Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss

WHO SHOULD TELL THE NEWS?

Because all children appear to harbor some degree of fundamental and primitive terror that something catastrophic might happen to their caregivers and that without their caregivers' protection and care they themselves might die, it is best if the news comes from the adults to whom a child feels closest--whether parents, foster parents, or other caregivers. Access to someone with whom the child shares an ongoing history of trustworthiness, concern, and involvement is an important buffer during crisis or change and reassures the child that he or she is not alone, that there are other people available to provide protection and vital caretaking.

If the loss entails the departure of a parent (whether because of a new job assignment, parental separation, serious illness, or incarceration), it is best for both parents to tell the news together, so that the child has the chance to understand that everyone is involved in what is happening and that, regardless of the change, they are still a family. If the loss is the result of parental conflict (separation or divorce), it is particularly important for each parent to take special care to avoid influencing the child's reactions and to do whatever is necessary to reduce the likelihood that the child will feel caught in the middle of a parental conflict that requires choosing a side. If it is impossible for parents to tell the child together, then they should each talk to the child as soon as can be arranged. Whatever the situation, when parents share the news, whether separately or together, they should both make it clear that their love and positive concern for the child have not diminished and that the child is not the cause of the family change.

WHEN SHOULD I TELL THE CHILD?

The best way to help children face significant changes or losses is to let them know what is happening as soon as the loss, separation, or change seems definite. When parents try to delay telling the news, they often underestimate how sensitive children are to parental preoccupation and tension. Telling a child about an impending loss not only prevents the distress and anxiety that may build as the child increasingly wonders what is wrong but also allows the child to begin to prepare for what lies ahead rather than being caught off guard. The child has a chance to start getting used to the idea, to raise questions and concerns, to participate in the adjustments parents are making, to play and replay the separation experience as a way of integrating the changes that will occur, to practice coping skills before they must be called into action, to begin to grieve. Talking about the change can promote the awareness that, though the adjustments may be hard, the child can manage both the grief and the loss: what has happened is not so awful that it cannot be faced and talked about.

There can be problems with direct prompt approaches. Imagine a mother who has only the brief time it will take someone to bring her children home from school to prepare herself to tell them that their father has suddenly died. Reeling with her own shock and bereavement, it is understandable that she might wish to postpone talking to them, to avoid seeing them, or at least to discourage their expressions of distress. It would be better, however, for her to remember that she need not hide her own pain and strong reactions as long as she makes it clear that the children are not expected to solve her problems or make her feel better. Her children will be most able to believe this if they know which adult friends and relatives will be helping her, since this is most likely to reassure them that their mother is in competent, caring, grown-up hands. If the mother

subsequently joins a loss group or seeks counseling, it might be helpful for the children to be invited to meet the therapist or pastor or group leader so that they can get direct reassurance that the helper understands how important the parent is and that the helper will be available as long as help is needed.

Saying to the child, "are you confused?" can help you avoid making statements that are misleading if taken absolutely literally. It may help to note how frequently adult thought patterns and speech revert to concrete thinking, especially in times of stress. The always/never, good/bad scorekeeping can often be observed in situations that involve assigning blame, dealing with moral or religious issues, or wrangling about politics, and it often shows up in domestic disagreements: "You always expect me to pick up after you." "What do you mean? I'm always happy to help." "Well, for one thing, you never wash the dishes." "And what about you? Three times this week I've had to remind you to put things back where they belong."

It is important to remember that, just as adults under stress may revert to concrete thinking, so children under stress often regress to earlier thought processes and patterns or mix different types of thinking. Consequently, even if a child's age suggests that he or she is in the concrete thinking stage, care should be taken to heed the guidelines appropriate for magical thinking as well.

Helping Children Trust Themselves

Because young children get their understanding of life primarily through their senses, tying news to a sensory or physical connection often helps them grasp it. Such an approach can also reinforce their trust in their own powers of observation. So talk with children about what they might have seen or heard: "When you heard us fighting, you may have wondered what was happening and felt worried and scared." "Today when Aunt Ruth came to get you at school, did you guess that something bad had happened?" Beginning this way also encourages the child to think, "I am the sort of person who can figure out what is happening." Corroborating what the child has noticed sends one more reassuring signal that the child is a thinking person, able to make sense of the world and therefore able to understand significant happenings. In fact, acknowledging that they have been aware of the adult actions or situations that led up to the loss may help reassure them that it was not their fault.

