

# HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVE



## Loss

Loss is an inevitable part of life and can occur at any age. Children experience loss in many ways and may include:

- Moving
- Illness or disability
- Death (family member, friend, pet)
- Divorce

The child does not have any control over preventing the loss and, depending on the age and developmental stage of the child, will not have the coping skills to deal with traumatic events. You, as the caregiver, will be in a unique position to help the child by providing a nurturing, supportive setting. This can have a positive effect in helping children grieve and can improve long term consequences.

Children's reaction to loss will vary based on several factors. These factors could include: personality, age, gender, amount of support, previous exposure to loss and parental reactions. The grieving period may vary as well depending on the nature of the loss. The caregiver needs to understand that the grieving process is normal and healthy, not something to be fixed. The provider role is one of listener.

Shakespeare said it best:

*"Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it . . . break."*  
(Macbeth, Act IV, Scene 1)

There are several characteristics that young children may exhibit which may assist providers in helping children cope. Remember that all children develop at different rates and the following are a guideline that may be used in assessing a child's ability to cope.

### **Self-centered**

Young children's world revolves around them and they may have difficulty understanding other points of view.

When grieving, they worry about the following questions:

*Did I cause this?*

*Will it happen to me?*

*Who will take care of me?*

### **Single-minded**

It is difficult for children to think of more than one thing at a time. Providers can help them see other perspectives

### **Black and White**

Children see most things as all or nothing. For example, someone is a friend or enemy or people are good or bad. With your help, children can see that people can be more than one thing.

### **Literal Thinkers**

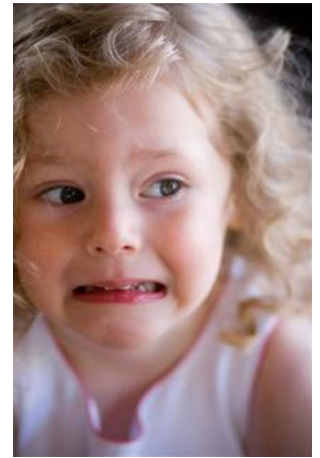
Their view of the world is very literal and it is difficult for children to understand abstracts such as death. Because they may believe a person is just sleeping, they may show little or no emotion after a loss. This indicates a lack of understanding rather than a lack of empathy.



## Peaceful Surroundings

Every provider has experienced a child arriving in the morning quite upset or out of sorts. This could be caused by something as small as not being able to find a favorite toy to bring to daycare. Having a limited view of everything around them can allow small things to upset their balance. Caregivers can be instrumental in helping children develop coping skills which will help children when faced with future challenges. Schedule, environment and routine support children in developing emotional competency.

For example, are children greeted warmly when they arrive; do they have their own space for their things; is the schedule predictable; are children given advance warning when changes occur; do you take children's concerns and fears seriously; do you model empathy and respect; give positive feedback when children show pro-social behavior; are children provided with a variety of activities; are children permitted to help with jobs.



## Stages of Grief

It has been determined that there are several stages of grief. It is important to know that children may vary the order and even experience several stages at one time. Children may even experience a stage multiple times.

### *Denial*

This is usually an early response and is a normal reaction that includes shock and numbness. Young children often do not understand what has happened or believe the situation is reversible. The same questions may be asked over and over in trying to understand

### *Anger*

Anger can stem from a feeling of abandonment because of a death or loss. Other emotions may include guilt, fear or anxiety. Their behavior could regress to include thumb sucking, bedwetting or tantrums.

### *Bargaining*

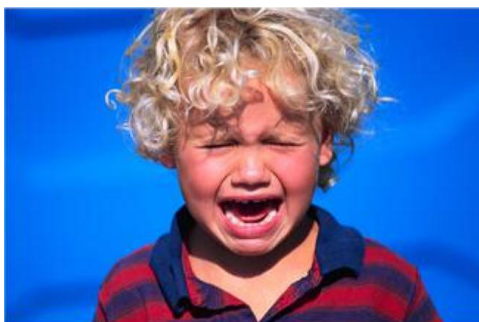
The normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability is often a need to regain control. Children may imagine things such as "what if..." or "if I am very good, maybe Daddy will wake up."

### *Depression*

In this stage, children begin to realize that the loss is real. They may experience trouble sleeping, poor appetite, and crying spells. Additionally, they may feel lonely, isolated, empty, lost, and anxious.

### *Acceptance*

Although the child will have moments of sadness or anger, he/she will begin to establish normal patterns of life.



Remember, loss is part of life and everyone will experience grief at some time. A provider's most important role is listening and allowing the child to experience the process. You can provide a safe place for children to express their feelings. Answer their questions simply and honestly. With such cultural and religious diversity, it is best to discuss how the parents or guardian would like for you to console their child. For example, "Everyone has their own beliefs, but I believe..." Children often need to be reminded that what has happened is not their fault. Giving permission to feel all emotions is important. Children may need to be reminded that it's ok to feel happiness and have fun, as well.

