

# Too Many Losses Too Soon: Loss and Grief in Children Who Are Adopted and in Foster Care

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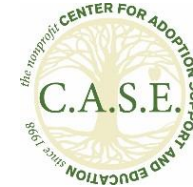
# Learning Objectives

1. Identify the unique aspects of loss and grief for foster and adopted children
2. Understand the factors that influence a child's grief response
3. Explore the 4 psychological tasks of grief work
4. Learn tools and strategies for helping children grieve



With decades of experience, C.A.S.E.'s mission is to strengthen the well-being of children and families of all adoptive experiences by providing them the adoption competent services and resources they need, including:

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- Crisis intervention, support and assistance with school issues
- Training, education & interactive workshops – for families, educators and professionals
- Nationally recognized post-adoption models
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# Loss in Foster Care and Adoption



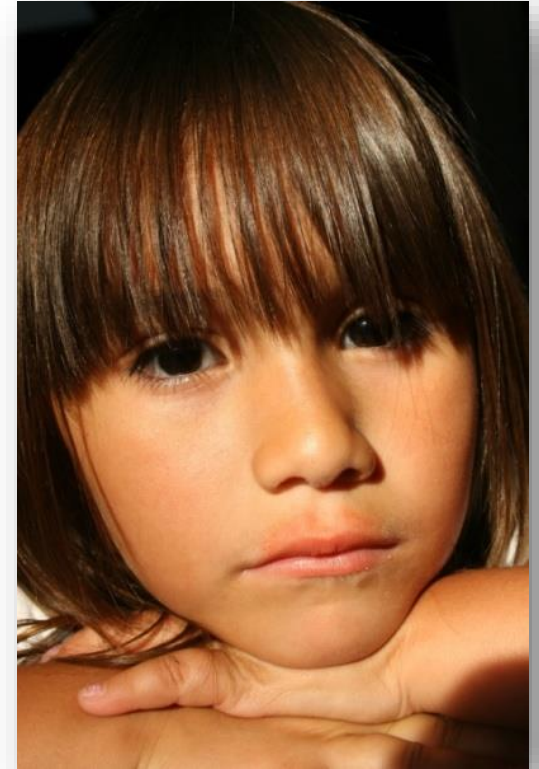
# LOSS

Children in foster care and adopted children lose their opportunity to grow up with their biological family.



## Between the ages of 6-11 a child...

- Realizes that she / he lost something in order to be in foster care, and begins experiencing feelings of LOSS and GRIEF.
- For many children this starts much earlier, but increased cognitive development at this age often brings it to the surface
- Persistent question inside: “Why didn’t my birth parents keep me?”



