

Discussion Guide: Understanding Childhood Grief and Loss

This discussion guide is designed to help parent group leaders facilitate a conversation that will help parents and caregivers understand childhood grief and loss, connect behaviors with these emotions, and offer support that may help a child through their mourning.

Introduction

Children in adoption, kinship care, and foster care have all experienced significant losses—including their first families—and often their homes and the life they once knew. As a result, children are often grieving. That grief can result in behaviors that, while normal and adaptive, can be challenging for caregivers.

Our discussion today will focus on the types of losses our children have experienced, how their grief may demonstrate itself, and how we can best support our children to heal.

Let's watch this video from Dr. Gregory Manning as an introduction to the topic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYfAcHGkRLs>

Put these thoughts into your own words to open the meeting:

Topic one: Identifying loss

Discussion questions. Use provided prompts if needed.

1. What are your reactions to the video?

2. What are some of the losses your child has experienced?

PROMPT: Possible losses could include:

- Relationships—birth family members, neighbors, friends, teachers, other caregivers, pets
- Objects that give comfort—toys, blankets, clothing
- Secure, familiar environment—food/smells, neighborhoods, parks, school, familiar habits and routines
- Sense of self (ways of being and doing that define us uniquely), including race, culture, traditions, and country
- Control—over where they live, how they live, and the direction of their lives

3. Have you experienced losses that help you understand your child’s losses?

4. Is there a loss your child experienced that they are struggling to process?

PROMPT: Some children speak openly about their losses while others may not have the verbal ability or sense of emotional security to express their grief.

Topic two: Expressions of grief

Simply put, grief is what you think and feel on the inside following a significant loss. Grief looks different for each child, just as it does for adults. Although we hear about the five stages of grief—denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance—grief can feel more like a roller coaster than an ordered series of stages.

Most children will likely move among the stages of grief for years and may cycle through various stages; it is usually not a linear process.

Put these thoughts into your own words to introduce the topic.

Discussion question. Use provided prompts if needed.

1. Grief may present through emotions, health, or behaviors in children. Does your child have symptoms or behaviors that may be signs that they are experiencing grief?

PROMPT: Here are some common ways grief may show up in a child's life:

- Angry outbursts or acting-out behavior
- Difficulty concentrating in school or falling grades
- Symptoms of anxiety or depression
- Feeling undefined or unexplained guilt
- Feeling especially different from others
- Anger toward or mistrust of adults
- Too much or too little intimacy with others
- Difficulty forming relationships with peers or adults
- Feeling uncertain or afraid of the future
- Experiencing confusing memories or fears
- Frequent crying
- Making up stories about their past or present experiences
- Hyperactivity or poor impulse control
- Feeling overwhelmed by choices or decisions

Topic three: Helping your child through grief and loss

Grieving is necessary—it gives meaning to the feelings that many of us have after suffering losses, no matter what our age. But we cannot expect our children to be able to identify grief and know how to manage it. It is our job as parents and caregivers to be compassionate and patient as we consider how our children may be grieving.

Put these thoughts into your own words to introduce the topic.

Discussion questions. Use provided prompts if needed.

1. How do your own past losses—and how well you’ve coped with them—affect your ability to help your child with their losses?

CONTEXT: A caregiver’s own experience with loss could affect how they help their child, both positively and negatively:

- A caregiver may be better prepared for their child’s grief if they have experienced similar losses. However, every person experiences loss differently, so they may still have trouble understanding how their child’s grief is showing.
 - The child’s grief and loss may trigger a parent’s own grief, potentially making it more challenging to help their child.
 - A caregiver with unresolved grief may struggle to help their child through their losses. Processing your own losses in a healthy way is critical to your ability to help your child to grieve.
2. What have you done or could you do to help your child “walk through” the pain of their losses?

CONTEXT: There is no one right answer to this. Each child and situation is unique. Regardless of the situation, children need the opportunity, space, and support to process their losses and come to a place of integration and healing. Here are some possible strategies you can use to help your children process their grief:

- Give opportunities for them to explore their adoption or foster care story. Let them explore their feelings and thoughts about their birth family without judgment.
- Hold or comfort them when they cry. Don’t try to fix it or make it better. Just be there and let them be sad or angry. Some children were taught not to cry. Help them understand how healing crying is. Let them see you cry.
- Take care of yourself so that you can take care of your child. If you have unresolved feelings about your child’s losses, it can be harder for you to help them through their grief. Process your own feelings so that you can be present with your child.
- Model and teach your child how to grieve, such as writing in a journal, exercising, drawing a picture or making a craft related to their emotions, coming to you, sitting alone when needed, or talking to a friend.
- Find a therapist to help your child. Look for adoption- and permanency-competent therapists who are knowledgeable about adoption, foster parenting, grief, and trauma.

3. How have you handled your child's expressions of grief in the past?
4. Are there times you could have taken another approach to an expression of grief from your child?