Caregivers can help by providing a stable routine and acknowledging the child's feeling of sadness. For a child whose parent is absent (deployed), you could have a map with stickers showing the location of the parent. Children could write letters, send emails, or make artwork. When a parent is seriously ill or hospitalized the child may feel that they will also become ill. Many hospitals offer field trips for preschoolers. This can help the children see the hospital in a non-threatening light. Key phrases that encourage children to share their feelings could be:

*I see that you are \_\_\_\_\_.*  
*It looks/sounds like you feel \_\_\_\_\_.*  
*Do you think \_\_\_\_\_?*



Well-meaning adults try to protect children from the enormity of loss by distracting them, telling them half-truths, even lying to them about the death of someone they loved. Some adults, perhaps to protect themselves from having to manage the full impact of a child's grief, fool themselves into believing that children are "too young" to know what is going on. As noted children's psychologist, Alan Wolfelt (1991), has said, "Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve."

Children need avenues for safe expression of feelings that may include fear, sadness, guilt, and anger. Children's play is their "work." Provide a child-friendly environment where a child may choose the avenue best suited to his or her self-expression. For some children, it may be drawing or writing, for others, it may be puppetry, music, or physical activity. Keep in mind that a child's reactions to grief will not appear the same as those seen in adults; as a result, children often are misunderstood. They may appear disinterested or respond as if they don't understand the significance of what has happened.

For example, upon being told that her mother might soon die from metastatic cancer, a 10-year-old responded by asking, "When we go to dinner tonight, can I order extra pickles?" She was letting the adults know that she had heard enough for the moment. A four-year-old was told that his father died. He continued to ask, "When will he be back?" At this age, children don't understand that death is permanent, final, and irreversible. Adults need to understand what is appropriate and expectable with children at different ages and stages of development and to recognize that children grieve in their own way and in their own time. Adults who tend to these children must focus on the children's individual needs as well as their own.



While it is true that three-year-olds don't understand that death is permanent, final, and irreversible, they do understand that something terribly sad has happened. They will miss the presence of people who have died, and they will worry about the sadness they feel around them. Lying to children or hiding the truth increases their anxiety. They are better observers of adults than most people recognize. You can't fool them. They are remarkably perceptive.

When children of any age are not given proper explanations, their powerful imaginations will fill in the blanks in the information they have picked up from those around them. Unfortunately, their imaginations often come up with things that are far worse than the simple truth would have been. If, for example, they don't understand the concept of "burial," they may create images of dead loved ones being buried alive, gasping for air and trying to claw out of the ground. In the case of cremation, they may imagine their loved one being burned alive and suffering horribly.





Children thrive when they are told what to expect and are allowed to participate in the commemoration of loved ones. When children and adults are encouraged to develop creative, personalized rituals, it helps everyone find comfort during the sad times. Children can be asked to draw or write a description of their favorite memory of the person who died. They love to share their memories and place the pictures, stories, and other items they have made into the casket to be buried or cremated along with their loved one. These kinds of activities can help the rituals around death become a meaningful family bonding experience rather than a continuing source of fear and pain. (Children and Grief by Karen Carney)

Coping with negative behavior can be very challenging. The following are some additional ideas that may help:

1. Set clear expectations and boundaries. At no other time is this more important. When a child's life lacks stability, he/she will test you to make sure you can be trusted.
2. Be kind and flexible. Recognize that a child's ability to "keep it together" may be hindered. There will be good and bad days. Work out a signal between the two of you for when a child is feeling wound up.
3. Provide outlets for relief when the child gives you that signal. Maybe the child can go to the special, quiet place to read a book or pound on play dough.
4. Teach appropriate responses to negative emotions. For example, when a child is angry he can use calm-down steps by taking a deep breath, counting to ten, walking away or asking for your help.
5. Teach problem solving skills. For example, teach children to ask for toys rather than grabbing. When two children are experiencing conflict, teach them how to share feelings: "I don't like that. Please stop." Children don't generally know what words to use until we model those words ourselves many times.
6. Focus on the positive. Use clear, descriptive language that describes the good behavior you saw, "David, I could tell you were feeling anger, but I watched you take a deep breath and ask for a turn with the car. Great job!"
7. When talking with parents discuss the behaviors seen and avoid making judgments. Find positives and avoid relaying every negative incident.



Helping families cope with loss can be one of the biggest challenges daycare providers face. Children and parents alike may be emotional, unpredictable or difficult to deal with. Remember that helping a child and his/her family through a loss is a tremendously difficult, but important, effort. While parents may not express appreciation in the middle of a crisis, they will likely remember your work for many years. Try not to take outbursts personally. They are generally not about you at all.

If you find yourself feeling burned out, angry, resentful or overwhelmed, this is a cue that something needs to be changed. You may be giving more than you should. You may need to establish new boundaries and limits. Seek support from other providers, as well as community organizations.

