

## CHILDREN AND LOSS HANDOUT

Children experience loss just as adults do. Death, divorce, and moving are stressful to children due to the change and loss involved in these experiences. Also, the death or disappearance of a pet or a friend moving away can trigger all the emotions one experiences in a major loss situation. Social and economic changes within the family are also a type of loss.

No matter what kind of loss, there are certain common or natural feelings and reactions associated with loss. Some of these are sadness, guilt, anger, depression, anxiety, grief, and denial. These responses can be grouped into certain stages of loss. These stages of loss, along with certain emotional and behavioral responses, are given below. Of course, there is overlap among these stages and individuals may not experience all of these in the same way. Certain stages may recur or an individual may be in more than one stage at a time.

**DENIAL:** Reality is not accepted, and the individual builds a world in keeping with his or her desired world. Some typical responses in this first stage of grief are:

- ❖ doesn't want to discuss or think about the loss
- ❖ keeps busy, an achiever
- ❖ idealizes lost object
- ❖ feels afraid - "What will happen to me?"
- ❖ withdraws from friends
- ❖ does not appear to be sad or confused
- ❖ feels relief - "No more fighting." or "They'll work it out."

**ANGER:** Anger results when one perceives he or she is interfered with, injured, or threatened. During this stage the person may strike out, either overtly or covertly, at others in the environment. Some typical anger responses are:

- ❖ becomes sullen and withdrawn
- ❖ unreasonably blames others
- ❖ projects emotions for the lost person or object onto the teacher
- ❖ is irritable and has little patience
- ❖ difficulty in sleeping and wets the bed
- ❖ lowered self-concept

It is during this stage that children are often calling out for help, yet the very behaviors typical at this stage antagonize others and push them away. It may help, during this stage, to provide for physical activities for the child.

**BARGAINING:** Denial and anger do not alter reality, so perhaps bargaining will help reduce the pain. Responses during this stage include:

- ❖ causing trouble in school; or doing "A" work
- ❖ using guilt- "how could you do this to me?" or "you always pick on me," or "I do the best I can", and "it isn't good enough."
- ❖ being sick, which can progress from faking it to actual illness
- ❖ thinking and acting like "if I act bad or have problems in school... their concern over me will get them back together."
- ❖ crying or tantrum behavior

Note that not all children act the same, some may be overly concerned with performance, and others may act out.

**DEPRESSION:** Depression occurs as mourning and the grieving process begins. The person discovers one cannot control or impact upon the loss situation. Remember that depression may be masked by such overt behaviors as aggressiveness, stealing, cheating, or lying. During this stage, it is helpful to keep the child's routine as familiar as possible. This gives a sense of security. Typical responses during this stage are:

- ❖ feels isolated, sad, empty, and worthless
- ❖ regression to more immature behaviors, for example, thumb sucking
- ❖ frequent crying
- ❖ becomes passive, listless, silent, and withdrawn
- ❖ regrets past behaviors
- ❖ fears abandonment

**ACCEPTANCE:** Finally, the person accepts the loss, even though he or she may not like it. One is able to remember the lost person or object without feelings of anger or depression. Some responses in this stage are:

- ❖ begins to trust others again
- ❖ improved self-concept
- ❖ feels relief
- ❖ accepts self-responsibility

Although there are common stages, individuals will react to loss and express their emotions in their own unique way. Some of these reactions may interfere with school performance.

Teachers have two excellent advantages in helping children cope with a loss; a relationship with their students and less emotional involvement than family members may have. One way teachers can help children deal with loss is by allowing them to talk about it. If we are to help children, we must let them know it is okay to talk about it. Through talking we learn what children know and do not know, and if they have fears, worries, or incorrect ideas. It is helpful for children to have someone to listen to them and someone to give suggestions on how to cope with the loss.

When talking with children; be respectful of their thoughts and feelings no matter how extreme or different from your own. Children need to express themselves and will in their own unique way. Two factors seems to influence children's perception of loss; their developmental stage and their experiences. This includes their environment; ethnic, religious, cultural background; and their personal way of seeing things.

In helping children deal with loss, it sometimes helps to be immediate and practical. For example, following the separation or divorce of parents, a child may be very concerned about whom he or she will live with and will the rules remain the same. It is best to address the child's immediate concern and provide information and reassurance.

It is okay to say "I do not know" and/or "People have different beliefs, I believe..." Children need to be reassured they will still be loved and that the loss is not their fault. Children are sometimes angry about being alone or without the comfort of the lost person.

Sometimes the best way for children to cope is repetition. The same questions, fears, or stage of crisis may be expressed several times. Be ready to repeat the same conversation without belittling the child for asking the same questions.

It can be helpful to children to let them-know adults feel the same way when losing a person or object. Children could also benefit by being given something physical to do.

