

CASA Conversations



California **CASA**
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

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Grief and Loss

Introduction

Simply by virtue of coming into foster care, every child or youth—and his family is experiencing grief and loss. Often what can be a “normal” response to grief is treated by professionals as a much more serious mental health issue.

One of the biggest gifts you can give to a child is to allow them to acknowledge and be able to share their feelings of grief. You can give the gift of taking the time to truly and authentically listen to a child. For a child, telling the story of what was lost, from their perspective, can be one of the most healing interventions they can receive.

The Facts

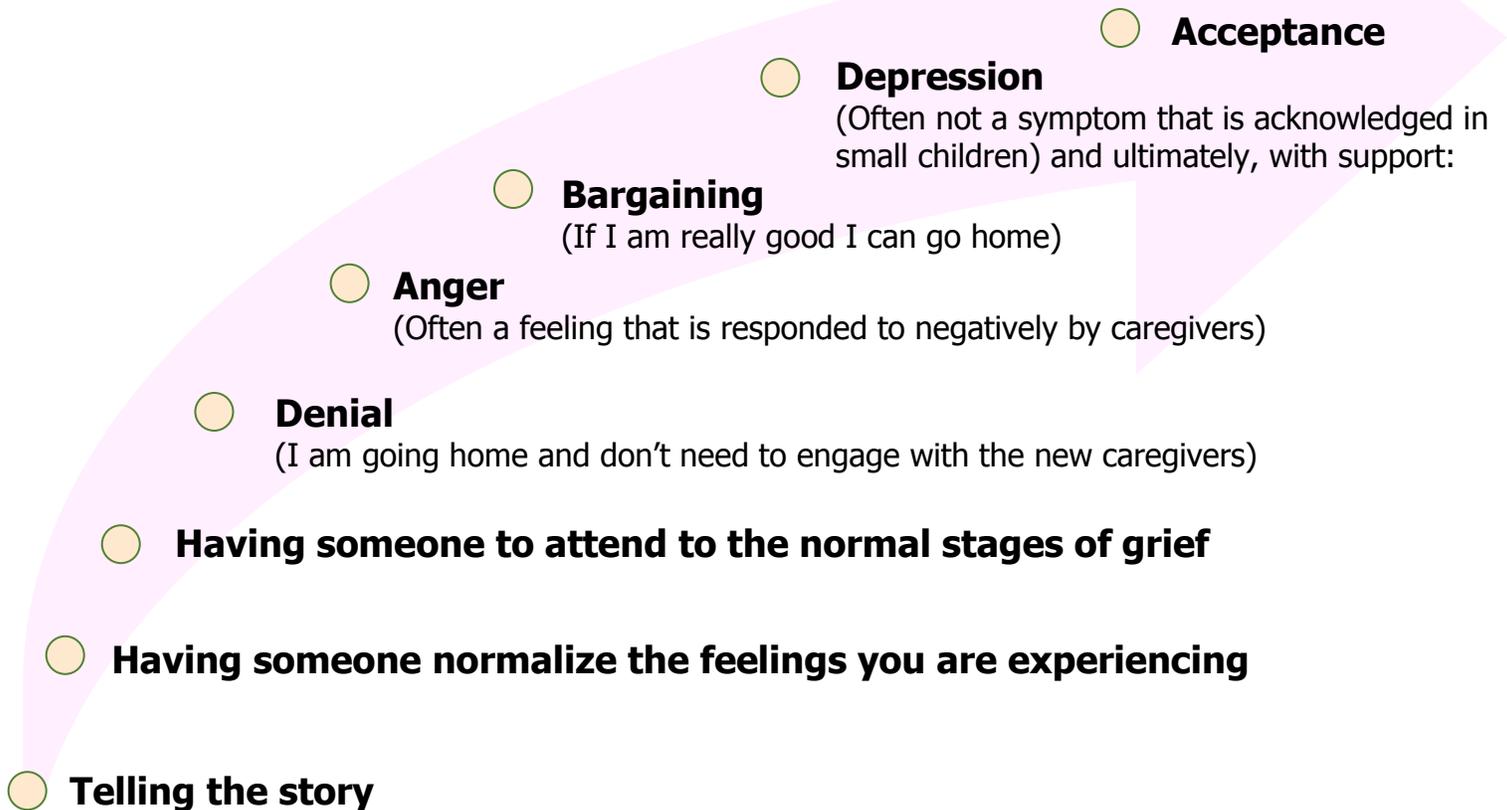
When a child experiences separation from their primary caregiver, they go through a similar grief process as when an adult loses a partner to death. However, when we lose a loved one to death, there is acknowledgement of the loss and subsequent grief, and we have many rituals to cope with the loss. For our children coming into foster care, there is often no acknowledgement of the loss and no rituals or support for their loss.

Children do not generally express this grief through words, but through behavior. For example, fighting, withdrawing, or refusing to let others get close may all be ways the child or youth acts out their grief. Also, there is no standard time for grieving loss and feelings of grief may be triggered at any time, by anything.