# Picture Books About Divorce

# Picture Books About Military Deployment

## I Don't Want to Talk About It

Jeanie Franz Ransom; Magination Press.  
September 2000

## It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear

Vicki Lansky; The Book Peddlers.  
December 15, 1997

## Mama and Daddy Bear's Divorce

Cornelia Maude Spelman; Albert Whitman & Co.  
January 1, 1998

## Mom & Dad Don't Live Together Anymore

Kathy Stinson; Annick Press.  
August 17, 2007

## My Family's Changing

Pat Thomas; Barron's Educational Series.  
February 1, 1999

## Standing on My Own Two Feet

Tamara Schmitz; Price Stern Sloan.  
June 12, 2008

## The Most Important Thing

Rhonda Roth; Crossing Guard Books.  
December 1, 2006

## Two Homes

Claire Masurel; Candlewick.  
July 14, 2003

## Was It the Chocolate Pudding?

Sandra Levins; American Psychological Association.  
September 2005

## When Mom and Dad Divorce

Emily Menendez-Aponte; Abbey Press.  
December 1999

## When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends

Jennifer Moore-Mallinos; Barron's Educational Series.  
March 1, 2005

## A Paper Hug

Stephanie Skolmoski; Self Published.  
June 12, 2006

## A Yellow Ribbon for Daddy

Anissa Mersiowsky; Veritas Media.  
February 28, 2005

## Daddy's in Iraq, but I Want him Back

Carmen R. Hoyt; Trafford Publishing.  
December 6, 2005

## I Miss You!

Beth Andrews; Prometheus Books.  
April 3, 2007

## Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom

Lisa Tucker McElroy; Albert Whitman & Company.  
January 1, 2005

## My Mommy Wears Combat Boots

Sharon McBride; AuthorHouse.  
February 28, 2008

## Night Catch

Brenda Ehrmantraut; Bubble Gum Pr.  
July 2005

## Red, White, and Blue Good-bye

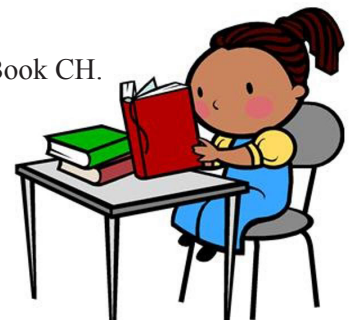
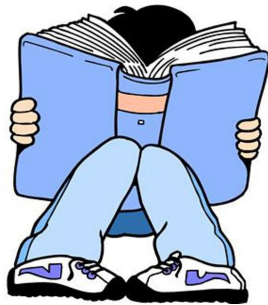
Sarah Wones Tomp; Walker Books for Young Readers.  
April 30, 2005

## When Dad's at Sea

Mindy Pelton; Albert Whitman & Company. January 1,  
2004

## While You Are Away

Eileen Spinelli; Hyperion Book CH.  
January 29, 2008



# Picture Books About Death

## Badger's Parting Gifts

Susan Varley; HarperCollins  
July 16, 1992

## For the Grieving Child: An Activities Manual

Suzan Jaffe; Self-Published  
February 6, 2008

## Gentle Willow

Joyce C. Mills; Magination Press  
November 2003

## I'll Always Love You

Hans Wilhelm; Dragonfly Books  
December 12, 1988

## I Miss You: A First Look At Death

Pat Thomas; Barron's Educational Series  
January 1, 2001

## Saying Goodbye to Lulu

Corinne Demas; Little, Brown Books for Young Readers  
September 1, 2009

## The Dragonfly Door

John Adams; Feather Rock Books, Inc  
January 24, 2007

## The Fall of Freddie the Leaf

Leo Buscaglia PhD; Slack Incorporated  
June 1, 1982

## The Next Place

Warren Hanson; Waldman House Press  
September 1997

## When a Pet Dies

Fred Rogers; Putnam Juvenile  
April 13, 1998

## Where Are You?

Laura Olivieri; Lulu.com  
November 9, 2007



# Books For Adults

## 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child

Dougy Center Staff; Dougy Center  
October 25, 1999

## Bereaved Children & Teens: Guide for Parents & Professionals

Beacon Press; 1995

## Growing Up with Divorce

Neil Kalter; Ballantine Books 1990

## Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups

William C. Kroen; Free Spirit Publishing  
January 15, 1996

## Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way

M. Gary Neuman, Patricia Romanowski; Random House  
July 27, 1999

## How to Talk to Your Children About Divorce

Jill Jones-Soderman, Allison Quattrocchi; Family Mediation Center Publishing Co  
June 15, 2006

## Talking about Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child

Earl A. Grollman; Beacon Press  
November 16, 1991

## What About the Kids? Raising Your Children Before, During & After Divorce

Judith S. Wallerstein; Hyperion  
March 17, 2004

## When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal with Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses

John W. James; Harper Paperbacks  
June 4, 2002



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