

Supporting Young People Through Family Separation

Seasons for Growth

Fiona McCallum,
General Manager Good Grief,
MacKillop Family Services

MacKillop Family Services good grief


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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Seasons for Growth: Facilitates what children need




- ◊ 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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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

- ◊ Around 48,000 children per year experience parental divorce

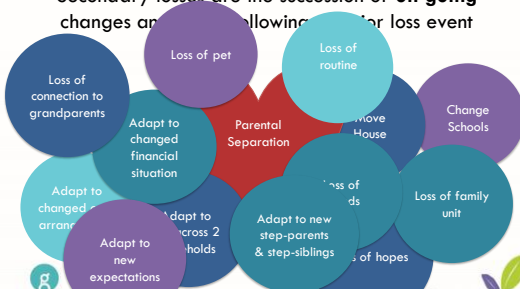
1 in 4

- ◊ Estimated 1 in 4 Australian children experience parental separation or divorce during childhood or adolescence

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Loss and Secondary Losses

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



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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

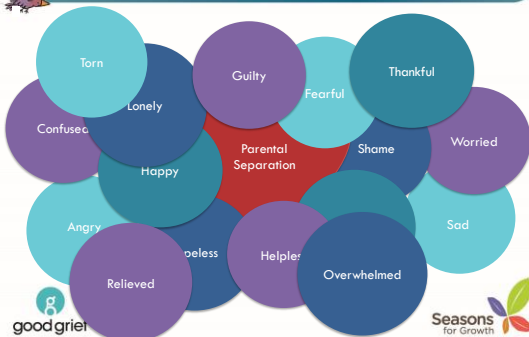


And yet,
it is not often
named beyond
bereavement

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Myriad of feelings...



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Storm Warning - Voting



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Storm Warning Activity

Q1. How would you respond to the following scenario?

Your Dog Runs Away

- ♦ A. Breeze
- ♦ B. Wind
- ♦ C. Storm
- ♦ D. Gale
- ♦ E. Cyclone



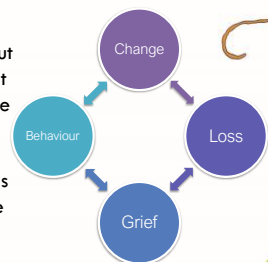
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Understanding Children's Loss and Grief

- ♦ 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



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Voting Results – Your dog runs away



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Storm Warning Activity

Q2. How would you respond to the following scenario?

You move house

- ◊ A. Breeze
- ◊ B. Wind
- ◊ C. Storm
- ◊ D. Gale
- ◊ E. Cyclone



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How do children react and behave following parental separation?

Primary School

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



Voting Results – You move house



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"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)



- 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



Voting - What do Children Need Most?

Q3. What do children and young people need most following separation and divorce?

- A. Involvement in ongoing decision making
- B. Caring support networks
- C. Competent and warm parenting
- D. Parent Wellbeing
- E. Low parental conflict
- F. Cooperative post separation parenting



What influences children's coping?

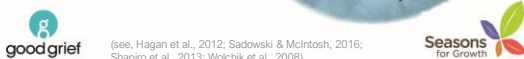
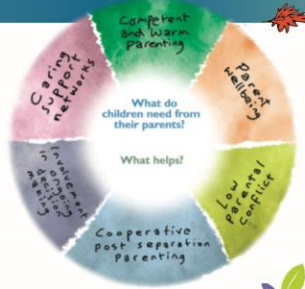
Stressors include:

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



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.



Competent & Warm 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 and make sense of a range of emotions
- Opportunity to be involved in decision-making around subsequent changes



Competent & Warm Parenting Involves..

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

- ◊ Strives to maintain family routines, care & meals
- ◊ Support for 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



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



GIVE CHILDREN A BIGGER VOICE,
MORE OF THE TIME

FINDINGS FROM THE ALES CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SEPARATED FAMILIES STUDY 2011

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



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



Seasons for Growth: Facilitates what children need



- ◊ 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



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.



Seasons for Growth: Worden's Tasks



Like the seasons of the year, the tasks are ongoing. We learn to adjust.

Key strengths of the Program

- ◊ Seasonal metaphor as a learning tool Worden's Tasks – requires an active rather than passive response
- ◊ Explicit emphasis on education - 'learning about'...
- ◊ An interdisciplinary understanding of children and childhood
- ◊ The role of relationships as a basis for recognition
- ◊ Builds on established links between participation (having voice, choice, influence, working together) and wellbeing



Cared for. Respected. Valued.



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)



Program Recognition & Accreditation



Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies

Communities for Children
Facilitating Partners Evidence-based programmes



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
- ◊ Open, honest **communication** - offer voice
- ◊ Help **normalise** the experience of grief and encourage children to identify their feelings and the actions / choices they can take - facilitate agency



Help with managing feelings

- ◊ Reassure children it is ok to feel sad, angry etc.:
 - ◊ 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 with other techniques or ways to diffuse overwhelming feelings

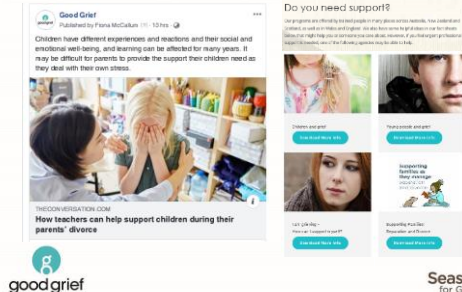


Conversations with Young People

- 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
- Keep communication open
- Enquire and implement support strategies – check in



goodgrief.org.au – FB - LinkedIn



Loss-Grief-Trauma-Healing



OCT 31
NOV 1



In a Nutshell

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



Thank you

Fiona McCallum,
General Manager Good Grief,
MacKillop Family Services



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"The best teachers...
are those who show you where to look
but don't tell you what to see"



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)



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"



Worden's Tasks	Seasons for Growth Tasks	Session Content
accept the reality of the loss	Learn that change and loss are part of life	AUTUMN Session 1: Life is like the seasons Session 2: Change is part of life
process the pain of grief	Learn about different ways people experience change and loss	WINTER Session 3: Valuing my story Session 4: Naming my feelings
adjust to a changed world after the loss	Learn skills to assist with adapting to change and loss	SPRING Session 5: Caring for my feelings Session 6: Remembering the good times
find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life	Learn about ways that help in moving forward with life	SUMMER Session 7: Making good choices Session 8: Moving forward

Worden's Tasks of Grief

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

- To accept the reality of loss
- To process the pain of grief
- To adjust to a changed world after the loss
- 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



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 to 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



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.



What works?

- ✦ Teach about grief and emotions – recognise feelings and techniques to express their emotions safely
- ✦ Allow for regression in behaviours and for physical changes including tiredness
- ✦ Answer questions honestly
- ✦ Allow **voice** and participation in decision making wherever possible to build a sense of control
- ✦ Flexibility with homework and assignments
- ✦ Encourage access to additional support:
 - ✦ Friends and family
 - ✦ In school support – counselling or programs
 - ✦ Online eg kidshelpline or eheadspace.)



Insights into practice in our work

Need to be tuned in to the diverse contexts in which children live their lives

Recognise how loss and grief permeate much of contemporary childhood

Support with recognition of the loss, opportunity to have a voice and to participate, facilitate agency

Programs and practice aimed at improving children and young people's lives need to be evidence-based

"We cannot give what we don't have"

- the importance of self-care



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)



A Message of Hope

“ Life is filled with disappointments, reversals of fortune, heartache, and pain but also new experiences that bring hope and joy.

*That is the message of the seasons:
a message of hope, not despair ,,*

(Fallin, 2013, p.3)