

April Dinwiddie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time podcast: Separation, Grief, and loss. I'm your host, April Dinwiddie. The national training and development curriculum for foster adoptive parents, or NTDC, is a five year cooperative agreement from The Administration On Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. This podcast supports the classroom-based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom on separation, grief and loss. This podcast will also a resource for parents to go back to as children in their care transition through different developmental stages. In this episode, we welcome Dr. Gregory Manning, a clinical psychologist based in orange County, California. Dr. Manning has worked in government, nonprofit organizations and mental health agencies providing case management services for youth and foster care. Dr. Manning is also a nationwide trainer and speaker on issues related to mental health foster care and juvenile justice. Welcome, Dr. Manning.

Dr. Gregory Man...: Thank you, April. Great to be with you. And please, call me Greg.

April Dinwiddie: Yes. Yes, of course. We're going to jump right in on this important topic. As a starting place, can you help our listeners understand how children may experience grief and loss?

Dr. Gregory Man...: First, we need to establish that grief is a normal reaction in response to losses and challenges in our relationships as people. And specifically for children, there are a few basics. First, the experience of loss for children can be very confusing as they're less likely to comprehend and understand the of reasons for a loss. They may not know why is the person gone, or why is their relationship changed. This can be very challenging for them and lead to very challenging and confusing behaviors. Next, the younger the child, the more likely it is that the grief is to be expressed outwardly. Specifically, we can see them demonstrate a lot of challenging behaviors. Such as aggression, defiance, and or withdrawal. Here's an example. In response to a loss, a child who otherwise is very playful and engaging at school and at home may become very physically aggressive and they may refuse to do things around the home or in the classroom. They also may withdraw and not want to play with any friends or not want to be around their family members.

April Dinwiddie: I appreciate you so much for validating that grief is a normal response to loss and some of these challenging behaviors that come from that loss and grief. It seems so basic, but it's really an important starting place. Now, do you think that children and adults experience separation, grief and loss differently?

Dr. Gregory Man...: I think there's some basic things that are similar, because we're all humans, but there's also some very important and critical differences that we need to be aware of. The similarities can be that a lot of times our feelings may be very similar, because there may be sadness, there may be anger. There also may be a loss of feeling just like feeling numb. I think all of us can experience that. However, the differences can be much more in some of the behaviors and also in the way that the people experience or understand the loss. The behaviors can

be, like I mentioned before, that the children tend to be more externalized. They tend to be more outward about their challenges. If they're not understanding their feelings and their thoughts, they turn into behaviors. Like aggression and defiance and withdrawal. While as adults tend to be more reserved in their behaviors. Not all the times, but in general. But on the experience side of it, it's lolly because of brain development. Children can't really fathom the fact that someone is gone, they're gone forever and not coming back.

I think when they experience that, it goes along with confusion and disbelief and they can't accept the loss. And so when we're trying to work with them and support them, we get really frustrated because they just don't seem to get it. I think that's the biggest challenge is understanding it. One thing also, April, it's important to note that for both children and adults, they'd be more likely to deny that the loss is affecting them, that everything's okay and they just want to move on with life and move on with things without ever addressing the loss. So I think that's important to realize too.

April Dinwiddie: That makes so much sense, Greg. It might seem easier to deny or ignore the loss. Can you talk more specifically about how children experience separation, grief and loss connected to adoption in foster care?

Dr. Gregory Man...: I think the most important thing to realize that for children experiencing foster care is that most of their losses occur when they are no longer physically connected with the person. For example, when a child is removed from a parent and their family because of abuse or neglect, that's a loss. I think it can be profound for them because I think it's a lot of times the problem is that we don't experience or acknowledge that as a loss. I think it's important to realize that for children in foster care, that separation is a huge loss for them.

April Dinwiddie: Is the same true for adoption as well, Greg?

Dr. Gregory Man...: Adoption takes it to another level. Because when a child is adopted, a lot of times they are in a home which people celebrate. Like there's a whole big celebration that, hey, you're in a loving family home and that you should feel lucky and that you should feel privileged that you're in this loving family home. While they hopefully are in a loving family home, that is a positive experience for them. It doesn't negate the fact that they're not with their family of birth. That is a big challenge for the youth, but also for the caregivers. Because like why isn't this child celebrating us? Why isn't this child happy? Well, they may be happy that they're with you, but they still can be sad that they're not with their parents.

