify what he/she has lost
- Give voice to the ambiguity
- Give the child permission to grieve the loss without guilt

Assisting the Child in their Loss

- Give the child coping strategies
 - Having plans for when the grief is triggered
 - Find out what is the most beneficial way the child processes; everyone is different
 - Talking, writing, poetry, art, building, exercise, etc.
 - Find appropriate avenues for the child to express feelings in a healthy way
 - If angry and physically acting out, have the child exercise, participate in physical activities, or do breathing exercises
 - Have the child join a local peer support group for grieving children
- Advocate for the child in school, community, etc.
- Identify support people
- Self-care

Assisting the Child in their Loss

Common Mistakes: Words and Actions to Avoid

- Do not suggest that the child has grieved long enough
- Do not indicate that the child should get over it and move on
- Do not expect the child to be able to perform at normal activities or stay focused
- Do not act as if nothing has happened
- Do not say things like:
 - "It could have been worse, you still have....."
 - "I know how you feel."
 - "You'll be stronger because of this."
 - "I'm sorry." (*add what you are sorry for... "I'm sorry your friend died and you won't be able to talk to him anymore," "I'm sorry you are going through all this pain right now"*)
 - "He or she lived a full life."
 - "He or she wouldn't want you to feel this way."
 - "It was their time."
 - "He or she is in a better place."
 - "You're young enough to deal with it."
 - "You're the man of the house now" or anything suggesting that they are to take on a more mature role, a supporting role, or a care taker role.

Assisting the Child in their Loss

Practical examples of coping strategies:

- Create a scrapbook or special memories box
- Recordable stuffed animals or books
- Photo blankets, pillows, frames, other items
- Create a family art project (i.e., handprint tree)
- Create a goodbye or I miss you video
- Scream box
- Feelings pillow
- Tell stories, write a poem, journal
- Exercise, join a sport
- Mindfulness, breathing techniques
- Memorialization
- Etc.

Additional Resources

- Please see handouts with practical tips

Contact Information

Deb Monasterio
deb@kyleskorer.org
 414-777-1585

Nichole Stangel
nstangel@chw.org
 414-266-2995