

# Grief Support for Children

handout

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## **Grief Support for Children**

Presented by Shane R. Jimerson, Ph.D., NCSP

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### Introductions

- ☞ How many folks are school psychologists?
- ☞ How many folks are school counselors?
- ☞ How many folks are graduate students?
- ☞ Does everyone work in the schools?
- ☞ Who is aware of grieving students in their schools?
- ☞ Who has prior training in working with bereaved students?
- ☞ Who has experience working with bereaved youth?
- ☞ Who am I?

### 3 Primary Objectives

- ☞ 1) To develop awareness of grief reactions influencing socioemotional and behavioral adjustment.
- ☞ 2) To provide knowledge and increase sensitivity to developmental considerations related to mourning during childhood and adolescence.
- ☞ 3) To provide information regarding specific strategies for facilitating support groups for bereaved youth.

### Outline of this Session

#### Introductions / Orientation / Video

1. Prevalence / Relevance of Child Bereavement
2. Principles of Grief and Tasks of Grief
3. Common Grief Reactions
4. An Overview of Salient Conceptual Models
5. Working with Bereaved Youth: Support Groups
6. Conclusion and Discussion

#### “What About Me?”

- ☞ This video consists of short clips of children and adolescents talking about their grief experiences. The video begins with the children briefly describing their situations. In each case, it was either a parent or sibling that died, or the child is currently living with a sibling who has a terminal illness.

#### Key Points from Video

- ☞ The following are some key points that the children make about their experience:
- ☞ They may get tired of talking and of people asking about the sick or dying person--

"I wish people would talk about me some."

- ☞ They may feel angry, guilty, and sometimes think the death was their fault.
- ☞ They may fear they might die too if they do the same activities.
- ☞ They may have nightmares.
- ☞ They may feel lonely and sad and it can be hard to go to bed.
- ☞ When feeling sad, it may help to go running, play, do gymnastics, look at a picture of the dead person, visit the grave and talk to the dead person, think positive and keep on living
- ☞ Eventually, it starts getting easier to incorporate the death into their life.
- ☞ They can always remember the dead person and keep that person in their heart.

## Prevalence/Relevance of Child Bereavement

### Part I:

#### Facilitating Grief Support Groups for Students

#### Child Loss Statistics

- ☞ Each year millions of children in the U.S. experience a significant early loss
- ☞ Approximately 90% of students will experience the loss of a close or special person before finishing high school
- ☞ Over 70% of primary schools have bereaved students
- ☞ Over 85% of secondary schools reported post-bereavement problems

#### Effects of Bereavement in School

- ☞ Children and adolescents can be more sensitive to the conditions that follow loss than are adults
- ☞ Unhealthy mourning can lead to poor adjustment
- ☞ Research has demonstrated a connection between socio-emotional adjustment and school achievement

Frequency of Common Grief Reactions  
reported as "currently a problem" Jimerson (2001)

School grades have dropped	10%
Difficulty falling asleep	8%
Fatigue	7%
Irritability	7%
Mood swings	7%
Difficulty concentrating	7%
Behavior problems at school	6%
Guilty feelings	5%
Shorter attention span	5%

Often distracted	5%	
Depressed	5%	
Seems afraid to separate	5%	from caregiver(s)

### The Role of the School Psychologist

☞ School psychologists are encouraged to attend to negative effects that grief can have on students and their school achievement

☞ School psychologists are able to identify and refer students to grief support groups

☞ School psychologists may facilitate grief support groups

### Definition of Terms

☞ Bereavement - characterized as a state caused by loss, such as death.

☞ Grief - characterized by the emotional and behavioral experiences in response to a loss.

☞ Mourning - involves a search for meaning in one's loss and changes in their general orientation and assumptions that lasts for years, and for many, throughout their lives.

### Principles and Tasks of Children's Grief

#### Part II Facilitating Grief Support Groups for Students

#### Six Principles of Children's Grief

- Grief is a natural reaction to loss
- Each person's grief experience is unique
- There are no "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve
- Each death is different and grief reactions will vary
- Grieving is influenced by a multitude of factors
- Grief continues across development

#### Three Tasks of Grieving

Fox (1989)

- Understanding
- Feeling the feelings
- Commemorating

#### Seven Tasks of Mourning

Crenshaw (1990)

- Acknowledge the reality of loss
- Identify & express the emotions of grief
- Commemorating the loss
- Acknowledging ambivalence
- Resolve the ambivalence
- Letting go

- Moving on

#### Tasks of Grief

Worden (1996)

- Task I: To Accept the reality of loss
- Task II: To Experience pain and emotion of loss
- Task III: To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing
- Task IV: To relocate the deceased within one's life and find ways to memorialize the person

#### Tasks for the Grieving Family

Rosen (1996)

