

Counseling Children Experiencing Grief

Matthew Paylo, Christine McAllister, and Victoria Kress, Youngstown State University

Nicole Stargell, University of North Carolina Pembroke

DESCRIPTION OF GRIEF

Many children experience the loss or death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, and even a pet during their formative childhood years. Grief is a normal emotional reaction to loss and death. Although many individuals process grief effectively, some struggle to cope (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011) adequately. Grief symptoms in children vary. Some children exhibit emotional shock and confusion, while some younger children may present with explosive, avoidant, and immature regressive behaviors (Ener & Ray, 2018). These grief symptoms are exhibited, especially in children who lack an understanding of death and loss. For example, younger children's understanding of the irreversibility, finality, causality, and inevitability of death can affect their ability to recognize, understand, and process their grief and loss (Ener & Ray, 2018; Willis, 2002).

Childhood grief symptomology presents somewhat differently than adults although the process is thought to be similar including the following stages: (a) denial (e.g., avoidance or unwillingness to discuss loss); (b) anger (e.g., blaming others for the loss); (c) bargaining (e.g., making promises or changes in one's situation or life as a means of regaining control); (d) sorrow (e.g., loss of appetite, energy, and motivation); and (e) acceptance (e.g., realization that loss is real and final; Kubler-Ross, 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010). While these stages can be helpful for professional counselors to understanding the universal process of grief, many researchers contend childhood grief should be conceptualized as individual and unique to each child (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2017; Ener & Ray, 2018).

Professional counselors need to recognize that grief is a process; therefore, symptoms can vary in duration and intensity. When children display grief symptomology for more extended periods, clinical attention is warranted. Individual, group, and family counseling services may be helpful (Cohen et al., 2017; Kress, Paylo, & Stargell, 2019). More specifically, children who experience prolonged periods of depression (e.g., loss of interest in daily activities and/or events), withdraw from friends, are unable to sleep, have counselor attention is

strong correlation exists between age and behavioral manifestations (Ener & Ray, 2018). In addition to behavioral manifestation, many children internalize their struggles and are at an increased risk of depression, traumatic responses, and functional impairment (Cohen et al., 2017; Edgar-Baily & Kress, 2010; Melhem, Porta, Payne, & Brent, 2013; Webb, 2011a, 2011b). One such assessment measure that has been validated with children who struggle with prolonged grief is *Inventory for Complicated Greif-Revised for Children* (ICG-RC; Melhem et al., 2013). The use of this measure is recommended. Also, a comprehensive assessment of children who experience grief could include measures of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress while also including assessments that measure behaviors from multiple perspectives (e.g., individual, family, school; Cohen et al., 2017; Pearlman, Schwalbe, & Cloitre, 2010).

INTERVENTION/TREATMENT STRATEGIES

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is an evidence-based approach for addressing grief and loss in children (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2012; Cohen et al., 2017). When counseling children who are experiencing grief, it is essential that their individual needs and level of severity be taken into consideration. What follows are some CBT-based counseling considerations that professional counselors might utilize when counseling children who experienced prolonged grief reactions to loss (Cohen et al., 2017).

Grief Psychoeducation

Professional counselors should use psychoeducation to aid younger children in combating common misconceptions about death (e.g., the deceased individual will return or come back) and assist children in identifying grief and loss reminders and triggers (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Cohen et al., 2017; Kress et al., 2019). During this process, professional counselors can help children learn about the typical stages of grief and normalize their associated feelings (e.g., sadness, irritability, despair). In some cases, younger children may need to be taught the definition of death, the difference between being alive and being dead (e.g., breathing, heart beating, brain activity), and the associated concepts/ideas such as finality, causality, and irreversibility. Professional counselors should be mindful of validating children's feelings, clarify issues of causation (e.g., you did not cause this death; it was not your fault), and allow children to ask all of their questions about death. Since children learn incrementally, children may continue to ask the professional counselor the same or similar types of questions repeatedly. Professional counselors should be patient with children when using the psychoeducation process and allow sufficient time before moving on to other aspects of treatment (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Cohen et al., 2017).

Resource:

Grief Education: <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-guide/grief-psychoeducation-guide>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network- Guide for Parents:

https://rems.ed.gov/docs/SAMHSA_ChildhoodTraumaticGriefForParents.pdf

Creating a Grief and Loss Narrative

An essential grief counseling component is allowing children to tell their stories in their own words (i.e., creating a grief and loss narrative). Professional counselors can use these grief and loss narratives to gradually expose children to their lived experiences while slowly incorporating newly revealed aspects of their loss either verbally or as a written narrative (Cohen et al., 2017; Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). This exposure aspect is vital and helps children to tolerate and integrate aspects of their individual experience, an essential aspect of the grieving process. Professional counselors using this narrative approach help children increase their level of awareness, level of communication, and reduce their tendencies to repress or not process their grief and loss (Cohen et al., 2017).

Encourage Processing of the Loss

In some situations, professional counselors may need to encourage children who are reluctant to share and process. Creating a warm and non-judgmental space and place can help children to feel comfortable to grieve their loss and to discuss aspects and memories of what they miss about the deceased persons. Professional counselors may want to help children process grief by having the child recall memories they shared with the person, what they learned from that person, what they are going to miss about the person, and how their world was better because of that person (Cohen et al., 2017). Using a name anagram is one activity that can be used to assist children who are beginning to explore their losses. Professional counselors can help the child assign a special memory, phrase, or a positive thought with each letter of the deceased person's name. This activity can begin to encourage children to identify and process their grief.

Resources:

Clinical Grief Activities:

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After a Loved One Dies – How Children Grieve and how parents and other adults can support them:
[https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/
Documents/After-a-Loved-One-Dies-English.pdf](https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Documents/After-a-Loved-One-Dies-English.pdf)
Helping Children Cope & Deal With Grief: