



Helping a Child through Separation, Loss, and Grief

There are six categories of childhood loss:

- Relationship loss
- Loss of objects that give comfort – toys, blankets, clothing
- Loss of a secure, familiar environment
- Loss of self (ways of being and doing that define us uniquely)
- Loss of skills, abilities, and competencies
- Loss of familiar habits and routines

Children separated from their parents, no matter what age, face many types of losses. They have lost their parents and family, their clothes and bedding, their familiar smells, tastes and sounds, their daily routine, and more. Due to their self-centered view of the world, it is not uncommon for children to experience feelings of guilt over the separation because they may feel that they are somehow to blame. If only they had been better behaved...

Children Grieve Differently than Adults

Children often grieve in spurts because they can't seem to tolerate grief for long periods of time. They may seem to be doing well when suddenly an event unrelated to the loss triggers a disproportional response. For example, the child may fall and scrape a knee and say, "I wish my mom were here...this wouldn't have happened if she were here."

Children are masters at distracting themselves and focusing on other things, but when something happens, all the emotions they've been pushing away come back. Grief may resurface at key points in their lives such as when entering puberty, or at times of special events.

Children also grieve in different ways at different ages and stages of life. There may be a variety of emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear. Grief doesn't happen in neat stages, but is unique to the person grieving.

Common Reactions of Grieving Children

- Sadness
- Hyperactivity
- Changes in appetite
- Hoarding food
- Inappropriate emotional response
- Headaches
- Difficulty making decisions
- Clinginess
- Anger – towards parents or family members. The anger keeps away the pain of missing them.
- Regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, feelings of insecurity, overly dependent.
- When children feel overwhelmed by intense feelings they may make their world safe by distancing themselves physically/emotionally. This protects them against new loss.
- Some children refuse to talk about the past at all in order to avoid the feelings of loss.

The issues of loss, grief and trauma do not disappear once the children have adjusted to their new lives...grief issues are re-visited throughout their lives into adolescence and adulthood. Every time a child reaches a new stage of maturity they may have to talk about the loss again and find new perspectives.

The grief and loss children separated from their parents feel is deeply intertwined with the possible trauma and loss they experienced before the family breakdown. Some of the children suffered from abuse, neglect, lack of affection, and more all of which contribute to later issues of grief. For many of these children, transitions of all types are difficult (new caregiver, new teacher, etc.) due to their fear of abandonment.

Helping the Child Grieve and Grow

- Talk to the child about the grief and loss. You cannot go around the pain and loss, you must go through it. Often adults want to stop children from thinking sad thoughts, but it is actually very helpful for the child to express their grief. Help the child understand that their reactions are normal.
- Expressing grief is about feelings, not problem solving. Just be with the child; encourage the child to give their feelings a name. Your purpose is not to take away the sorrow, but to allow them to express it. It may take time for some children to open up. Listening may be all you need to do for a long time.
- As the child begins to face their grief, the feelings may become intense. You must be prepared to listen to these emotions. Praise the child for expressing their feelings. At the end of your discussion, ask the child to breathe deeply and do some visualization. Help the child to visually put the feelings in a box and put it on a shelf in their mind. During the week, when the feelings of grief surface, ask the child to put the feelings in their box in their mind and bring them out when they are ready to talk again.
- Observe the reaction the child is having to their loss and talk about it. For example if the child is withdrawing say, “Sometimes children have lost someone they loved and are afraid of losing someone again. So they refuse to talk to others. I can see how you might feel that this protects you from getting hurt again.” Don’t start giving advice...just listen and let the child talk.
- Read books to them about grief and loss and show how others have lived through it. Give them the chance to project their feelings onto the characters in the story.
- Suggest that they keep a journal where they draw or write about their feelings
- Help them express their feelings positively: physical activities, praying, crying
- Help the child learn to cry. Many were taught not to cry. Help them understand how healing crying is.
- Help the child create a timeline where their losses are included. Note dates when their family member died, when they moved into the home, etc.
- Create puppet shows, clay figures or animal skits where the theme is loss and grief.

Activities to Help with Grief

- Do a ritual in honor of the person lost. The ritual can be very simple such as scattering flower petals, lighting a candle, writing a poem, etc.
- Create a Memory Book or Box to gather good and bad memories. Have the child create the book with their parent or counselor over time. Provide a pretty journal or notebook and a special pen.
 - The purpose of the Memory Book is to get the child into the grief. You can begin to draw/write on some paper to get started.
 - Ask the child to visualize what they would like things to be like. You may start by saying something like “Tell me what you would do with your brother if you could be with him right now.” Then invite the child to draw it. Continue exploring the child’s wishes, inviting them to draw in their memory book.
 - You could help the child make a special card to say what he/she wishes they could say to the people who are gone. Or the child could write a letter to the family member and tell them the things they miss most.
 - In future discussions, continue to use the book and allow the child to grieve what was lost. (Good memories of how things were.) “What do you miss about...?” Ask the child to draw these memories.
 - Photos may be added if available.
 - Confidentiality is key. The book belongs to the child, and no one other than the child and anyone they wish to share it with should have access to the memory book.
- Help the child understand that grief is like a maze (Ages 6-9) – this activity is designed to illustrate that the process of moving through grief is not easy; it is normal to “hit walls” and sometimes “get stuck” in a feeling for a little while. Give the child a copy of the maze sheet (see next page) and ask them to find their way through the maze. Explain that getting through grief is a lot like moving a pencil through a maze. Sometimes we move forward. Sometimes we have to go around a wall. Sometimes we have to back up and start again. The important thing is that we keep moving toward the end of the maze.