- Shared acknowledgment of the reality of death
- Shared experience of the pain of grief
- Reorganization of the family
- Redirection of family's relationships and goals

#### Synthesis

- Understanding
- Expressing emotions
- Adapting to a new environment
- Memorializing and commemorating
- Grief reactions vary across individuals
- Grief is an ongoing process

#### Keys to Healthy Grief

Lehman, Jimerson, & Gaasch (2001)

- ⇒ Get the facts
- ⇒ Remember the relationship
- ⇒ Identify changes
- ⇒ Express feelings
- ⇒ Find help

#### Uniqueness of Grief Reactions

- No single "correct" way to grieve
- Grief reactions are impacted by many factors; (e.g., the circumstances (type of death, expected, unexpected, disenfranchised), relationship/closeness, and support...)
- Family influences (e.g., Surviving caregiver's ability to provide care, Family stressors)
- Grief reactions are impacted by level of development
- Children and adolescents may exhibit many or few of the following common grief reactions

- Any of these common reactions may result in later difficulties depending on the intensity and persistence

#### Common Emotional Grief Reactions

- Anger
- Sadness & Longing
- Anxiety
- Helplessness
- Shock & Denial
- Depression
- Guilt
- Relief
- Shame
- Mood Swings
- Repression of Feelings & Apathy
- Hypersensitivity

#### Common Cognitive Grief Reactions

- School Difficulties
  - Distraction
  - Attention Span
  - Decline in performance
- Spiritual Questions
- Memory Problems
- Confusion
- Preoccupation with death

#### Common Physical Grief Reactions

- Illness/Somatic Complaints
- Sleep Disturbance
- Crying and Sighing
- Decline in Energy
- Eating Disturbance
- Hyperactivity
- Susceptibility to Health Problems
- Gastrointestinal Disturbance
- Numbing/Heaviness/Tingling

#### Common Social Grief Reactions

- Changes in Personality and Family Role
- Changes in Relationships with Peers and Adults
- Withdrawal
- Acting out/Increased Need for Attention

- Aggression and Fighting
- Tantrums and Outbursts
- Regression

#### Healthy vs. Unhealthy Grief

- Important considerations in making this distinction:
- Duration and intensity of grief:
  - Common for the youth to be “in and out” of grief
  - Reactions that are chronic or last over a prolonged period of time warrant professional intervention
- Impact and change following the loss-- May be overwhelming or cause impairment
- Iatrogenic grief reactions-- Emotions and behaviors often intensify before they improve

#### Severe Grief Reactions

##### Indicate the Need for Professional Help

- Chronic Depression
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Substance Abuse
- Suicidal Behaviors/Talk
- Chronic Physical Symptoms Without Organic Findings
- Inappropriate Sexual Behavior
- Severe Changes in Eating Patterns
- Persistent Sleep Disorders
- Prolonged Guilt
- Risk-taking/Unsafe Behaviors
- Persistent Denial
- Develop Symptoms of Deceased

##### Summary

- As children vary so does their grief
- Multiple influences on grief (e.g., circumstances, closeness, support)
- Common grief reactions include: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive
- Important to examine the intensity and persistence of all grief reactions
- Some students need referral to a specialist

## An Overview of Salient Conceptual Models and Developmental Considerations

### Part IV

#### Facilitating Grief Support Groups for Students

##### What is Development?

- Growth and change over time
- Cognitive, social, emotional
- Normative/non-normative
- Context

##### Piagetian Theory

- Cognitive Development (4 phases)
- Sensorimotor – birth to age 2
- Pre-operational – ages 2 to 7
- Concrete operations – ages 7 to 11
- Formal operations – age 11+

#### Social & Emotional Development

- Attachment to a parent or primary caregiver (Bowlby)
- Separation anxiety – distress when caregiver leaves (6-8 months+)
- Caregiver as secure base
- Object (person) permanence
- “Loss of a loved person is one of the most intensely painful experiences any human being can suffer” (Bowlby, 1980)

#### Ecological Theory

- Contextual framework (Bronfenbrenner)
- Microsystem – family, daycare, schools, etc.
- Mesosystem – relationships within the microsystem
- Exosystem – healthcare, workplace, etc.
- Macrosystem – customs, laws, values

#### Transactional Model

- Transaction between organism & environment
- Bi-directional, mutually influential (Sameroff)
- Current behaviors are the result of one’s developmental history & current circumstance
- Developmental trajectories
- Element of time
- “Every unresolved grief is given expression in one form or another.” (Deutsch, 1937)

#### Risk and Resiliency

- Risk factors
- Protective factors
- Interaction
- Competence not necessarily consistent across contexts

#### Four Elements in the

#### Understanding of Death

- Universality
- Irreversibility
- Non-functionality
- Causality

#### Universality

- All living things die
- All inclusive – no exceptions
- Inevitability (used interchangeably with universality)
- Unpredictable - timing



-Social development  
development

-Emotional

- Contextual Considerations
- Risk/resilience – role of early loss to later deleterious outcomes
- Transactional model

Grief Support Services  
Part V:  
Working With Bereaved Students

Support Options

- Prevention - Death Education
  - Provide effective ways of coping
  - Explore topics about death
  - Self-awareness
  - Additional sources for children
- Individual Therapy / Counseling
- Family Therapy / Counseling
- Support Group
  - Will provide further details on this...

