

Children Experience Grief Over Separations

by Anne Moffett

The previous installment of this series discussed the first phase of grief reactions that children experience when faced with other forms of separation, such as marital separation and divorce, hospitalization, military service, placement in an alternate living situation (for example, going to live with grandparents or other relatives or placement in foster care), or even separation caused by a family move. I conclude the article now with the second and third phases.

The second stage of mourning a separation from a loved one, called acute grief, includes stages of yearning and pining, searching for the lost person, intense feelings, disorganization, despair, and finally, reorganization. When a child suffers a loss or separation, there is something deep inside that continues to wish for a different ending to the story. Hope springs up again and again that somehow things will return to the way they were before, and that the lost person will return. At this stage, children often display regression, or a return to behaviors typical of a younger developmental age.

For example, thumb sucking, “baby talk,” or bedwetting may return after having been outgrown some time ago. When adults can allow a grieving child to return to simpler and familiar patterns of behavior through regression, without shaming or punishing this behavior, usually the child’s emotional balance is restored after a time and she no longer feels a need for the regressive behavior.

As a result of the yearning and pining for the loved one who has been lost through separation, children often go through a stage of searching for the person. This can include preoccupation in both thoughts and conversation with memories of the person, a sense of waiting for something to happen, attraction to places where the person is likely to be found, and a restlessness and continual scanning of the surrounding environment. This searching is particularly understandable since the loved one who is lost has not died, but lives away from the child. (A common example of this stage is the searches that adopted children often make when they enter adulthood to find their birth parents.)

Searching usually does not stop until the child is satisfied that he has made every effort possible to find the person who was lost. Adults can help by being patient with the child’s efforts and providing a safe relationship to discuss both the wish to find the person and the disappointment in not succeeding.

Intense feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, shame, and despair are part of this phase as well. Working through grief is painful and there is no short cut. Claudia Jewett suggests that adults can support the child in dealing with these feelings by being available to listen and by avoiding giving messages to the child to deny or cover up her feelings. If possible, make time right away to listen to your child’s feelings whenever they arise, rather than postponing the opportunity. Provide physical closeness and reassuring touch. Often it helps just to sit with the child while she cries or vents angry feelings. Try to accept that the child’s feelings may be very different from your own, and do not criticize or tell the child what to feel or how long to feel it.

Disorganization and a lack of concentration frequently show up in school situations when children are grieving a separation from someone important. Teachers and parents both may underestimate the length of time this disorganization can last. It is not unusual for it to last into the second year after the loss occurred. Adults can help by sharing concrete and positive suggestions for ways to organize time and materials. Resist the impulse to limit play and social activities in order to focus on school work, since grieving children need time and encouragement to become reinvolved in pleasurable activities as well as in the responsibilities of school. Watch for improvements and successes, and give reinforcement when they occur. It can help some children to focus better on school work if they know they have a regular time to talk about their loss with a parent, school counselor, or other helping adult.

In time, the child who is coping successfully with separation from a loved one will show a decrease in crying, anger, irritability, and other intense emotional reactions to the loss. This occurs when the child has been able to reorganize himself to go on with life without the missing loved one.

Children at this stage will show improved self-esteem, self-control, attentiveness, and an ability to become attached to others and to form relationships once again. They have not forgotten the loss, but are now able to focus on other things. This development occurs at the end of the second, or acute, stage of grieving.

In the final stage, children who have successfully worked through earlier stages of grief can accept the reality of the loss and begin to focus on the present and the future instead of the past. They can invest energy in new activities and relationships. Intense mourning has been replaced with more moderated feelings.

In this stage, adults should continue to encourage the child to talk about the person who is gone. Pictures and other mementos of the person should be provided and memories shared freely. When the separation has occurred as a result of divorce, the child should be supported in buying or making presents for the separated parent, and ongoing contact should be encouraged and facilitated whenever possible.

The child needs reassurance that both parents continue to love and care for her, in spite of the fact that the family is now separated. Strengthening a child's positive memories is perhaps the kindest and healthiest way an adult can help a child who is living with a loss resulting from separation.

Anne Moffett is a nationally certified school psychologist who works with the Journeys Program as a co-leader of groups for children and adults dealing with loss and grief.

Original publication date: 01/27/1997 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon