

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GRIEF

Children cope with grief at different developmental stages and parents might see behaviors that indicate that the child is expressing grief, rather than simply exhibiting bad behavior. The following will help to identify the ways in which grief may be expressed at different stages.

Infant to 2 years

Children who come into the child welfare system at a very young age, and while they cannot really understand loss intellectually, they nevertheless experience loss, especially if they have had a positive attachment to their birth parent or other caregiver. The main developmental tasks of these early years are:

- establishing trust
- making attachments
- and moving toward autonomy.

Separation from a primary caregiver may result in losing a basic sense of trust that adults will meet their needs, lack of trust in the world at large, and delay of the normal development toward autonomy.

A child's grief reaction to loss can be overlooked if the new caregiver is not attuned to their behavior. They will often show signs of grief immediately or soon after being moved to a new family including

- changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- irritability
- lethargy
- separation anxiety
- regression in attained milestones.

For instance, if they are toilet trained, they may regress and begin soiling themselves. If they are no longer drinking from a bottle, they may need to be offered a bottle again to be soothed. For infants and toddlers from different ethnic backgrounds, sounds, smells, and visual stimuli can all be very different and strange, contributing to discomfort with an unfamiliar environment. Today in child welfare many infants and young children entering care may be drug affected, have a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, or both. These circumstances require special attention and knowledge on the part of caregivers.

Preschoolers: Ages 2-5 years

At this developmental stage children have not yet developed an understanding of cause and effect or permanence. Children who joined their foster, adoptive or guardianship family at birth or at a very young age like to hear their story during this developmental stage, whether it is how they came to their foster or adoptive family, or how they came to live with their relative. They may enjoy telling their story, and can usually repeat it word for word, but at this stage they do

not understand the implications of the story. They are often confused about the facts and may miss the fact that they were born like everyone else, so this should be emphasized.

This is also the time that children become aware of differences, and in transracial placements this is the time to be certain that these differences are discussed in a sensitive and supportive way.

Although they may not explicitly understand the losses surrounding their move from their birth family, children may exhibit behaviors that indicate that they are aware of the losses, such as

- searching or yearning behaviors
- asking strangers if they are their birth parents
- exhibiting anxiety and sadness
- becoming fearful of strangers and being clingy
- exhibiting depression
- having nightmares
- having temper tantrums
- becoming hyperactive
- developing control issues.

Children who are removed from their birth families at this age may feel responsible for being removed from their parents, blame themselves, and think that if they were only better behaved they would not have had to move. They may exhibit phobias such as school phobia. They may be destructive, angry, anxious and depressed.

Ages 6-12 years

At these ages, children begin to understand cause and effect, and the implications of removal from their birth family, especially if they are adopted or in legal guardianship. They begin to understand that they are in a foster, adoptive or guardianship placement because their birth parents were not able or willing to parent them. Children begin to wonder about their birth parents, extended family, or culture but may not talk with their parents or guardians about their interest, for fear of hurting their feelings. When children are in relative adoptions or guardianships, their feelings of loss can be exacerbated by the intermittent presence of birth parents, or by negative family attitudes about their birth parents. Children at this age are often hypersensitive to the attitudes of their adoptive or guardianship families with regard to their race or culture as they enter into the identity development tasks.

If they were removed from their birth parent(s) during these years, they may be worried about them and any siblings they were separated from. Unless discussions are openly encouraged, these concerns may go underground which can have a negative impact on the child's functioning. They may regress in their behavior, feel very out of control, and blame themselves for their situation.

The conversations that foster, adoptive and guardianship parents have with their children during these years are very important and should be honest and framed in a way that supports the self-esteem of the child. No matter how positively the conversation is framed, children understand at this age that, in a child's language, "I got given away." They recognize that you don't give away something of value, and it might follow that they wonder, "What is wrong with me that they gave me away, or didn't try hard enough to keep me?" It does not help to tell a child that, "Your mother loved you so much that she wanted a better life for you." It is better to be honest about the circumstances in language appropriate to the child's age.

Some behaviors that might be common during these years for any child who was removed from their birth family include

- school or learning problems
- daydreaming about birth family members
- imagining reunions
- fantasizing about how life would be different if they were raised by their birth family.

The child might emotionally withdraw from the family, or insistently ask questions about his birth family. Children placed transracially may adopt stereotypical behaviors associated with their race or culture to test the comfort of the foster, adoptive or guardianship family or because they don't have real connections to support a healthy identity. Some children exhibit anger to create distance and avoid the vulnerability of closeness to avoid further pain. This is especially common for children who are removed from their birth parents and placed in a foster, adoptive or guardianship family during these years.

Adolescence

This is a pivotal time in a youth's life. Adolescents are dealing with many questions about their own identity, their story, and anxiety about growing into adulthood. They often have a keen curiosity about their birth parents, need clarification about the story of their separation from their birth family, and as they move toward their own adulthood and leaving home their early losses may be triggered. Their emerging identity challenges can trigger grief issues and emotional upheaval. Their grief looks more like adult grieving. Their anger at their birth parents may manifest in anger toward their adoptive parents or guardians, flouting of rules and engaging in behaviors they expressly know their parents would disapprove of.

Some teens may become extremely depressed over a breakup or friends moving away or even high school graduation, all potential triggers of early losses, and in extreme cases they may have suicidal ideation. American Indian children placed transracially, for instance, have a suicide rate ten times that of Caucasian youth. Some teens deal with loss by turning to risky behaviors like substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual acting out and even pregnancy as a way of aligning with their birth parents, if their birth parents were teens as well. Some adolescents use pregnancy and parenthood as an opportunity to prove that they love their children more than their parents

loved them; or to “break the pattern” of abuse without realizing the significant challenges this creates for them if they haven’t resolved their own grief and loss.

All of the normal adolescent issues of separation and developing independence are magnified by experiences with grief and loss. Identity formation at this point is critical, whether cultural, gender, or family. Without opportunities to engage in positive identity formation activities the adolescent will find their own, and when complicated by grief and loss they often turn to identities that reject both their birth family and their adoptive or guardianship family, challenging the boundaries of their new family in the process.

Into Adulthood

The developmental process does not end with high school graduation. As youth grow up and move away from home, they continue to process the issues inherent in early losses. The importance of addressing the loss and grief issues in childhood becomes more evident as youth move into adulthood. Many pursue reunion with their birth parents, siblings or other family members they were separated from. This is especially true in transracial placements and American Indian youth are thought to have the highest rate of reunification.

Reunions can trigger many unexpected and conflicting feelings including fear of rejection, anger, confusion, guilt, curiosity, identity confusion, and grief. Some find that feelings of loss resurface when they have their own children. Some adopted adults have difficulty with intimacy and sustaining deep relationships, especially if their grief and loss has gone unaddressed throughout their childhood.

It is important that loss and grief issues are addressed at early developmental stages so that by adulthood there is a foundation on which to weather the normal recurrence of grief. There are many triggers in everyday life which can be challenging, including anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, contact with family members, and revisiting places, all of which can bring expected or unexpected grief reactions, as memories of losses reemerge.