

HANDOUT #2: THEORIES ON THE STAGES OF GRIEF IN FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION: COMMON GRIEF RESPONSES FOR CHILDREN

There are several theories about the grief process; the most familiar being Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief, developed for death and dying. We now understand that people grieve in no particular order of stages, and that grieving children especially bounce between emotional states all the time. For that reason, we will be discussing children's reactions to loss as grief responses. Over time, children continue to experience these grief responses as their feelings or developmental stages change. Children who are being fostered or who have been adopted often experience complications in their grieving process, and the process can occur over a longer period. They may revisit grief at various times in their lives, as they come to understand their losses differently. The grief responses that we will be talking about are as follows: Shock, Anger or Protest, Negotiating, Deep Sadness, and Understanding, as adapted from the Kubler-Ross model.

Let's take each one and what you might see when a child or teen in foster care or who has been adopted is experiencing each grief response.

Shock

As a child comes into your home after being separated from familiar people and surroundings, you might see a child who is very compliant, somewhat emotionally removed, slow to interact, and expressing little emotion. They may deny having any feelings about their move, but their behavior will indicate that they are reacting to it.

What you might see in their behavior:

- They do not seem interested in anything
- They do not express any feelings about leaving their family
- Going through the motions of normal behavior and compliance, but not being engaged with activities that they have previously enjoyed or that other children their age would likely enjoy
- Very quiet, passive, and emotionally detached or numb

It may appear the child is moving easily into your home, but as time goes on and their behavior changes, you may in hindsight recognize this type of behavior and realize that they were experiencing the shock response of grief. The child should move to more emotional expressions, but if they remain stuck in shock over a long period of time, it may be an indication of a more serious emotional disturbance requiring professional support.



How the parent can support:

- ❖ Focus on safety and building trust; do this with reassuring words and setting a clear home structure.
- ❖ Engage the child slowly and respectfully, being mindful not to overwhelm them with your enthusiasm or lots of adult visitors.
- ❖ Follow the child's lead; if they want to play and not talk, allow for that.
- ❖ If they make requests for what is familiar to them, like familiar foods, do your best to accommodate the child.
- ❖ Be clear about why the child is with you and what your role is, but do not push this conversation.
- ❖ Be gentle and kind, validating that this must be hard for them and letting them know you are there to support them.
- ❖ Give the child time to work through their emotions and feelings.

Anger or Protest

When the child realizes their loss, then they may experience anger. They might direct their anger at the person they think is responsible for the loss, but sometimes their anger seems more general. They might feel responsible for being taken from their family, especially if they reported abuse. They also might blame others for taking them away from their family.

Their anger can be expressed in many ways, but some of the most common behaviors are:

- Tantrums
- Angry outbursts
- Being oppositional and hypersensitive
- Being withdrawn
- Being grumpy and hard to please
- Being aggressive with other children
- Breaking toys or objects
- Lying and stealing
- Refusal to comply with direction
- Eating or sleeping disturbances
- Mutism or refusing to talk
- Regression in toileting

During this grief response, you might find them confronting you, defying you, doing the opposite of what is asked of them, or breaking the rules. Though many of the behaviors are common among all children,



behaviors in the anger stage are often occur with more frequency and intensity. Sometimes this behavior is misinterpreted as a mental health issue when it is actually an expression of grief.

How the parent can support:

- ❖ Set a well-defined home structure; the parent needs to be clear, yet compassionately in charge.
- ❖ Name and validate what you think may be going on; for example, “Johnny, it makes perfect sense that you would be angry considering all that you have lost.”
- ❖ Talk about what the child may be feeling and experiencing when they seem calmer and more relaxed.
- ❖ Provide consequences that show you’re on their side and help them to learn; say non-judgmentally that they may not have learned these rules before, and your role is to help them learn.
- ❖ Acknowledge their losses gently out loud. They need to feel that you get it and talking about it can help if they are open to it. If not, don’t push but do validate how hard the situation must be for them.
- ❖ Be mindful of physical and emotional safety, make sure the child, you, other family members and pets, are safe at all times. This may require changing things physically in the home environment or the routine.
- ❖ Offer physical outlets for their anger, such as playing sports, throwing things in safe places (like balls or frisbees or wet paper towels against a garage door), yelling outdoors, etc.
- ❖ Continue to share experiences of joy and pleasure, regardless of what the child may have done.

Negotiating

Some children can respond to grief by trying to “fix” the situation by attempting to change their behavior or promising to “be good” if they can only go back home. Some children try to negotiate with the person who they think can influence the outcome, such as their social worker. You can see this at any age, from quite young children to teenagers who have been in foster care a long time.

When they are having this grief response, you might see a change in the child’s behavior in the following ways:

- They are overly eager to please you
- They are following the rules and your directions very carefully
- They are doing the things they had not done before but now believe will look like good behavior, such as making their bed every morning or helping with household chores

These are ways the child may be trying to control their environment and prevent the inevitable loss.

