

HANDOUT #1: DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GRIEF

Children cope with grief at different developmental stages, and parents might see behaviors that indicate that the child is expressing grief, rather than simply exhibiting defiant behaviors. The following will help to identify the ways in which grief may be expressed at different stages. At each stage, caring adults can help by recognizing the grief underneath the behavior and providing support to the child or youth.

Infant to 2 years

Children who come into the child-welfare system at a very young age, and who cannot yet fully understand loss intellectually, nevertheless experience loss, especially if they have had a positive attachment to their parent or other caregiver. The main developmental tasks of these early years are:

- Establishing trust
- Making attachments
- Moving toward autonomy

Separation from a primary caregiver may result in losing a basic sense of trust that adults will meet their needs, lack of trust in the world at large, and delay of the normal development toward autonomy.

A child's grief reaction to loss can be overlooked if the new caregiver is not attuned to their behavior. They will often show signs of grief immediately or soon after being moved to a new family including:

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Irritability
- Lethargy
- Separation anxiety
- Regression in attained developmental milestones

For instance, if they are toilet trained, they may regress and begin soiling themselves. If they are no longer drinking from a bottle, they may need to be offered a bottle again to be soothed. For infants and toddlers from different ethnic backgrounds, sounds, smells, and visual stimuli can all be very different and strange, contributing to discomfort with an unfamiliar environment. Today in child welfare many infants and young children entering care may be drug affected, have a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, or both. These circumstances require special attention and knowledge on the part of caregivers.

Developmental Stages of Grief; adapted from National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative; Module 5, Lesson 2; 2019; Carol Bishop



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Preschoolers: Ages 2 to 5 years

At this developmental stage children have not yet developed an understanding of cause and effect or permanence. Children who joined their foster, adoptive, or guardianship family at birth or at a very young age like to hear their story during this developmental stage, whether it is how they came to their foster or adoptive family, or how they came to live with their relative. They may enjoy telling their story and can usually repeat it word for word, but at this stage they do not understand the implications of the story. They are often confused about the facts and may miss the fact that they were born like everyone else, so this should be emphasized.

This is also the time that children become aware of differences, and for children in transracial families, these differences should be discussed in a sensitive and supportive way.

Although they may not explicitly understand the losses surrounding their move from their family, children may exhibit behaviors that indicate that they are aware of the losses, such as:

- Searching or yearning behaviors
- Asking strangers if they are their parents
- Exhibiting anxiety and sadness
- Becoming fearful of strangers and being clingy
- Exhibiting depression
- Having nightmares
- Having temper tantrums
- Becoming hyperactive
- Exhibiting behaviors around needing to be “in control” of situations

Children who are removed from their families at this age may feel responsible for being removed, blame themselves, and think that if they were only better behaved, they would not have had to move. They may exhibit phobias, such as school phobia. They may be act out in destructive and angry ways or be feel anxious, and depressed.



Ages 6 to 12 years

At these ages, children begin to understand cause and effect, and the implications of removal from their family, especially if they are adopted or in legal guardianship. They begin to understand that they are in a foster, adoptive, or guardianship family because their parents were not able to parent them. Children begin to wonder about their parents, extended family, or culture, but may not talk with their foster or adoptive parents or guardians about their interest, for fear of hurting their feelings. When children are in relative adoptions or guardianships, their feelings of loss can be exacerbated by the intermittent presence of parents or by negative family attitudes about their parents. Children at this age are often hypersensitive to the attitudes of their adoptive or guardianship families related to their race or culture as they enter the identity development tasks.

If removed from their birth parent(s) during these years, they may be worried about them and any siblings from whom they were separated. Unless discussions are openly encouraged, these concerns may go underground, which can have a negative impact on the child's functioning. They may regress in their behavior, feel a loss of control, and blame themselves for their situation.

The conversations that foster, adoptive, and guardianship parents have with their children during these years are very important. These conversations should be honest and framed in a way that supports the self-esteem of the child. No matter how positively the conversation is framed, children understand at this age that, in a child's language, "I got given away." They recognize that you don't give away something of value, and it might follow that they wonder, "What is wrong with me that they gave me away, or didn't try hard enough to keep me?" It does not help to *only* tell a child that, "Your mother loved you so much that she wanted a better life for you." It is better to be honest about the circumstances in language appropriate to the child's age.

Some behaviors that might be common during these years for any child who was removed from their family include:

- School or learning problems
- Daydreaming about family members
- Imagining reunions
- Fantasizing about how life would be different if they were raised by their birth family

The child might emotionally withdraw from the adoptive family, or insistently ask questions about their family. Children in transracial or cross-cultural families may adopt stereotypical behaviors associated with their race or culture to test the comfort of the foster, adoptive, or guardianship family or because they don't have real connections to support a healthy identity related to their race and/or culture. Some children exhibit anger to create distance and avoid the vulnerability of closeness to avoid further pain.



Adolescence

This is a pivotal time in a youth's life. Adolescents are dealing with many questions about their own identity, their story, and anxiety about growing into adulthood. They often have a keen curiosity and need clarification about the story of their separation from their family of origin, and as they move toward adulthood and leaving home, their early losses may be triggered. Their emerging identity challenges can trigger grief issues and emotional upheaval. Their anger at their birth parents may manifest in anger toward their adoptive parents or guardians, flouting of rules and engaging in behaviors they expressly know their parents would disapprove of.

Some teens may become depressed over a breakup or friends moving away or even high school graduation, all potential triggers of early losses, and in extreme cases they may have suicidal ideation. Native American children in transracial families for instance, have a suicide rate ten times that of Caucasian youth. Some teens deal with loss by turning to risky behaviors like substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual acting out, and even pregnancy perhaps seeing this as a way of aligning with their birth parents and their story. Some adolescents use pregnancy and parenthood as an opportunity to prove that they love their children more than their parents loved them; or to "break the pattern" of abuse without realizing the significant challenges this creates for them if they haven't resolved their own grief and loss.

All of the normal adolescent issues of separation and developing independence are magnified by experiences with grief and loss. Identity formation at this point is critical, whether cultural, gender, or family. Without opportunities to engage in positive identity-formation activities, the adolescent will find their own, and when complicated by grief and loss, they often turn to identities that reject both their old family and their adoptive or guardianship family, challenging the boundaries of their new family in the process.



Into Adulthood

The developmental process does not end with high school graduation. As youth grow up and move away from home, they continue to process the issues inherent in early losses. The importance of addressing the loss and grief issues in childhood becomes more evident as youth move into adulthood. Many pursue reunion with their birth parents, siblings, or other family members. This is especially true in transracial families., Native American youth are thought to have the highest rate of returning to their birth families.

Reunions can trigger many unexpected and conflicting feelings, including fear of rejection, anger, confusion, guilt, curiosity, identity confusion, and grief. Some find that feelings of loss resurface when they have their own children. Some adopted adults have difficulty with intimacy and sustaining deep relationships, especially if their grief and loss have gone unaddressed throughout their childhood.

It is important that loss and grief issues are addressed at early developmental stages, so that by adulthood there is a foundation on which to weather the normal recurrence of grief. There are many triggers in everyday life that can be challenging, including anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, contact with family members, and revisiting places, all of which can bring expected or unexpected grief reactions, as memories of losses reemerge.

