

Supporting Young People Through Family Separation

Seasons for Growth

Fiona McCallum,
General Manager Good Grief,
MacKillop Family Services

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Loss and grief are not limited to bereavement...

"All changes involve loss, just as all losses require changes"
(Goldsworthy, 2005)

- Bereavement
- Parental separation and divorce
- Natural disasters
- Emigration and migration
- Out of home care
- Parental incarceration
- Homelessness
- Disability

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Our Focus Today

- How do young people **react** to separation and divorce?
- What **influences** their coping?
- How can we help **normalise** the change for them?
- What does the evidence tell us? How do we help in building their **resilience** to transition through family separation?

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Australian Families

48,000

1 in 4

- Around 48,000 children per year experience parental *divorce*
- Figures are higher if we take into account *separation* of married and unmarried parents
- Estimated 1 in 4 Australian children experience parental separation or divorce during childhood or adolescence

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; 2017)

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Loss and Secondary Losses

Secondary losses are the succession of **on-going** changes and losses following a loss event

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(Ellis et al., 2013)

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Grief is a normal response to loss

"Grief can be defined as the response to loss in all of its totality – including its physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual manifestations - and as a natural and normal reaction to loss."
(Hall, 2014)

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Understanding Children's Loss and Grief



And yet,
it is not often
named beyond
bereavement



Understanding Children's Loss and Grief

- Children and young people are surprised but relieved to discover that their reactions to change and loss are normal
- In this way, their feelings and behaviours become explainable



How do children react and behave following parental separation?

In unique and different ways!

- Influenced by a range of factors, not solely age
- Many primary aged children appear to adapt easily but some may hide their own feelings or have difficulty regulating emotions (such as anger) and their behaviour



How do children react and behave following parental separation?

Primary School

- Sad and angry one minute, okay the next
- Unrealistic and frightening thoughts
- Blame self and others
- Regress to earlier behaviours
- 'Lash out' at family, friends and teachers
- Clingy and uncooperative
- Tired, distracted and unable to concentrate
- Stomach aches and headaches



How do children react and behave following parental separation?

Adolescents...

- May retreat into very private and intense grief
- May appear self-centred and may withdraw from the family increasing the risk of engaging in risky behaviour
- Sleep problems, exhaustion, headaches
- Mood changes
- Withdrawal from social networks



Myriad of feelings...



(Ellis et al., 2013)

"In and Out" of Grief



- ◊ They experience sadness, anger and fear, but also are able to have fun and engage in activities.
- ◊ This is a **"normal"** grief response.
- ◊ Prolonged or chronic depression, anger, withdrawal or fear over a period of several months may indicate that the student needs professional help in dealing with loss"



(The Dougy Center, n.d., p.9)



Disenfranchised Grief



Grief that "is not recognised, acknowledged or socially sanctioned - and hence particularly problematic"

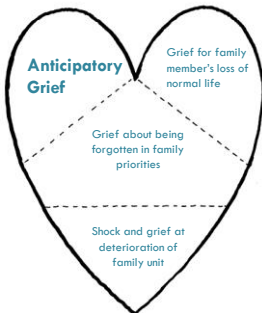
(Bell et al., 2012, p. 50).

For example:

- ◊ Grief for an abusive parent
- ◊ Grief following suicide due to social stigma
- ◊ Grief for parental incarceration
- ◊ Grief for a girl or boyfriend during adolescence (sometimes considered transitory relationships by adults)



Anticipatory Grief



Anticipatory grief is triggered by the threat of a death, separation or other loss event

(Lindemann, 1944)



- ◊ Following separation, the focus tends to be upon children's adaptation and behaviour - **little recognition given to children's experiences of loss and grief, and how best to support them.**



Supporting Children and Young People



What influences children's coping?

Stressors include:

- ◊ Poverty
- ◊ Violence and abuse
- ◊ On-going parental conflict
- ◊ Low parental mental wellbeing
- ◊ Diminished parenting capacity
- ◊ Multiple secondary / other losses



(Baxter et al., 2011; Hagen et al., 2012; Kaplow et al., 2014; Kaspiw et al., 2009; Mooney et al., 2009; Pryor & Rogers, 2001; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2013)



What does this tell us about what children need?

A strong, supportive, warm and open relationship with at least one parent is the overwhelming mediating factor emerging time and time again in many different studies.



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(see, Hagan et al., 2012; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2013; Wolchik et al., 2008)

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Positive Parenting Involves...

Open, warm conversation and involvement in decision-making

- Clear, factual, age-appropriate information
- Reassurance they are not to blame
- Warm, open communication to talk through and make sense of what has happened – repeatedly and without judgement
- Space to express a range of emotions and help to make sense of these reactions
- Opportunity to be involved in decision-making around subsequent changes

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(Hagan et al., 2012; Haine et al., 2006; Rolls & Payne, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2013; Wolchik et al., 2008)

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Positive Parenting Involves...

Ideally, children also need a parent or carer who remains attentive to the practical aspects of parenting

- Strives to maintain day to day family routines, care and meals etc.
- Continues to support their school and extracurricular activities
- Notices changes in their child – including if the child may be hiding their grief to prevent overburdening the parent
- Maintains usual family boundaries and expectations

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(Haine et al., 2006; Shapiro et al., 2013; Werner-Lin & Bank, 2013; Wolchik et al., 2008)

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Supporting Children

But...