Purpose of Support Services

- Facilitate healthy mourning
- Avoid deleterious outcomes

“No One Ever Told Us”

- This video clip shows adolescents discussing ways they have dealt with their grief, concluding with comments on the usefulness of participating in a grief support group.

Unhealthy Variations  
of Mourning

- Isolation
- Maladaptive behavior
- Poor academic achievement
- Poor academic adjustment
- Self-medication

Healthy Adaptation  
to Mourning

- Acknowledging thoughts and feelings
- Identify and form values
- Incorporate the experience into life

Evaluating Support Services:

3 types of change

- Subjective
  - Increase feelings of self-esteem
  - Feel less guilt
  - Increase in positive feelings about deceased
- Behavioral

- Form new relationships
- Decrease maladaptive behaviors
- Symptom Relief
  - Decreased negative grief reactions

#### Important Initial Considerations for Group Facilitators

- Being comfortable with one's own losses
- Being comfortable talking with children about death
- Appropriate preparation (literature and training (e.g. Hospice, ADEC, group centers in the U.S.))
- Need to know and understand the needs of children and adolescents

#### Considerations for Grief Support Group Design & Implementation

- Clear timeline for the group
- Children grouped with same-age peers
- Developmentally appropriate activities
- Engaging activities that address important aspects of grief
- Multiple avenues for expression
- Tools for future coping are discussed
- Activities designed to meet goals
- Address emotions and thoughts/ideas
- Emphasize grief in the family context
- Flexibility to accept variations in children's bereavement experiences

#### Important aspects of working with bereaved youth

- LISTEN attentively to the children in order to understand them
- Be ACCURATE when answering children's questions - half truths and fantasies can be worse than the truth

#### Specific Strategies:

#### Review of Grief Support Group Curriculum

Lehmann, Jimerson, & Gaasch, 2001 (Taylor & Francis: Brunner & Routledge)  
a five book series including;

#### Grief Support Group Facilitators Handbook

The Mourning Child Grief Support Group Curriculum: Preschool Edition

The Mourning Child Grief Support Group Curriculum: Early Childhood Edition

The Mourning Child Grief Support Group Curriculum: Middle Childhood Edition

Teens Together Grief Support Group Curriculum: Adolescent Edition

#### Session #1:

#### Information Interviews

- Serves as a transition into the group and information is provided
- The caregiver and the child meet with the group facilitator
- Information is obtained on each child to facilitate grief support

#### Overview of Group Activities

#### Procedures That Should Take Place Every Week

(with the exception of week 1 and week 10)

- Opening Activity

- Do group opening and identify topic of session
- Centering Activity
  - Relaxation / Imagery technique to focus group
- Sharing Feelings (Check-In)
  - Have children indicate how they are feeling on a range from 1-10, then share with the group

#### Overview of Group Activities

(Continued)

- Introduction to the Topic
  - Introduce the topic
- Journal Drawing
  - Have the children make an entry in an ongoing journal that relates to the weekly topic
  - Children select beads that depict specific entries in their journal, and will later use these beads to create a symbolic bracelet

#### Overview of Group Activities

(Continued)

- Closing Activity
  - Have children sit around a lit candle
  - Provide feedback and encouragement
  - Have children select an affirmation and read it aloud
  - Conclude the session with a statement that highlights the purpose of the session

#### Session #2:

#### Telling My Story

- First group meeting with children only
- Facilitator establishes the “Code of Safety” which allows the children to feel comfortable
- Each child shares his or her story
- The word “grief” is defined

#### Session 2 Sample Activity

#### Getting To Know Each Other

- Materials
  - Puzzle pieces
  - Markers/crayons
- Procedure
  - Have child draw something about themselves on the puzzle pieces ( e.g., favorite color, food they hate, best friend’s name, etc.)
  - Have group put pieces together to form the shape of a heart. This signifies healing a broken heart through the support of others.

