

**Children and Grief:
A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers**

By Lori A. Moses

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Glossary | 4 |
| Podcast Script for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers | 5 |
| Brief Example | 5 |
| Traumatic Events in Childhood | 5 |
| Common Responses to Trauma | 6 |
| Traumatic Grief..... | 7 |
| Strategies for Support | 8 |
| Support for Teachers..... | 8 |
| Ideas for Accommodations | 9 |
| Support for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers | 10 |
| Final Thoughts | 11 |
| Suggestions (Do’s and Don’ts) | 12 |
| Additional Resources | 13 |
| References | 14 |

Introduction

Hello. My name is Lori Moses. I am currently obtaining my Master's Degree in Applied Developmental Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. We have done a great deal of work discussing issues and disorders in childhood. For one of my graduate classes, Emotional Disorders in Childhood, I completed a Guide for parents, caregivers, and teachers helping children cope with grief.

Grief is a very difficult concept for children and adults, especially when they are coping with the loss of a loved one. Within this guide, you will find numerous strategies for adults to help guide children through their grief. Also, there is some general information regarding some natural responses that children have when dealing with a trauma.

As part of our guides, we created podcasts, which are short, online audio clips. Also, throughout the guide you will find a glossary of terms, suggestions, additional resources and references. There are some wonderful resources, such as books and websites, which can offer you additional information and suggestions.

I believe that children need much support and guidance as they try and cope with their loss. I hope this guide can be helpful for you in your efforts to become a positive support system for a child. To learn more about emotional disorders and topics in childhood, please visit www.sbbh.pitt.edu. It is filled with resources, covering an array of issues, including emotional and behavioral disorders in children.

Glossary

Trauma – an experience, either firsthand or directly, that has been caused by an unexpected event that seriously threatened, injured, or killed someone; includes four key elements:

unpredictability, helplessness, fear and horror (DSM-IV-TR, 2000)

Traumatic Grief – the experience of the sudden loss of a significant and close attachment (Kerr, 2001)

Podcast Script for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers

Hello, and welcome to our podcast. Thank you for listening to this guide for parents, caregivers and teachers helping children cope with grief. My name is Lori and today I will begin discussing some tips that may be helpful to you.

A common theme that you may hear throughout the podcast is to listen to the child. Sometimes listening is the most supportive and caring act that an adult can do for a child.

The goal of this podcast is to provide you with some information that may help children who have experienced a significant loss.

Brief Example

Let's consider this brief story: Adam is a bright and energetic twelve year old boy. He usually spends his free time playing with friends. However, lately he has been going through a very rough time in his life. About a month ago, he suddenly lost his mother. It was a shock to everyone, including Adam's family, friends and community. But no one was in as much pain as Adam. He began acting out in school, and his behavior became a bit unpredictable. Who could possibly understand what he was going through? When was this hurting going to stop?

Many of us know someone like Adam. Studies suggest that an estimated 3.5% of children under the age 18 in the United States have experienced the death of their parent (Haine, Wolchik, Sandler, Millsap & Ayers, 2006). However, children don't have to be alone during these tough times. Teachers and parents are in a unique position to make a difference in a child's life by providing support as children heal (Westmoreland, 1996).

Traumatic Events in Childhood

Let's take a moment to discuss how a traumatic event can affect a child. "We say that a person has experienced or witnessed a *trauma* when they have been exposed-firsthand or indirectly-to an unexpected event" (Kerr, 2005, p. 1). This unexpected event may have seriously injured someone or led to death (Kerr, 2005).

According to the American Psychological Association (DSM-1V-TR 2000), there are four key elements of trauma: unpredictability (or shock and surprise), helplessness, fear, and horror (as cited in Kerr, 2005). These are also known as acute stress reactions (DSM-1V-TR 2000). This means that a specific event has caused a kind of reaction that may be stressful to the child. Each of these elements can affect children differently. These effects are greatly influenced by the child's age or developmental level.

Common Responses to Trauma

In order to understand a child's reaction to a traumatic event, it is helpful to be able to recognize the common responses to trauma. I'd like to briefly discuss some reactions that you may notice. (The following comes from Kerr (2005)):

- Shock and surprise may lead a child to become dependent on routines and upset with routine changes. The child may be moody, angry, nervous and easily startled. A need for control may also arise.
- Helplessness may cause irritability, bossiness, judgment of others, stubbornness, a lack of flexibility, and showy or risky behaviors.
- Fear may cause a child to be easily frightened and anxious. A child may lose their appetite, become forgetful and demanding of attention, and may turn to alcohol or other risky behaviors to help calm their fear.

- Horror may lead to nightmares, flashbacks, general sadness and a “numb” feeling. The child may constantly think about death, the traumatic event, and may have many questions about the details of the traumatic event. The child may also make jokes.