April Dinwiddie: Gosh, absolutely. I'm so glad that we have established these basics. And now we can go a little bit deeper into some of the more complicated, sometimes harder to understand elements of grief and loss. There's something known as

ambiguous loss. Can you explain what that is and how it relates to children experiencing foster care and adoption?

Dr. Gregory Man...: Ambiguous loss, in a general sense, is when a loss is experienced by someone without any verification or proof of death. And as a result, there's no certainty that the person will ever come back and return to them. Like natural disasters, like earthquakes or floods or fires, where the person is no longer there, but the body is never recovered. So there's not that finality. When we mentioned earlier about losses related to foster care, these are very powerful losses because the physical person, the parent in particular or the sibling, which is equally powerful, are no longer with the individual. There may be visits, but it's not that day-to-day rhythm that you get by living with someone on a regular basis.

As a result, the adults in the children's life, whether it be in foster care and or adoption may not acknowledge that that loss is truly there for the child because the child is no longer being exposed to abuse or neglect. And finally, when they're in foster care, there's this concept that, well, you might return. So they're in a very confusing state. I think that's that real ambiguous loss concept is like this child, especially is in this throes of loss, and yet everyone around them without the right perspective sees, hey, you're gaining from all this. This is a huge benefit for you. And then when they start having those behaviors and the problems, they're like, "What's your deal? You should be happy."

April Dinwiddie: I remember learning what ambiguous loss was. And it was like a light bulb went off for me as an adopted person. I had this amazing, loving, adoptive home. I knew I had a birth mother and a birth father that existed, but I did not know where they were and if they were alive or dead. So I felt the loss, but I didn't know how to talk about it or let my feelings out. So all that you describe here about ambiguous loss is so powerful and poignant. I think knowing about that can really be helpful to parents.

Dr. Gregory Man...: Absolutely. April, your personal experience is very common.

April Dinwiddie: Thank you for that. That's appreciated. We cannot talk enough about some of these concepts that aren't talked about enough, right? Which is this idea of the perception of things because they are physically, emotionally, psychologically safer for a child in the adoptive home, the pre-adoptive home, the foster home. That there isn't something else that may be occurring within the emotional elements of grief, loss, and separation. This is reinforced throughout this conversation that we're having. And I think it's so important. So I really appreciate that. When we think about this, what can happen when these kinds of losses are not validated by others?

Dr. Gregory Man...: I think when losses are not validated, it prevents any closure. If we prevent closure from someone who's experienced loss, what we're generating is that they're likely to struggle in terms of their ability to experience and process that grief and loss. That they may be the only ones experiencing it. Because if

everyone else neglects it, then they're the only ones experiencing it. And as a result, they don't have any resolution or any healing. Also, is that they're not given the right to grieve their loss. So they're confused. I'm grieving, but I'm not allowed to. And also, without this validation, they're also not provided with the sources of support and or treatment necessary to facilitate a healthy resolution of their grief and loss. And that has a profound effect on all of their relationships, both peers and at school, and especially in the family home that they're in right now.

April Dinwiddie: That makes a lot of sense. Now that we have this as a baseline, help us understand how children might express their grief and loss through behaviors.

Dr. Gregory Man...: I think parents who are fostering and or adopting might see some of these following behaviors. These are related to the separation, the grief and loss that the children are experiencing. They could be verbal and behavioral aggression or defiance. And this could be with peers, with children in the home, with adults, also in the community. There could be isolation and or running away. Just as that of avoidance of contact with others. There also can be substance abuse or use. And there also could be other self-harming behaviors, such as cutting. In more severe cases, there also could be suicidal or homicidal ideation or behavior that leads to that sort of outcome.

As well, a global kind of decrease performance in or refusal participate in activities, especially in school sports or extracurricular activities and also around the family home. I think what's important to realize is that in addition to the loss that they're experiencing, some of these behaviors may be ones that they've been struggling with for long time. And so, I think it's important to realize that some of those challenging behavior that they may have had in the past, if they experience loss and are not supported, are likely to get even worse, as well as expanded on.