- Children experiencing parental separation are usually in the care of distressed adults
- Children's loss and secondary losses may be complex to disentangle and recognise
- Beyond bereavement, little recognition of grief
- Other adults (eg. teachers, coaches, extended family) may feel uncomfortable and unsure how best to offer support

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(Dyregrov et al., 2013; Kahn, 2013)

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How has Seasons for Growth endeavoured to facilitate what children need?

Seasons for Growth: Children and Young People's Program



- Based on a belief that change, loss and grief are part of life
- Explores a range of issues associated with change and loss – what they may experience and ways they can respond and adapt

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Seasons as a Metaphor for Change & Loss



"Seasons" is a wise metaphor for the movement of life...

"The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all – and to find in all of it opportunities for growth"

Parker Palmer (1999)

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Seasons as a Metaphor for Change & Loss

- Each season is good, unique and important for growth
- Individuals are affected differently by the seasons
- We have to find ways to adjust to differences in each season
- Each season has its own story; there are easy days and difficult days
- Seasons have their own unpredictability and that is normal
- Seasonal change is often silent, gradual and unseen

"Life is like the seasons, good times like summer will come again"



Theorising Grief

Grief is a process

- not a state ...

(Grief Counselling, 1980 p. 10)



Seasons for Growth is built around the grief theory related to the work of J. William Worden.



Worden's Tasks of Grief

For the *Seasons for Growth* Program these have been adapted as:

1. To accept the reality of loss
2. To process the pain of grief
3. To adjust to a changed world after the loss
4. To find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life



The Strengths of Task Theory

- Shifts grief from being a passive ('if only') to an active ('I can') experience
- Makes sense of the 'to and 'fro' of emotional turmoil and normalises such experience
- Helps empower by encouraging an intentional response
- Doesn't prescribe any specific order with tasks
- Can be revisited and reworked over time
- Important learning for children as they find their way in a perpetually changing world



Vulnerable and Capable

Recognises that children are both **vulnerable** (as a result of their circumstances, inexperience) and **capable** (of making decisions, setting goals, solving problems given opportunity and support)



Supporting children to navigate loss

The **core** elements within the literature regarding what children need surrounded:

- Supportive relationships
- Support to understand their reactions
- Opportunity to participate
- Sense of recognition (as grievers)

These elements are woven through the *Seasons for Growth* program.



Putting these insights into practice in your life or work

We cannot reverse the loss a child has experienced, but we can influence wellbeing and build capacity

- **Acknowledge** a child's loss - offer recognition = 'I am'
- Open, honest **communication** - offer voice = 'I have'
- Help **normalise** the experience of grief and encourage children to identify their feelings and the actions / choices they can take - facilitate agency = 'I can'



Conversations with Young People

- Let the young person know their loss is recognised
- Identify yourself as a safe person who is open and willing to listen
- But, don't say, "I know how you feel"
- Don't force children to share the details of their story
- Don't assume to know



Conversations with Young People

- Focus on discussing concerns or changes required in your context. In a school a class teacher might ask:
 - How / if they would like their classmates informed?
 - How would they like the teacher to deal with questions?
 - Would they like to choose a safe place they can go if they begin to feel overwhelmed etc.?
- Keep communication open over time:
 - check how things are going
 - if strategies are working out
 - any new concerns



Help with managing feelings

- Let children know it is ok to feel sad, angry etc. after a big change – it is a normal part of grieving a loss
- Help them to recognise and identify their feelings
- Help them to understand whilst feelings are ok, boundaries apply – helps children feel safe and retain normality
- Help them to find other techniques or ways to diffuse overwhelming feelings



www.goodgrief.org.au/assistance



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Do you need support?

Our programs are offered by trained people in many places across Australia, New Zealand and Scotland, as well as in Wales and England. We also have some helpful ideas in our fact sheets below that might help you or someone you care about. However, if you feel urgent professional support is needed, one of the following agencies may be able to help.



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Supporting someone who is grieving

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Resources Available



New Booklet Series

Used to help you understand and share your thoughts and feelings

Steps to feeling better

There are times when we need a bit of extra help and there are steps we can take to feeling better ... The booklet series, "Worried", "Sad" and "When Someone You Love Dies", provide practical ways to looking after ourselves and others.

AVAILABLE NOW
www.goodgrief.org.au/help/resources



In a Nutshell



1. Grief is a normal response to loss and change
2. Children will grieve in unique ways
3. Children need:
 - Supportive relationships
 - Help to understand their reactions
 - Opportunity to have a voice & participate
 - Sense of recognition



But no season lasts forever,
... not even Winter.



“The only thing in life that is permanent is change.
Change is the one constant in life”

(Fallin, 2013, p.5)



Thank you



Fiona McCallum,
General Manager Good Grief,
MacKillop Family Services



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Supporting children – Worden (1996)

Worden identified that grieving children need the following:

- ✦ Adequate information
- ✦ Fears and anxieties addressed
- ✦ Reassurance they are not to blame
- ✦ Careful listening
- ✦ Validation of individual's feelings
- ✦ Help with overwhelming feelings
- ✦ Modelled grief behaviours
- ✦ Opportunities to remember
- ✦ Involvement and inclusion
- ✦ Continued routine activities.



How can schools help?

Children and young people need ...

- ✦ to feel safe
- ✦ to be supported
- ✦ to learn about what is happening for them
- ✦ to be seen as an individual – what is normal behaviour for this young person, and if its changed, what support may they need?
- ✦ increased awareness of the role of social media

Remember: Many children cope well with the support of family, friends and trusted, caring adults.



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