You may not recognize all of these signs or they may come and go. However, knowing what to expect may help be a guide for *you* and your efforts.

Traumatic Grief

Sometimes children may have very strong reactions to their loss. From a traumatic event, some children may experience what is called traumatic grief, which is different from normal bereavement, or normal grief. I’d like to take a moment to discuss this.

Traumatic grief refers to the experience of losing a loved one suddenly (Kerr, 2001).

According to the Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents, children who are experiencing traumatic grief get “stuck” on the way their loved one died (Kerr, 2001). These children are not comforted by thoughts of their loved one; instead, they become upset and frightened (Kerr, 2001). This may lead to other difficulties in the child’s life.

If you feel that a child is experiencing traumatic grief, a professional counselor or psychologist should be contacted. This will give the child the best care outside of the home and school. However, one of the most important things that you can immediately do is listen, if the child feels like sharing. Also, it’s crucial to take the time to ask the child what helps. Kerr (2001) suggests that an essential goal to helping children is to show them that they have control of their situation.

“Children who feel helpless often become irritable unless they are given choices” (Kerr, 2001, p. 142). Children need to be able to direct their own recovery. For more information on traumatic grief, please refer to <http://www.pittsburghchildtrauma.com/>.

Strategies for Support

Children may need a long time to work through their feelings and emotions, so patience is important. Keep in mind that grief isn't a single event; it's truly an ongoing process that continues across a child's development (Heath et al., 2008). "Demonstrating caring support tells children that, despite the tragedy, they will be taken care of and they are still loved" (Hogan & Graham, 2009, p. 7).

I'd like to refer you to a great website, www.projectreassurance.org, dedicated to helping children of all ages deal with trauma and grief. It not only provides useful tips, but it also offers links and resources for parents, teachers, and children.

Now, let's take a more detailed look at some other useful strategies.

Immediately you may say "I'm sorry." This response may first come when attending the funeral. "Children are often comforted by having teachers and peers attend a parent's funeral" (Hogan & Graham, 2002, p. 6). Attending tells the child that you care and that you'll be there for them in the future.

Support for Teachers

For teachers, it may also be very beneficial to learn about any family history of the children entering your class. Knowing ahead will prevent embarrassing situations when children would normally be required to answer questions about their parents. Questions such as "What does your mom do?" or "Where does your dad work?" may be upsetting for a child whose parent has died.

"Children have a natural tendency to provide care and nurturance for classmates who have experienced a significant loss" (Hogan & Graham, 2002, p. 7). This is such a wonderful thing to keep in mind; however, children who have lost someone may feel left out or different

than those who have not. In private, use statements such as “This must be really tough” and “I am here for you” to build trust (Heath et al., 2008). Showing children how to give and receive support is part of affective [or emotion] education” (Hogan & Graham, 2002, p.6). And let children know that it’s certainly ok to cry. If a student is teased because of emotional outbursts, talk with classmates about how crying is a natural response to sadness (Hogan & Graham, 2002).

Ideas for Accommodations

Being a teacher requires you to make certain accommodations for students on a daily basis. You may want to keep this in mind if a child in your classroom is experiencing grief. Sometimes children, regardless of their age, need some time alone. Such breaks may come from a trip to the nurse’s office or from the opportunity to excuse themselves without question if they are experiencing a rush of feelings. This is especially true early in the grieving process and around the holidays (Hogan & Graham, 2002).

You may find that children experiencing loss have trouble concentrating and remembering (Westmoreland, 1996). This is a perfectly natural reaction. Allow the child to have several options during their daily routine (Heath et al., 2008) so that they may stay engaged in the classroom activities. This may be an important step in showing the child that you understand they are struggling and appreciate the gravity of their situation.

If you are the teacher of a younger classroom, you may want to consider reading stories about children who lost a family member (Heath et al., 2008). According to Leavy (2005), “a story about grief and death can assist children and adults in discussing this sensitive and often painful topic” (as cited in Heath et al., 2008, p. 263). This can also be a way to show the child that others understand what they are going through. This may also give the child a way to

understand their grief since some children may not have the vocabulary to describe it (Hogan & Graham, 2002).

You may want to discuss some book options with librarians, other teachers and school counselors before making your selection (Heath et al., 2008). There are many publications and books available on helping young children cope with death. A good resource is Family Communications. Their website is <http://www.fci.org/>. It provides wonderful information for both parents and professionals and is a continuation of the work of the well known Fred (or Mister) Rogers.

Another way for children to express themselves is through drawing (Heath et al., 2008). Providing any option such as walking, drawing, doodling, playing with a stress ball or clay (Heath et al., 2008) can help students to relax. Also, this may be a good way to show your students that you respect their silence (Heath et al., 2008).

