

# **Strategies for Understanding and Assisting the Grieving Student**

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- Nearly five percent of children under the age of 15 will experience the loss of a loved one in their lives.

Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2007



# The Loss...

- May be of a parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend, or other family member.
- May have occurred suddenly or with knowledge ahead of time
  - However, even children who are “prepared” for the loss are still overcome by the intensity of actual grief and loss.
- Impacts every individual differently but always makes some kind of impact.

# Outcomes of Loss

- Heightened risk for psychological problems
- Difficulties concentrating and performing in school
- Increased feelings of fear and sadness
- Decreased self-esteem
- Loss of connection with social network

- Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2007

# Harvard Child Bereavement Study

- 125 children, ages 6-17, who had lost a parent; compared to 70 children who were not grieving
- Common symptoms: crying, anxiety about safety of self or others, feelings of guilt about misbehavior and lack of affection in past
- Increased physical complaints
- Increase in accidents and serious illness in first year compared to non-bereaved but then returned to normal levels in 2<sup>nd</sup> year

- McEntire, 2003

# The Good and Bad News

- Approximately 80% of children in the HCBS demonstrated the resilience needed to adjust to the loss in a healthy way.
- 15-20% continued to demonstrate significant emotional and/or behavioral concerns 2 years after the loss

- Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2007

# What Can We Do to Help?

1. Understand typical reactions to grief across age levels
2. Become familiar with the grieving process
3. Get to know the child: age, type of loss, personal understanding, etc.
4. Provide supports to child and family

# Emotional Reactions to Grief

- Sadness, confusion, despair
- Anger, desertion
- Fear, anxiety about safety
- Guilt
- Confusion, powerlessness
- Adolescents may suppress due to social pressures, giving the mistaken impression that they are unaffected (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

# Behavioral Reactions to Grief

- Anger: acting out, rage toward the one who has died
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Withdrawal, internalization of symptoms
- Regression to activities and needs of a younger child
- Attempts to bring the person back through fantasy, bargaining
- Play that incorporates death and dying
- May appear to return to "normal" routine quickly and easily but will continue to demonstrate grief sometimes due to unexpected triggers

# Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss

(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Birth to Age 3 (Sensorimotor, beg. Preoperational)

- Do not understand concept of death or forever
- Recognize absence but may expect to return

Intervention: allow to cry, regress, attach; help label emotions

# Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss

(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

## ■ Ages 3-5 (Preoperational)

- Magical thinking: they have powers to control world; they should have been able to stop the person from dying
- Egocentric: cannot see another's perspective
- Beginning to understand what death means but still may believe it is reversible

Intervention: listen to concerns, answer questions, prepare for changes, allow for as much choice and control as is possible

# Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss

(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Ages 5-9 (Concrete Operational)
  - Developing understanding of death as final, irreversible, and inescapable
  - Resulting feelings of powerlessness
  - May believe that their actions somehow contributed to the death, especially if sudden

Intervention: answer questions, encourage outlets

# Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss

(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Ages 9-12 (end Concrete Operational, beg. Formal Operational)
  - Beginning development of abstract reasoning
  - Often ask "What if" questions about past and future events
  - Increased emphasis on friends, desire to not stand out or appear different
- Ages 12 and up (Formal Operational)
  - Exploration of what death means, attempts to integrate the experience into their own identity

# The Grieving Process

- Worden's "Tasks of Mourning"
  - To accept the reality of the loss
  - To work through the pain of grief
  - To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing (external, internal/identity, and spiritual)
  - To emotionally relocate the deceased (as protector, supporter, provider of values to now follow) and move on with life

- Perschy, 2004

# The Grieving Process

- Wolfelt's Model of Mourning for Teens
  - Acknowledge the reality of the death
  - Move toward the pain of the loss
  - Remember the person who died
  - Develop a new self-identity
  - Search for meaning
  - Let others help you now and always

- Perschy, 2004

# The Grieving Process: Core Issues

- Predictability of events
- Mastery and control over lives
- Development of self-image
  - Tend to have a more negative view of own performance while also seeing selves as more mature
- Sense of belonging
  - Tend to withdraw socially
- Fairness and justice
  - Comparisons to others' "perfect" lives

- Perschy, 2004

# The Grieving Process

- Grief can manifest differently in each person, and it may come and go throughout life
- Key triggers to returned feelings of sadness and loss include:
  - Holidays
  - Birthday and death anniversary
  - Experience of another death
  - Rites of passage (graduation, big birthday, etc.)