How the parent can support:

- ❖ Be clear that children do not decide things like custody. Explain who makes decisions in age-appropriate ways.

- ❖ Redirect children to jobs that actually are theirs; for example: doing homework for school, performing chores, having fun playing, and focusing on growing up.
- ❖ Do not reinforce them too frequently for being “good”, but rather try encouraging them to spend time in free-flowing activities, like using messy paint, playing in dirt or rain, using a free pass to get out of a chore, etc. Remind them that you care about them regardless of how they are behaving; tell them that it’s ok not to be perfect- it can actually good to learn how to make mistakes, especially when you learn from them!
- ❖ Help children find and practice things that give them opportunities for control and building mastery, such as cooking, playing sports, music, academics, etc.
- ❖ Give children choices in things that are safe to have power over, like choosing what’s for lunch or dinner, picking out their own clothing, making choices for entertainment, etc.

Deep Sadness

Whenever the child realizes that the losses are real and they cannot stop it, the child may express feelings of despair, helplessness, fear and panic, and a lack of interest in people, surroundings, or activities.

What you may see in the child’s behavior may include:

- Social and emotional withdrawal
- General anxiety
- The child is easily brought to tears
- The child is easily frustrated and overwhelmed by minor stresses
- Listlessness
- Inability to concentrate and short attention span
- Robot-like activities
- In severe cases or in younger children, you might see head banging, rocking, or eating and sleeping disturbances

You may notice that these behaviors look somewhat like behaviors in the Shock grief response, but these are associated with recognition of their loss and a deep sadness inside. These are critical times in the relationship with the parent. It is important to recognize that these behaviors are part of the grieving process, and by talking about them with the child you can strengthen your relationship through support and comfort. Younger children may not recognize the permanency of the loss for a long time. Even many older children in foster care may not begin to come to this realization until after the termination of their birth parents’ rights or, for some, after being adopted.

How the parent can support:

- ❖ Be available to the child; check on them often if they are withdrawn.
- ❖ Validate their sadness as completely understandable given all they have lost.
- ❖ Gently acknowledge their losses out loud. Consider having them write their losses down with your support or creating a poem, story, or song about them; share this with a therapist if they have one.



- ❖ Help the child create rituals for honoring their grief, such as lighting a candle on important holidays to honor losses.
- ❖ Support as you would anyone who is grieving, give extra time, kindness and comfort in your words and deeds.
- ❖ Continue to provide fun activities, but do not pressure them to be playful or light if they are not in the mood.
- ❖ If they are comforted by touch, then this is a time for hugs, backrubs, hand holding, etc.
- ❖ Recognize sadness at much later stages as they reach milestones that make them realize what and who they've lost, such as a wedding or birth of a child.

Understanding

Over time, we hope all children can make sense of their losses through understanding. As they begin to look toward the future and see the possibilities for themselves, the symptoms of deep sadness and distress will fade. They may not like all the final outcomes, but the child can begin to respond to people around them, plan for the future, and return to active life in the present. While grief responses may be re-visited over a lifetime, understanding is a sign that the child is moving forward and away from active grieving.

The behaviors you might see include:

- Developing new attachments in the new family
- Finding their place in the family and feeling like they belong
- Identifying as part of the family, such as wanting to use their last name or dressing more like them
- Experiencing pleasure and fun, wanting to participate in family activities
- An improved ability to concentrate
- More stability in emotional responses
- Interest and participation in activities and surroundings
- Interest in and planning for future activities

These behaviors are signs of positive movement toward more typical daily life and functioning.

How the parent can support:

- ❖ Spend time enjoying this period with your child while honoring the past and the emotions the child still carries from it.
- ❖ Talk openly with the child about good times and bad, including times with all of the families they've lived with.
- ❖ Acknowledge any longings they continue to have towards their birth family, including taking the lead in finding out more information for them when they are younger and supporting any searches they may choose to do when they are older.
- ❖ Clarify your relationship to one another and be playful about your future together.
- ❖ Let the child lead in how much "claiming" they choose to do of you, your family members, and your lifestyle.



- ❖ Keep connections to people, places, and cultures of the child's origin.
- ❖ Understand that this is not a fixed state. There may be periods, especially during life milestones, that trigger former grief responses that the person already seemed to move through at an earlier period.

Let's remember that children can move back and forth between grief responses, sometimes going backward before moving forward. Every child grieves differently and in their own time. Their age and development also influence how they understand their experiences, and they may revisit grieving responses as they get older and see their loss through a different developmental lens.

The important thing to remember about grief is behavior is not always what it seems. Sometimes behavior is a sign that a child is re-entering a grief response, and what needs to be done is to acknowledge the losses and grief and work through it. You will play a critical part in supporting the child through these painful times.

References:

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