# Dilemma in Foster Care

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graph TD; A[Dilemma in Foster Care] --> B[Permanent Foster Care]; A --> C[Reunification]; A --> D[Adoption];
```

**Permanent  
Foster  
Care**

**Reunification**

**Adoption**

*When the child enters care, it is unclear whether the goal is to help the child cope with separation/loss of birth parent or reunification with birth parents. Concurrent planning fosters a sense of impermanence for the child.*

# Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)-1997

- Foster Care is temporary and not a place for children to grow
- Permanency planning efforts should begin as a child enters foster care, expedite services to families
- Innovative approaches are needed to achieve the goals of safety, permanency and well-being



# Goals of Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)

- Promote the safety of children first and foremost.
- Decrease the time it takes to achieve permanency for children.
- Promote adoption and other permanency options.
- Enhance state capacity and accountability for both safety and permanency.

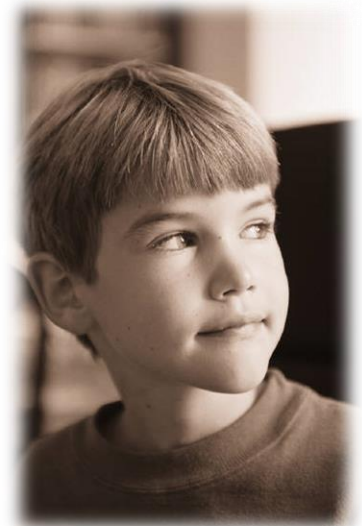


# LOSS in Foster Care and Adoption

- LOSS is the affectual state that an individual experiences especially when something of significance is unexpectedly withdrawn.
- Separation precipitates sense of LOSS
- Grief is the process through which one passes through to recover from LOSS
- Separation involves fear which must be overcome
- Loss involves grief that must be expressed



LOSS in foster care and adoption is unique from other losses...



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# LOSS in Foster Care and Adoption

- Is less socially recognized
- Is more pervasive
- Is lifelong
- Can be more profound
- Is intergenerational
- Has no closure/ is potentially reversible
- Has few rituals to commemorate the LOSS
- Often involves connection with LOSS figure



LOSS is more than just people and things. Being placed in foster care/adoptive family involves multiple losses.

- Loss of culture
- Loss of religion
- Loss of racial connections
- Medical information
- Birth history
- Birth order
- Genealogical continuity
- Sense of stability, safety, security
- Physical connections
- Traditions
- Siblings
- Country
- Language



# A significant difference is that...

## **Loss in Foster Care is Ambiguous!**

- Will I go back home?
- Can my mom get it together?
- Can I stay at my school?
- Should I let my foster dad get close to me?
- Who will be there for me if I age out of foster care?



A significant difference is that...

LOSS in Foster Care is AMBIGUOUS!

- Will I ever see my birth parents again?
- Do I have any brothers and sisters?
- Does my birthmother think about me on my birthday?



# Ambiguous Loss

Of all losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is most devastating because it is:

- Unclear and confusing
- Indeterminate
- Immobilizing – cannot problem solve because child does not know if loss is final or temporary
- Lacks resolution

# There are 2 kinds of AMBIGUOUS LOSS:

- Physically absent, but psychologically present  
(What often leads to placement)
- Physically present, but psychologically absent

Boss, Pauline. Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief, 1999



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# Children who lack certainty in life...

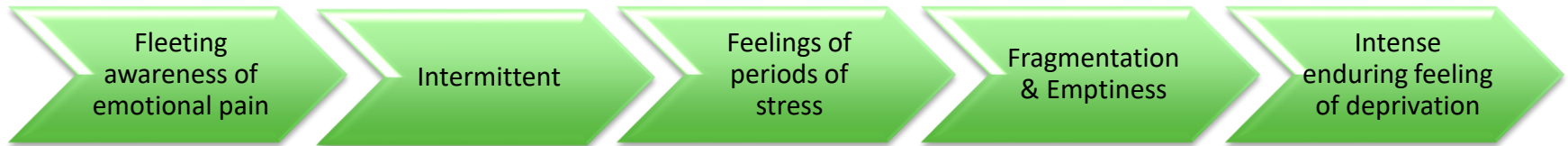
May exhibit difficulty in:

- Relating to others
- Developing a sense of self
- Developing self-confidence
- Feeling they belong
- Developing self-motivation



*They may spend too much time and emotional energy trying to predict or anticipate what will happen to them next. They become preoccupied with basic needs and have difficulty expending energy on emotional and intellectual growth.*

# Children's Reaction to Loss



# Ambiguity may . . .

- Erode children's sense of mastery
- Cause them to feel incompetent
- Create feelings that the world is unfair, unsafe, unpredictable, unmanageable

If a child can obtain information, that eases the stress of ambiguity.

# Risk

The greater the AMBIGUITY surrounding the child's life, the more difficulty they will have in mastering it.

- Increased depression
- Increased anxiety
- Increased internal conflict

**Hope**

**Hope**

**Helplessness**

***Hope is raised and then dashed so often, eventually psychologically the child stops reacting.***

***AMBIGUOUS LOSS perpetuates child's inability to grieve. Child hangs on to the hope that things will go back to "normal."***

# Children's Developmental Stages of Understanding Grief

## PRESCHOOL: AGES 3-5

- Death is temporary
