

Section I: Supporting Children with Grief and Loss

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH GRIEF AND LOSS (written by Katherine Duncan & Shannon Deacon)

Allowing children to show their guilt, show their grief, show their anger, takes the sting out of the situation. —Martha Beck

An example: *"Keisha (age 15) was in the Society's care from the age of 12, when her mother died and there was no other caregiver or family to take care of her. She had been doing well in a very supportive foster family, until adolescence, when she had some difficulties that resulted in her running away. She told me, her caseworker, that a family of a friend of hers wanted to adopt her. She became unstable in her placement, was not attending school regularly, and spoke often of the fantasy that her friend's family was going to adopt her. That relationship broke down within six weeks. Keisha came to the office to see me and appeared very anxious, her nerves shaking her leg up and down. Keisha and I had spoken previously about going to visit her mother's grave, but she had refused. That day, I asked her again "when would you like to go and visit your mother's grave?". Her answer was "now". Together, we somehow found the cemetery where her mother was buried. There was no headstone. After Keisha made some jokes about not walking on her mother, Keisha wanted to go to the office to look at numerous headstones that she said she would buy for when she was older. As this experience belonged to Keisha, and not to me as her caseworker, Keisha led the conversation. I noticed on the way back that it appeared as if a great weight had been lifted from Keisha; she was quieter, relaxed and more still. This experience opened the door for her to finally be able to begin to mourn her mother."*

The separation of children from their primary attachment figures can evoke feelings and defenses that we need to understand in order to help children cope with their reactions. Without reiterating attachment and cultural attachment theory, we know that whether secure or not, a child's primary attachment figures shape their ability to trust and engage in future relationships with others and with themselves. Almost always do the children we meet in child welfare context have some level of attachment to someone or something and require support to grieve their losses, including mourning the life that they did not have. Some children, who have lived with extreme neglect and abuse, may be detached from others because of their experiences and need support to cope and understand their feelings of numbness and despair. Unresolved grief can also lead a child to be detached, which can have lifelong consequences for their relationships. The goal of grieving is to come to some kind of acceptance and understanding of what has happened so that the child can open or re-open themselves to positive loving relationships in the future.

There are a number of factors that influence the impact of separation and grief, such as the age and developmental stage of the child, the nature of the relationship to the attachment figure or figures, the length of the separation, any previous separation experiences, the temperament of the child, and the time and quality of assistance with mourning.

Cultural connections and traditions can also play a large role in how and if we grieve loss. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) in fact states the importance of culture in understanding an individual's duration and expression of grief. From a child welfare perspective, we must also consider the grief connected to the treatment of racialized populations with which we work in historical and current systems burdened with racism.

A framework to assist workers to recall the conditions needed to mourn are quite simple:

- The child needs to remember what is lost and have the opportunity to speak about (or revisit) their past caregivers, siblings, pets, homes and neighborhoods.
- The child needs an environment in which they can freely express and feel their feelings. Caregivers and workers need to create the safe space needed for this to occur.
- The permanency and seriousness of the loss needs to be addressed and supported. Many placed children are in limbo; it is often hard to give them the clear messages that they need. However, it is still helpful to keep them included in any time frames (court, service goals, etc.) and to provide them the information they need to resolve their feelings.

When children are first admitted into care they are often in shock, as the family may be too. A child can appear as if they are “settling in” to a placement, when in fact they are in a deep state of despair. Often a mourning process can be avoided or restricted, for many reasons. While placed children can intellectualize about why they’re in care, the actual process of grieving has either been avoided or aborted. Simple tools are available to help workers trigger the mourning process.

When you have a worker and an agency that is committed to grief and mourning you have a long-term improvement in outcomes. Devolld and Rickman (2014) describe a child “...with a sense of who they are and where they fit in the world will be far more successful than a child who has withdrawn from emotional commitment because they experienced too much grief and loss”. It is suggested this could lead to more reunifications, increased placement stability, and increased positive outcomes for the child. Simple steps and tools provided to workers and placement caregivers could have a lasting impact.