Grief and Loss

As a CASA you have a unique opportunity to be an ally and support in a child's normal grieving process.

The work of grieving includes:



As a CASA, you can truly and actively listen. You can also normalize what is going on for the child by letting them know that the feelings they are experiencing are legitimate.

I realize that there might be a lot of youth who will just feel numb. It definitely took me a long time to come into anything emotions-wise, other than anger. I easily get mad. But I was always a serious person. But what would help break me out of that would be when my mentors would say, "I congratulate you. You did this, you overcame this. It would get me to start thinking of things, and I would break somewhere and start crying. - Claudia

Grief and Loss

Starting a CASA Conversation

Sometimes children and youth feel that they are not able to talk about their past. Allowing them to tell you about memories, both good and bad, can be very helpful. You might let them know you are willing for them to talk about their past by asking about favorite foods, movies, activities or pets from their past.

For example, you could just ask, "What is your favorite food?" and then, "how long it has been your favorite food?", and "did you ever have another favorite food?" If your child says, for example, "I love tamales, but I don't get them at my foster home," you can then ask follow up questions, such as "do you miss getting to eat tamales? Are you sad you don't get to eat tamales? What did you like about tamales?"

You can also simply ask, "Is there anything you miss?" "What are some of your favorite memories?" No matter how traumatic a past a child or youth has had, there are bound to be favorite memories, and things people and places that they miss. Asking about these gives the memories value.

It is important to be sensitive to a child's willingness to talk about their feelings. Many times, however, children and youth don't have words for their feelings.

You can help by saying "you sound sad that you don't get to eat your favorite food" or "do you miss your dog?", or "it must be hard not to get to know how your dog is doing." In this way you are doing several things:

1. You are letting them know you are willing to let them discuss their past.
2. You are giving them names to their feelings.
3. You are normalizing their experiences – if you can name it, it must not be unique to them.
4. You are giving value to their feelings and experiences. If you are asking about them, they must have value.

Orange juice and grandma – say you lose your grandma and it doesn't bother you, but then one day you spill juice and you freak out. Take into account what they need and why they need that. They might be reacting to something more because of something else. - Jynnah

Make the young person comfortable; let them know 'we don't have to get into it.' Sometimes I get so angry and I don't like to be asked what's wrong, but if you just say something nice, I might tell you. - Brianna

Another thing you can do with your child or youth is to create a memory book, with any photos or mementos that they have, or that you can help them find. If they want a memento of something they do not have a photo of, for example a place they lived or a pet, they could draw it, or cut something out of a magazine. This can help them feel connected to their past, and again, give them a safe outlet to discuss their loss and the feelings they are having about their loss.

The work of grief is ongoing, and you may have many short conversations. Let the child or youth determine when they wish to talk about their grief, the way in which they want to talk about it, and when they are done with the discussion.

Grief and Loss

Pitfalls to Avoid

You are not a therapist, and are not doing grief counseling with the child or youth. You are providing a context for them to talk about their feelings and acknowledging their experience and feelings. It is appropriate for you to suggest they see a therapist, and for you to talk to the therapist about the child or youth's expressions of grief.

Do not judge what the child tells you they feel. Feelings are feelings, and we have no control over our feelings. If they say they aren't sad, or they hate someone ... or any feeling that to you doesn't sound "correct," just acknowledge their feelings, WITHOUT invalidating them (e.g. "oh you don't hate your sister"). Telling them they aren't experiencing what they tell you they are is the opposite of valuing their feelings and experiences.

Don't tell a child or youth what to feel. For example you can ask, "Do you miss your dog?", or "Does it make you sad that you aren't with your sister?" but you shouldn't say "I know you are sad because you don't have your dog", or "You must be very upset you aren't with your sister". You are providing the place for them to explore and understand their feelings, not telling them what they feel.

- **Don't open doors you're not willing to walk through (emotionally) with young people and make sure there is enough time to process info.**
- **Don't ask questions that you can't handle the answers to.**
- **Don't make empty promises.**
- **Make sure you don't pacify them, and make sure that you let them know their feelings are valid. For example:**

I had a mentor and my mom had decided she didn't want me back until I turned 18. And I was upset about it and didn't understand it, and she tried to pacify me by saying, "oh but you have a really great foster home." But that was not where I wanted to be; I didn't like this woman, she was in it for the \$900 she got for me each month."

-Emmy

Additional Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics Children and Grief

http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Children_And_Grief_08.aspx

California CASA Association

<http://californiacasa.org/grief-and-loss/>

Dr. Gregory Manning Grief and Loss for Youth in Foster Care & Adoption

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYfAChGkRLs>

North American Council on Adoptable Children: Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children

<http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/ambiguous.html>

U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services Child Welfare Information Gateway

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/mentalhealth/common/grief.cfm>

I think environment is really, really important. I don't like talking about anything that's uncomfortable so I just won't talk about it.

But my mentors know, if we're in a car and we're driving somewhere, I just start to open up more. There's something about a car – it's soothing to me." - Jynnah