#### Session #3:

#### Exploring Death

- Gives children a forum to talk about death
- Children are taught about death concepts
  - (irreversability, causality, universality)
- Children learn that “Every living thing dies”

### Session 3 Sample Activity

#### Dispelling Myths About Death

- Materials
  - Drawing sheet: dispelling common myths
  - Blackboard with myths written on it
  - Crayons
- Procedure
  - Define “myth” - something not true that is thought to be true
  - Go over common myths about death with group ( i.e. “only old people die”, “death is contagious”, etc.)
  - Have group correct the myths

#### Session #4:

#### Identifying Changes

- Children are taught that change is constant
- It is explained that when a close or special person dies, things change
- Each child talks about how they and their family have changed since the death

### Session 4 Sample Activity

#### Common Grief Reactions

- Materials
  - Colored die
  - Grief Reaction Cards
- Procedure
  - Children toss die and pick a card that corresponds with the color
  - Children say whether or not they have experienced this reaction
  - Facilitator keeps tally to demonstrate that these reactions are common

#### Session #5:

#### Memories/Remembering

- The word “memory” is defined and the importance of memories is discussed
- Children can bring pictures of, or objects that remind them of, their close or special person
- The children are encouraged to talk about their memories
- A remembrance ceremony allows the group to remember their special people

### Session 5 Sample Activity

#### Memory Cards

- Materials
  - Memory Cards
- Procedure
  - Children take turns selecting a card from the stack
  - Children relate a memory they had with their special person according the card (e.g., Remember from the past with your special person.)

#### Session #6:

#### Identifying & Expressing Feelings

- The children talk about the word “feeling”
- The children learn that their feelings are a normal part of the grieving process
- The children are assisted in identifying and expressing their feelings about the death

## Session 6 Sample Activity

### Feeling Sentence Starters

#### ■ Materials

- Feeling sentence starters

#### ■ Procedure

- Children and facilitator each pick four cards and read it to themselves.
- Ask children to complete at least three of their sentences (e.g., “When I am happy...”)
- Go around the group having each person respond to one card per turn.

#### Session #7:

### Exploring Unfinished Business

- The concept of unfinished business is introduced as being any obstacle that prevents normal grief progression
- The children can talk about the things they didn’t get to say to, or do with their special person
- The children can say anything about the death that is troubling

## Session 7 Sample Activity

### Coulda-Woulda-Shoulda

#### ■ Materials

- Coulda-woulda-shoulda post-it notes

#### ■ Procedure

- Put one each of “coulda”, “woulda” and “shoulda” post-it notes (e.g., “I coulda been nicer,” “I shoulda called more often.”) on each child.
- Take one phrase at a time, and ask each child to share their coulda-woulda-shoulda’s, and as they share take that post-it off. Process symbolizes willingness to not let these feelings “stick” to them anymore.

#### Session #8:

### Coping with Feelings

- The children can talk about reactions to their feelings and talk about troubling feelings
- Children are given tools to help them cope with their feelings of grief in a healthy way

## Session 8 Sample Activity

### Coping With Our Feelings in a Healthy Way:

#### Thought-Stopping

#### ■ Materials

- Pencils and thought-stopping worksheet

#### ■ Procedure

- Have facilitator explain the process of thought-stopping and have children complete the worksheet.
- Discuss with group

#### Session #9:

### Learning Self-Care and Support

- The importance of a strong support system is stressed
- Children are also taught the importance of caring for themselves
- The children learn ways to get support and care for themselves

## Session 9 Sample Activity

### Problem Solving Plan

- Materials
  - Problem solving plan hand-out, problem solving scenarios
- Procedures
  - Go over hand-out with children and ask for volunteers that are dealing with a particular problem in their lives right now
  - Have the group use the plan to help that child with their problem

Session #10:

Learning to Say Good-Bye

- The children say good-bye to each other now that the group is ending
- Each child's personal strengths are emphasized
- Children participate in a celebration of their group support

In Sum

- 1. Information Interviews
- 2. Telling my Story
- 3. Exploring Death
- 4. Identifying Changes
- 5. Memories / Remembering
- 6. Identifying and Expressing Feelings
- 7. Exploring Unfinished Business
- 8. Coping with Feelings
- 9. Learning Self-Care and Support
- 10. Learning to Say Good-Bye

Conclusion

and

Discussion

Part VI:

Facilitating Grief Support Groups for Students  
Concluding Considerations

- ☞ Need to utilize theory and research to facilitate our intervention practices with bereaved youth.
- ☞ Minimally, we as educational professionals should be aware of possible achievement, behavior, and socioemotional difficulties associated with early loss.
- ☞ Range of appropriate assistance; outside referrals, support groups, communication with the primary caregiver(s)
- ☞ Being sensitive to how children think about death, what they understand, and common grief reactions will better prepare us to work with children who have experienced a loss.

Questions and Discussion

- ☞ Any additional questions at this point?
- ☞ The information presented during this session provides a foundation to gather additional information and skills to work with bereaved youth.

3 Primary Learning Objectives

- ☞1) To develop awareness of grief reactions influencing socioemotional and behavioral adjustment.
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