The classroom and relationship with the teacher provide an environment for students and teacher to share ideas on coping with stress, death, and loss of friendship before the crisis occurs. Classroom discussions are ideal in that they can help children develop the ability to cope and understand they are not the only ones affected by an event. Your school social worker, school psychologist or guidance counselor can help facilitate these discussions or provide materials for you to use. These professionals also facilitate groups for children who have experienced a certain kind of loss, for example, groups for children whose parents have divorced.

## **TRUTHFULLY ANSWER A CHILD'S QUESTIONS**

Questions in this sensitive area often tempt the adult to protect the child from unpleasant or disturbing answers. A child who is aware of inconsistent or incomplete answers by the adult may be more anxious about the ambivalence he is sensing than by the truth.

In answering a child's questions, try to be sure you understand the question. If, for example, a child asks, "What is it like to die?", you might rephrase the question to "What do you think it's like?" This gives the child a chance to state more clearly what he's thinking.

If the adult were emotionally distraught, it would be honest to say "I can't talk about it now, but we'll talk soon." Children are sensitive to feelings and can share in the grief rather than being turned away.

We do not protect children by shielding them from the realities of death. We only hinder their emotional growth.

## **ACKNOWLEDGE THE CHILD'S PERCEPTIONS OR REACTIONS TO DEATH**

Responding to the child's statements with "You shouldn't say/feel that" denies the child's feelings and stifles communication. It is important to acknowledge, not necessarily agree with a child's statements or feelings, no matter how strange that child's statement may be.

Children need to talk about the death. They need to be reassured that they did not cause the death by something they said or did.

## **AVOID CONFUSING OR FEAR-PRODUCING EXPLANATIONS**

Children need to know that death is not a punishment for bad behavior.

Equating death with sleep may be fear producing; it may cause the child to fear sleep.

Don't avoid questions, use hushed tones, or give lectures about death to children, which may be more than they are able to understand.

## **CHILD'S LEVEL OF COMPREHENSION OF DEATH AND DYING**

Under two years of age, children primarily are dependent on non-verbal communications.

**Ages 3 - 5:** These children tend to see death as akin to sleep or a journey from which one can awaken or return. For the young child there is no clear distinction between life and lifelessness. Death is seen as a temporary thing.

Very simple questions may be asked, and only very simple answers are required. For example, a child may ask, "What does dead mean?" The response may be "dead means not to be alive anymore like the daisies we picked and are all wilted now." Age or disease often explains death to this age child. "Grandpa died because he was old." "Billy died because he had a sickness that we don't know how to make better yet."

The most painful thing about death for a young child is that someone who used to be there for him is no longer there. This may leave the child feeling lonely, insecure, and deprived. These children must be reassured that there will always be someone to love them and take care of them.

Questions answered simply thoughtfully, and honestly will help to give the child a sense of security.

**Ages 5 - 10:** These children understand the reality of death, but they have difficulty imagining that they or their loved one will die. These children may feel anger about death, but will have difficulty speaking about it.

Because death becomes personal and real, the child may suffer guilt feelings if he has expressed anger toward a person whom later died. They may even think that their thoughts of anger could have caused the death. At the same time they may be angry with their loved one for having abandoned them. This anger and guilt need to be expressed, listened to, and accepted. They must also be reassured that the one who died loved them.

**Ages 10 - Teens:** These children realize the irreversible nature of death, are more curious about its biological aspects, and are aware of the social implications.

Children at this age may be troubled by thoughts of their own death. Some may feel more threatened than others and may even feel that death is a punishment for being bad.

## FAMILY GRIEF

Parents would like to protect their children from the hard facts of life, but they cannot. When a family death occurs, the children are affected and may react in different ways depending upon their age and experience. Adults should remember the following points:

- ❖ Children need to be allowed to respond to the death of a family member in their own way. Each family member's relationship with the deceased is unique, and their response to the loss may vary from one person to another. Children must be allowed to respond in a way that is right for them even if they act as though nothing is wrong following a death.
- ❖ It is important not to exclude the children when grieving. Parents need to talk about their sadness with their children. Often children will blame themselves for their parents' sadness if the subject is not discussed openly. Especially very young children will view adults' anger, frustration, or sadness as being something for which they are responsible.
- ❖ Young children do not perceive that death is permanent. Children may see death as a bogeyman or as an invader, who is coming to get them. Children over age 12 can understand death as adults do. The issue of death may become religious or philosophical, and they may question the justice of God who allowed the death to happen. It is not uncommon for adolescents and teens to have difficulty expressing their emotions regarding death and loss.
- ❖ Grief can be critical problem for children. If a parent sees major changes in a child—such as a change in sleeping and eating habits, a drop in grades, or talk of suicide—within 18 months after a significant death, the family should seek professional counseling.