Support for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers

The next few ways that children may convey their grief would probably be most noticeable to a caregiver or parent; however, it is very possible that a teacher may also notice symptoms linked to these behaviors.

Although sleep disruptions can occur at any age, younger children may be most vulnerable to nightmares (Hogan & Graham, 2002). Perhaps as a caregiver, you may want to leave a light on, keep the bedroom door open, or allow your child to sleep in the same room as you (Hogan & Graham, 2002). It's important to note that maintaining old bedroom habits and routines will help "children find renewed continuity in their life." (Hogan & Graham, 2002, p. 7) This is a way of reassuring the child that things will eventually begin to feel better.

Holidays can be particularly difficult for a grieving child. They may serve as a reminder that family routines will no longer be the same. (Hogan & Graham, 2002). Be extra supportive and nurturing if you sense a particular sadness during these special occasions. Holidays not only have the ability to “retrigger” (Hogan & Graham, 2002) children’s grief, but they also may cause the child to feel as though they are not allowed to enjoy themselves. Children may “believe that it is disloyal...to have fun and be happy” (Hogan & Graham, 2002, p.6). Remind the children that they are not doing anything wrong.

Children who are experiencing a great loss may also sense aches and pains. This can result from an emotional overload in the child (Hogan & Graham, 2002).

Final Thoughts

All of these behaviors that I just mentioned are typical reactions to losing a loved one. Children may move in and out of the grieving process as time goes on. They “generally do not grieve regularly or constantly. At times, they may appear unaffected by the loss or may seem to be handling their grief” (Westmoreland, 1996, p. 11). It has been stated that children handle loss very differently than adults, and that it may take up to two years for children to adjust to death (Westmoreland, 1996). This may vary with age and with each individual.

It’s so important to be open and honest, to encourage discussions of feelings and ideas, and to listen to grieving children. I hope this can be a guide for both caregivers and teachers. You have made an important step by listening to this podcast. If you are eager to learn more about helping children cope with grief, please read our Children and Grief study guide also on this website. Thank you.

Suggestions (Do's and Don'ts)

- Do try and listen to the child
- Do ask the child what helps for him/her
- Do remember that grieving is a process
- Do realize that children need to have control of their recovery
- Do remember that grieving affects all children differently, particularly because of their developmental level
- Do not diagnose a child's reactions to their stressful, traumatic event
- Do seek professional help if you are concerned; asking other parents, teachers and caregivers can also help
- Do try and be patient and understanding, some children do not have the vocabulary to discuss their grief
- Do not assume that a child will recover quickly, regardless of their coping skills
- Do remember that you can be a positive support system for a grieving child

Additional Resources

There are numerous websites and books dedicated to helping children cope with grief and helping adults guide children through the grieving process. The following are some websites and books that may be beneficial to you. *Note:* The books listed vary in age-appropriateness. Always check the book first before recommending it to a child.

Books

- Rosen, Michael. (2005). *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*. Cambridge: Candlewick Press.
- Napoli, D.J. (2002). *Flamingo Dream*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Wilhelm, H. (1985). *I'll Always Love You*. New York: Crown.
- Brown, L.K, & Brown, M.T. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Varley, S. (1992). *Badger's Parting Gifts*. New York: Mulberry Books.
- Paterson, K. (1977). *The Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: Crowell.
- Rylant, C. (1992). *Missing May*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Hesse, K. (1997). *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hinto, S.E. (1967). *The Outsiders*. U.S.: Penguin.
- Creech, S. (1994). *Walk Two Moons*. New York: HarperCollins

Websites

- <http://www.projectreassurance.org/>
A wonderful resource dedicated to assisting children, adolescents, and adults cope with trauma and grief. They are especially interested in helping those with disabilities.
- <http://www.pittsburghchildtrauma.com/>
Allegheny General Hospital's Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents. Serves children and families who experience traumatic or stressful events in their lives.
- <http://www.fci.org/>
The Family Communications website. A wonderful resource for caregivers, parents, and professionals. They are dedicated to continuing the work of Fred Rogers.

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- Kerr, M.M. (2005). Children and trauma: What you can do to help. Retrieved November 22, 2009 from <http://www.projectreassurance.org/resources/UPLOAD/index.php?dlid=21>
- Leavy, D.G. (2005). Facilitating communication about death between mothers and adolescent sons using fictional children's literature. Unpublished master's thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
- Westmoreland, P. (1996). Coping with death: Helping students grieve. *Childhood Education, 72*(3), 157-160. Retrieved November 03, 2009 from General OneFile via Gale: <http://find.galegroup.com/itx/start.do?prodId=ITOF>