More resources for parent group leaders

AdoptUSKids offers tip sheets and tools to help parent group leaders facilitate discussions and manage their groups. You can find these resources at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

Tip sheets

- *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders*
- *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent Support Group Leaders*
- *Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders*

Tools

- *Self-Care Activities for Your Support Group*
- *Discussion Guide: Understanding Parental Grief and Loss*
- *Discussion Guide: Lying, Confabulation, and Distorted Thinking*



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Participant Handout: Understanding Childhood Grief and Loss

By becoming adoptive and foster parents and kinship caregivers, we step into the world of loss that accompanies our children. Their losses are more complex and more widespread than they are for others, and may include lost opportunities for typical child development and experiences, lost relationships, and loss of control over their lives as they enter the foster care system.

As a result, children are often experiencing—if not understanding—grief. This can result in behaviors that, while normal and adaptive, may be challenging for caregivers.

Ambiguous loss

Ambiguous loss is a feeling of grief or distress combined with confusion about the lost person or relationship. There are two types of ambiguous loss:

- When a person is physically present but psychologically unavailable
- When a person is physically absent but psychologically present—the more common form of ambiguous loss in foster care and adoption.

Often the ambiguity means the loss can go unnoticed by others. The resulting grief the child feels can go unresolved because the loss is not openly mourned or socially supported. The sense that the losses have been ignored or minimized by others can make it more difficult for children to heal from these ambiguous losses. There are no funerals or mourning rituals that show the child their deep loss is shared by others. The child wonders if they have the “right” to mourn since others do not seem to share their grief. Foster and adoptive parents must be sensitive to the role ambiguous loss plays in children’s behavior, and create opportunities to show their children that their losses are significant and important.

Expressions of grief

Simply put, grief is what you think and feel on the inside following a significant loss. Grief looks different for each child, just as it does for each adult. Although we hear about the five

stages of grief—denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance—grief can feel more like a roller coaster than an ordered series of stages.

Most children will likely move among the stages of grief for years and may cycle through various stages; it is usually not a linear process.

Here are some common ways grief may show up in a child's life:

- Angry outbursts or acting-out behavior
- Difficulty concentrating in school or falling grades
- Symptoms of anxiety or depression
- Feeling undefined or unexplained guilt
- Feeling especially different from others
- Anger toward or mistrust of adults
- Too much or too little intimacy with others
- Difficulty forming relationships with peers or adults
- Feeling uncertain or afraid of the future
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- Frequent crying
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- Hyperactivity or poor impulse control
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Helping your child through grief and loss

Grieving is necessary—it gives meaning to the feelings that many of us have after suffering losses, no matter what our age. But we cannot expect our children to be able to identify grief and know how to manage it. Children need the opportunity, space, and support to process their losses and heal. Here are some ways you can help your child process their grief:

- Give opportunities for them to explore their adoption or foster care story. Let them explore their feelings and thoughts about their birth family without judgment.

- Hold or comfort them when they cry. Don't try to fix it or make it better. Just be there and let them be sad or angry. Some children were taught not to cry. Help them understand how healing crying is. Let them see you cry.
- Take care of yourself so that you can take care of your child. If you have unresolved feelings about your own loss experiences, it can be harder for you to help your child through their grief. Process your own feelings so that you can be present with your child.
- Acknowledge the missing pieces of their story. You may not have all of the information children want about their life before they came to your home. It's important to not invent information when we don't have answers. If you don't know, you don't know. Acknowledge the difficulty of not having clear or thorough information and allow your child to grieve the unknown.
- Do not push your child to work through something if they're not ready. You can make sure to be there when they are ready by giving them ample opportunities to talk about their adoption or foster care experience.
- Model and teach your child how to grieve, such as writing in a journal, exercising, drawing a picture or making a craft related to her emotions, coming to you, sitting alone when needed, or talking to a friend.
- Create a life book with your child. This project can help create special bonds with them, and allow your child to creatively work through any grief and loss they may feel.
- Plant a tree or garden in honor of someone and allow your child to care for it regularly. This ongoing action is a tangible way to connect and help children to process loss.
- When grief displays in aggressive behaviors, consider giving your child a physical outlet for expressing feelings in a healthy way.
- Use calming tools such as weighted blankets, vests, or lap pads; chewing gum; lollipops; Chewelry; and deep breathing techniques. Blowing bubbles can help a child when they are struggling to control their breathing.
- Find a therapist to help your child. Look for adoption- and permanency-competent therapists who are knowledgeable about adoption, foster parenting, grief, and trauma.

Resources on grief and loss

Here are some books, videos, and online resources that can help you to learn more about your child's grief and loss experiences and how to help them heal.

- *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*, by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen (book)
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*, by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. (book)
- *The Wounded Spirit*, available at fosterclub.com (handout for teens)
- Resources on grief and loss from the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), available at nacac.org/help/parenting/grief-and-loss



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