- Wants to call or visit the deceased, continue the relationship
- Wants person back
- Some limited understanding of loss
- Interested in gross information

# Children's Developmental Stages of Understanding Grief

## PRESCHOOL: AGES 3-5 (continued)

- Concrete in thinking, explain in 2-3 sentences
- No cause and effect or sense of time
- Limited capacity to tolerate pain
- Will create their own story
- Will be sensitive to adults' reaction

# Children's Developmental Stages of Understanding Grief

## LATENCY: AGES 6-8

- Limited capacity to deal with pain/loss
- At the very beginning of cause/effect “Is it my fault?”
- Denial is a defense mechanism
- Safety is the key issue
- Fascinated with and needs to know details
- Knows loss is irreversible
- Worries about routines and is egocentric



# Children's Developmental Stages of Understanding Grief

## PRE-ADOLESCENCE: AGES 9-12

- Sense of responsibility for loss/guilt
- Abstract thinkers
- Cause and effect thinking
- Flat affect – hide feelings; frightened by loss
- Intellectualizes loss
- Works hard to keep it together
- “Couldn’t care less” attitude, “It is no big deal.”

# Children's Developmental Stages of Understanding Grief

## ADOLESCENCE: AGES 13-18

- Adult understanding of loss, finality of death
- Believes they are invincible
- Wants to explain the philosophical “WHY”
- Loss threatens dreams of the future
- High risk-taking behavior
- Reticent to show or share painful emotions
- Maintains control

# Impact of Unresolved Loss on Children



# What They Look Like

- Developmentally stuck
- Increased magical thinking
- Assume role of victim
- Hyper/independent/lack of intimacy with others
- Expectation that others will leave
- Undefined guilt
- Chronic worrier
- Mask feelings with compulsive behaviors: fear and obsessions
- Difficulty feeling calm, nurtured – may move toward  
addictive behaviors
- Less open to love
- Anxious/depressed/fearful
- Disconnected from others
- Can't form new attachments



# Impact of unresolved Loss in children

- Children in foster care system cannot make optimum use of placements until they have resolved their past losses and formed new attachments
- Unresolved separation will often interfere with the development of new attachments

GOAL: Free children from the past by supporting and facilitating the grieving process

# Helping Children Resolve the Past

- Unresolved separations will interfere with formation of new relations.
- New attachments are not to replace old ones
- We can free children from the past by providing process to grieve past losses
- Children fear re-occurrence of pain of losses and avoid intimacy
- Adults who show support of child's emotions as s/he copes with grief facilitate the development of new attachments
- Foster and adoptive parents must accept that loyalty issues will exist but "children can love more than one person"



# Factors that Influence a Child's Reaction to Loss

Factors that influence a  
child's reaction to loss





## Factors that influence a child's reaction to loss

1. Child's attachment to birth parent and foster parent
2. Age and developmental stage of child at placement
3. Cognitive strengths and limitations
4. Social/emotional maturity and stage of development





# Factors that influence a child's reaction to loss

## 5. Past experiences with separation/loss

- # of moves decreases child's reaction to separation: they often appear “numb” or don't outwardly react
- Multiple moves can impact the ability to form close attachments
- Over time children may develop fear of abandonment and have self doubt (feel responsible for the placement)

## 6. How child sees LOSS

- Lack of control over situation
- People outside of family have more power than parents
- Someone gave me away – didn't quite measure up (sadness, guilty, depression)
- Taken away (anxiety & fear)
- Caused the separation
- Adults not trustworthy





## Factors that influence a child's reaction to loss

7. Temperament/personality of the child
8. The way LOSS occurs and how it is communicated to the child
9. How successful we are in validating child's grief
  - Permit/invite children to express feelings
  - Share similar experiences of other children
  - Accept child's "continuum of feelings"
10. Information – keep child informed as to why separation occurred & what is happening now

**I NEVER KNEW GRIEF  
WOULD FEEL SO MUCH  
LIKE**

**FEAR** – C.S. Lewis



To support grieving children,  
we must be comfortable with...

**HELPLESSNESS**



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If it is

**unmentionable**

It is

**UNMANAGEABLE**



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# The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