April Dinwiddie: Hearing your thoughts reminds me of something someone once told me in reference to their feelings of grief and loss related to the separation from their birth family. It was just simply easier for them to be angry than to be sad. So for their grief and pain, it came to life as throwing tantrums and acting out. And again, another light bulb, it was like, of course I do think that this is a theme throughout this conversation is sometimes it's just easier in the moment and these behaviors just come out. How can parents who are fostering or adopting support children in acknowledging their grief and loss?

Dr. Gregory Man...: Number one, verbally acknowledge to the children the loss that they've experienced and that they're likely continue to experience. Really put that to words right in them in a caring, supportive way. Number two, verbally affirm to the child that they have a right to grieve that loss and then share your feelings about loss as well. You don't have to say that your loss is similar to theirs, but you could share your experience of loss to try and connect with them. Verbally

commit yourself to support the child through their grief and loss, no matter what and for how long it takes.

April Dinwiddie: I love all this so much. Especially the part about the grown up sharing their feelings. I think that's so, so critical to all of this. What else, Greg?

Dr. Gregory Man...: Well, I think, like you mentioned before earlier, April, parents need to remember that it's oftentimes easier to be angry and to act out than to work through the grief and loss. And this is true for us as adults as well. Because when we're working through the grief and loss, we have that sadness, we have the tears. And that can be really tough to be with. I think it's important for parents to realize before solving the problem for the child, you have to really take the time to sit down and listen, engage and support the children to find out what they need. Because really there's nothing you can do to solve the loss. You can just support them and be with them through the loss.

Also, you want to create partnerships with social workers and teachers and therapists to help the work around the grief and loss. To make sure that everyone acknowledges that the person is experiencing the loss and to make sure that they have that support all around them. Also, you want to share, as mentioned with teachers and community members, about the grief and loss that the child may be experiencing. Just remember that we don't want to overshare private information about the child, but provide just enough so the people around the child can be supportive for them as well.

April Dinwiddie: It sounds like being in tune, listening and communicating are all very vital here. What are a few more practical things that parents can do?

Dr. Gregory Man...: I think the most important thing is that parents who are foster and adoptive parents can be ready to engage the child at their current developmental stage. Which is important because a lot of times we parent according to the child's chronological age. But they may be 10, but experiencing a grief and loss, they may be more developmentally acting like they're three. So we have to meet them where they're at, I think is critically important. Also, make sure that we provide ongoing physical and emotional safety for the child. Make sure that as a parent, that you're consulting with the foster care and mental health professionals to help you understand where the child is at and what strategies and techniques are best for this child, which may be different for other children that you may be fostering or adopting as well. Also, you want to make sure that you're aware of some of the risk factors, like I mentioned before, about the self-harming and at risk behaviors. And how you can develop a safety plan with the child to make sure that they stay safe.

We also want to make sure that we really focus a lot on the words we and us. Because when you say, "You are experiencing this or you are doing this." The child feels very isolated and judged. But when we hear we and us, then we feel that support and we experience the love in that. Be very clear to the child that

you're going to work with them and help them through the difficult time, no matter what. It's likely going to get ugly at times, but when you commit to them that I'm going to be with you, it's so critically important. The other thing that can often be overlooked is that we want to have things available for the child to do, like play or exercise or sing or dance. At the same time, maybe just provide quiet moments and calm moments, like a soothing bath, or sitting outside under a tree or walk in the park. Those things can be very helpful and healing as well.

April Dinwiddie: Oh my gosh. These are such amazing practical tools and they have so much value for parents. As we bring this podcast to a close. What are some of your final thoughts?

Dr. Gregory Man...: Sure. I think the most important thing is we want to take away from this is that parents need to be partners with a child and help identify what the child needs and what the child wants to do as they journey through this grief and loss experience. And last, but certainly not least, we want to recognize that the impact that caring for children with significant grief and loss challenges can have an impact on us as the parents and caregivers and adults. We want to especially make sure that you also ensure good self care. Just like you're caring for the children, make sure that you demonstrate good self care. Also, be ready that your own past or present experiences of loss may be triggered by your journey along with the child through their grief on loss. Reach out to other mentors or support groups and respite care when necessary. The therapist and social workers like we mentioned before are also critically important.

April Dinwiddie: Well, I can't think of a better way to close out this podcast. Greg, I want to thank you for sharing your knowledge, your insight, and all of these practical tools for parents. Thank you.

Dr. Gregory Man...: Thank you.

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