# Getting to Know the Child

- Consider age and developmental level when preparing for meeting.
- Have plenty of materials available: stuffed animals, markers and paper, books, etc.
- Begin with a basic statement and question ("I understand that you had something sad happen. Can you tell me about it?") and allow child to guide conversation.
- Encourage use of materials for expression
- Allow and accept silence

# Getting to Know the Child

- Key Information to Obtain about Child:
  - Current understanding of the loss
  - Current emotional state
  - Desire to share
  - Support system, both family and friends
  - Possible secondary losses (i.e., financial difficulties due to loss of income)

# Which Interventions Work?

- Bereavement interventions for children have the greatest impact when they:
  - Occur within a short period of time following the loss
  - Target children who are demonstrating high-risk concerns showing significant difficulty with adjustment to the loss
  - Focus on normalizing grief

- Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer (2007)

# Individual Interventions

- Allow the child to talk about the person who has died and their emotions
- Discuss how life was before and how it has changed
- Educate the child about grief, normalize the experience
- Provide outlets such as puppets, drawing, and pretend play
- Share books related to grief, read them together and discuss
- Help the child set goals related to personal well-being
- Assist the child in identifying sources of emotional and social support

# Individual Interventions

- Guide the child in changing negative cognitions to positive ones
  - Encourage to share stories about when the person was alive and not only the experience of the death
  - Encourage identification of personal strengths and accomplishments in this process
  - Encourage use of positive self-statements
  - Encourage identification of ways to experience joy again now
- Encourage identification of a commemorative activity and assist in its implementation
  - Balloon release (with letter or poem)
  - Memorial
  - Making of a vase to put flowers in on special days
  - Creating an album of the person's life

# The Story of Dahlia



# What We Can Learn from Dahlia

- Children must balance their own grief with the grief of others in the home; they must be given time to process their own.
- Children can benefit from sharing their grief with others in the home.
- Young children may best express themselves through modes such as drawing while older may prefer verbal discussion and written outlets.
- A safe private environment allows for honest expression and normalization.
- Balloon liftoffs can offer a sense of closure while also providing a visual sense of “where” the person is for younger children.
- Short-term grief interventions can be effective.

# The Story of Jasmine



# What We Can Learn from Jasmine

- We must consider the primary and secondary losses in grief; in Jasmine's case, this was not only the loss of the baby but also of the identity she had created for herself.
- Normalization and education of the grief process is critical.
- Adolescents may not be able to connect their emotions and behaviors to their loss and may need guidance.
- Some students may not be ready to commemorate; they instead may find comfort in other activities such as journaling.
- Peers can be unaware of the impact of their comments; we must help adolescents find positive sources of support.
- Goal-setting is an important method of re-focusing the student to their own life so that they can envision more than where they are now.

# When Loss Impacts the School

- If a traumatic event has occurred, the trauma must first be handled before the loss can be explored.
  - Processing of what happened and students' reactions to it can help in exiting from the shock and frozen state (Perschy, 2004).
- Teachers and other staff may also be experiencing grief and should be offered opportunities to discuss it as well as resources.

# When Loss Impacts the School: Example

- Sudden loss of beloved mother of twin girls in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade
- Administration sent out letters to parents notifying them of the loss
- Classroom meetings the next day to answer student questions
  - Discussion included how to react to the students when they returned
- Students made cards
  - Teachers were instructed to look for drawings, statements, or emotional reactions that indicated difficulties
- Follow-up with individual students and their parents when abnormal or intense reactions were noted
- Follow-up with father of girls to ensure that they had the support and resources they needed

# Bereavement Groups

- Recommended when multiple students have been impacted by a common loss or when multiple students have experienced a loss within a short period of time
- Provides mutual support, a sense of community, development of relationships, normalization, a safe outlet, and an opportunity for students to help, question, and encourage each other (Murthy & Smith, 2005)
- Activities vary by age and level of students but may include identification and exploration of emotions, discussion and sharing of the loved one, commemoration, and preparation for moving on

# References

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# Other Resources

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# Other Resources

- Compassionate Friends: a national network of support groups and resources for parents and siblings grieving for a child of any age  
[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)
- New Song Center: Phoenix-based program offering programs and resources for grieving children  
[www.hov.org/new\\_song\\_center.aspx](http://www.hov.org/new_song_center.aspx)
- The Dougy Center: Portland-based program offering programs and resources, including special links for children and teens, related to grief  
[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)