1. Understanding
2. Grieving
3. Commemorating
4. Going On



Trozzi, Maria, Talking with Children About Loss, 1999



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# The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

## 1. Understanding

Knowing what happened to the person who left and why, or knowing what situations caused the loss and why it happened.

# The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

## 2. Grieving

Experiencing the painful feelings associated with a loss.



# The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

## 3. Commemorating

Remembering the persons, places, things that are no longer part of the child's daily life.

# The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

## 4. Going On

Child learns that the pain of grief subsides and the legacy of their loved one lies within themselves.



I began making my family and relatives from clay with hidden cry and fear inside; knowing that I will never see them again on this earth. After I made all of my family members, I closed my box as if I were saying good-bye for the very last time. I said to myself one day that I have to let this go because it won't help me with my dilemma with grief. So, I let it go...it was one of the most arduous decisions I have made.



Irena, 16 years

# Helping Children Grieve



How can we help  
children with the  
grieving process?

We need to understand  
and help their  
foster/adoptive parents  
understand:



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New attachments are not meant to replace old ones.

- Acknowledge birth parents/siblings previous foster families
- Find ways to honor the role/legacy of birth family members



Talking is important! Share their story and talk about it over time.

We can help children integrate past losses and begin to grieve when we share information in an age appropriate way



It is important to give children permission to express all feelings, and give them the tools they need.





Model how to communicate thoughts and wondering.

Show support of child's emotions as she or he copes with grief.



We can't **fix** the loss, but we can validate and affirm the child's feelings.





Adults need to be aware of their own loss and grief history.

Adults must be aware of how it impacts their ability to hold the grief of the child.



Seek professional support from an adoption-competent therapist.



# Tools to Help Grieving Children



## Mask Work



“My parents of my past are always loved the same if not even more than I imagined.”



# Loss Box



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# What is a LIFEBOOK?

A tool that gives children the opportunity to understand and process their past. It helps them to turn their attention to their present and prepares them for the future. It helps the caseworker / social worker and parents to know the child.



# Introducing the Concept to a Child: Creating a Healing and Therapeutic Experience

- There is NO “One Way” or “Right Way” of putting together a Lifebook
- There are many different means of communicating and documenting information
- The discussion before, during and after the Lifebook is completed highlights the value of the Lifebook itself
- Being available and open to helping the child express and process his/her past in a supportive environment
- Anticipating Grief and Loss work



# Potential Challenges:

- The social worker, parent/ caretakers fear of stirring things up
- Talking to children about his/her birth parent's problems
- Lack of information, actual pictures and/or artifacts
- Need to contact significant people from the child's past
- Child's reluctance and disinterest in participating in the process



# Why Create Lifebooks?

## The Seven Top Reasons

1. To recreate a child's life history
2. To give a child information about his or her birth family
3. To give a child reasons to make sense of their placements
4. To help children record their feelings about their life
5. To give children important information about their developmental milestones
6. To provide a therapeutic tool for working on grief/loss with the child
7. To assist children with processing their feelings and experiences

Keefer, Betsy and Schooler, Jayne, Telling the Truth to your Adopted or Foster Child



I was born in The Hospital.



I know this about my birth  
mother or birth father:  
was poor,

When I came home, my family  
my Mom cried



I have photo book  
that helps me remember my  
adoption story.



I *do not* to share  
(like or don't like)

my adoption story with  
friends because

*it is sometimes  
private*





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