

7 SKILLS FOR PARENTS TO SUPPORT A GRIEVING CHILD

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Children's losses are often treated differently than adult losses. If an adult reacts to loss with anger, irritability or becomes withdrawn it is understood. If a child reacts that way, they are often "diagnosed" with a mental health diagnosis.

- Regina Kupecky says this: "Think about it. If an adult lost their home, belongings and everyone they loved on Friday, no one would expect them to show up for work on Monday, ready for a new day. Yet, this is exactly what happens to children. They are removed by the police or other authority one day, and we expect them to "buck up" return to school and learn their fractions the next day."

Loss: is an emotional state that occurs when a child is unexpectedly separated from something of significance

Grief: is a process that we pass through to recover from loss.

Ambiguous Loss: The type of loss that children experience through foster care and adoption is considered an ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs without closure or clear understanding. This kind of loss leaves a person searching for answers, and thus complicates and delays the process of grieving.

Disenfranchised grief or complicated grief: is grief that is not acknowledged and is not given the opportunity to heal. By suppressing the losses or not acknowledging that the losses happened, we open the door to our child experiencing this complicated grief.

When a loss is not acknowledged, the grief does not heal. Children are left with the burden of carrying the pain and the loss alone. So how can we as foster and adoptive parents carry this burden with them so they do not feel alone in their grief and can gain acceptance and heal from their loss?

The 3-5-7 Model is one way to recognize the role of grief and loss and give the child a way to express and process their loss and grieve in a healthy way. Children do not instinctively know how to grieve. They know how to demonstrate their feelings through their behaviors, but they do not know how to process their feelings in a way that helps them find the place of acceptance and healing from the loss. This is where adoptive or foster parents come in. You can walk alongside them through their grief and help them find this place of healing.

There are 7 Essential Skills that a person needs in order to support a grieving child:

1. The ability to engage the child in the process

When you join a child in this process the messages your actions are telling them are, "I'm here for you, you are safe, you are not alone." You are not sparing a child pain by trying to protect them from their grief. There are many ways that a parent can engage a child in the process such as reading them a book about grief. (See link titled Books for Grieving Children). When the loss they are experiencing is from a death, a parent can support the child's desire to attend a funeral or memorial and attend WITH them. You want to allow the child/youth the opportunity to say goodbye whenever possible.

2. The ability to listen to the child's words and be present

Sometimes words are simply not necessary and the simple presence of a person is so powerful because they do not feel alone. A foster parent can simply present with a youth or child and allow them to cry. Touch is a non-verbal way to communicate being present and caring like through a hug or a hand on a shoulder or knee.

3. Speaking the truth

Children from hard places are especially observant and are aware of things both said and unsaid. If a child sees an adult keeping information from them for their own protection, the child may keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves in order to protect the adults. This creates a damaging cycle of silence. Be prepared for the hard questions a child will ask (and they will ask). Being prepared will give you more confidence as you enter into their questions.

4. Validating the child's feelings from the experience

A child experiencing these feelings of grief and loss are going to have a roller coaster of emotions to include sadness, loneliness, anger, rage, and guilt to name a few and they will likely shift between emotions in the same day or from day to day. Parents have an opportunity to validate and normalize the experience the child is having so it does not feel so scary.

5. The ability to create a safe space for the child to do the work

You can create a safe space for children or youth to do this grief work by letting them know that it's okay and expected to have the feelings they're feeling. It is important that parents are not quick to react to behaviors with punishment. It is not possible to punish grief out of a child, but you can talk with them about ways they can cope with emotions when they come up. Lifebooks are also excellent tools for doing grief work (see list of resources on lifebooks). Grief journals are also helpful tools for children or youth who may be more comfortable expressing emotions through writing.

6. The ability to go back in time (it's never too late)

Anniversaries of losses can be particularly triggering as feelings of grief can emerge again. These can be opportunities to connect with a child regarding a loss they experienced and process feelings related to the loss. A child will continue to experience grief related to the loss at different developmental stages as their understanding of the events/losses in their life will continue to mature and grow.

7. Recognize that pain is part of the process and is often expressed through behaviors

Children express their big feelings through behaviors such as: being irritable or moody, difficulty focusing, impulsivity, temper tantrums, aggression, difficulty with transitions, and lack of motivation. By recognizing that their big feelings are being expressed through their behavior can help parents remember to be the "calm" that the child needs instead of joining them in the chaos.

Grief is a process that has very little order or predictability. These skills are not a step by step process. Opportunities to process grief are going to occur at unplanned, spontaneous, and sometimes inconvenient times. Those moments are your opportunities to connect with them and implement these skills that will lead them on the road for healing.

Resources

Books for Grieving Children <https://www.allinahealth.org/health-conditions-and-treatments/grief-resources/suggested-books/books-for-grieving-children>

10 Questions Children Ask about Death <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/blog/10-questions-children-ask-about-death-dying/142040>

Lifbook Resource http://www.ifapa.org/publications/IFAPA_Lifbook_Pages.asp (Free full pdf Lifbook in English and Spanish)