In some families, children are discouraged from observing, commenting on, or questioning what is going on with adults, especially their parents, Such children may now need assurance that it is all right for them to have noticed that things were not going well. Consequently, when talking about a loss, you should deliberately relax any unwritten rules that children should not be "nosy" about the affairs of their elders and encourage your children to voice their questions and to confirm their own observations about what has been going on in the family. Remember: when a child suffers a loss, very little about what has happened is none of the child's business. A significant separation or loss definitely is the child's business and needs to be explained as thoroughly as possible to help avoid serious repercussions later. If the questions are too personal to handle or if the separation hinges on sexual or financial matters inappropriate for discussion with children, you might say, "That's an OK question, but I feel private about the answer, and I really don't want to talk about it."

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE ADJUSTMENT EASIER?

Helping Children Say Good-bye

After the news of the upcoming loss or change has been introduced and explored, children need to be given the opportunity to say whatever good-byes are involved. Having the chance to say actual

thought-out good-byes to people, places, or a familiar family structure is among the most healing things a child can experience. Not only do such good-byes give the child a chance to review and acknowledge the good things that will be lost, they also allow the child an opportunity to express those feelings face to face with the others who are involved. Wishes and blessings can be exchanged, and the child can be given loving permission to have a successful, satisfying life. A thoughtful good-bye visit leaves less unfinished business to complicate the grief that follows the loss. Youngsters who do not have the chance to exchange good-byes or to receive permission to move on sometimes are more likely to sustain additional damage to their basic sense of trust and security to their self esteem, and to their ability to initiate and sustain strong relation-

ACUTE GRIEF

This second phase of mourning has several components: yearning and pining; searching; dealing with sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, and shame; experiencing disorganization and despair; and finally beginning the job of reorganization. Each helps the child recover from the loss, accept what has happened, and move toward healing. Although children may have a mixture of these feelings, shifting among them over time, it is not unusual for one reaction to predominate at first, and then for the child to begin work on another as the first subsides. Some children feel overwhelming anxiety or sadness first, while others begin with anger or guilt. Whether the feelings are mixed or successive, each component of grief must be worked through, and none suppressed. This can be a lengthy though intermittent process, taking as much as two to three years in adults and longer in children. Older children may need more time than preschool children, and adolescents can be especially vulnerable to separations and losses, because so much in their lives is already in flux. In addition, research indicates that serious ambivalence or internal conflicts about the relationship with the lost person severely complicate the grief process, extending the time it may take to move through it. When there is no physical body to take leave of, this, too, tends to prolong the grief process.

Children need to know that their feelings and reactions are common and normal to grief, that the return to creative, healthy living involves pain, and that there is no short cut--the greater the loss, the longer it takes to get over it. Unfortunately in these days of fast food and instant gratification, many adults as well as children have had little experience with tolerating discomfort patiently. Children should be reassured that they will feel better eventually, although they may not believe it. It is honest to tell them that crying and hurting are part of the cure, though they may not understand how that can be so. Often it helps them to know that what they are experiencing and feeling is normal so that instead of trying to fight their feelings they can become more comfortable expressing them.

The outcome of children's grief experiences hinges to a large extent on whether adults are able to tolerate their expressions of strong feelings about what has happened. Complications seem most likely to arise in children who have not felt permitted to let themselves know and express their genuine feelings or have not had their awareness and expression of these feelings encouraged and supported. Remember that when the loss has stricken the caregiving adult or adults deeply, children may be reluctant, resistant, or unwilling to share and process their feelings at home. In such cases, it is important that children have supportive adults to talk to and that their need to keep their feelings separate and private from their caregivers should be respected.

Whatever their age or their circumstances, grieving young people need authentic empathy, respect, and support from caring adults. Give children as much time as they need with all their feelings; don't try to rush them into "more productive" emotional states or urge them to speed their reactions up or tone them down. Feelings are, after all, just signals of an emotional state--our

response to something that has touched us, like the itch that results from a mosquito bite. To say to a child, "Don't be sad [or angry or upset]" is as useless as saying, "Don't itch." Be firm, however, about not allowing children to discharge their feelings in hurtful or destructive ways.

Here are some suggestions for the adult who wants to provide encouragement and support to a child who is experiencing or dealing with acute grief:

- The child's feelings and concerns should take precedence over almost everything else. As soon as the child tries to share feelings, stop what you are doing immediately (or as soon as you can) and focus on the child. It is important to send the message: "Your feelings are important to me, and I will find time to listen to them. You are not bothering me."
- When the child shares sadness, anger, guilt, or shame, whether verbally or physically, don't ask that those feelings be postponed, denied, or concealed. Stifling grief requires precious energy better used to deal with all the changes accompanying loss; moreover, grief driven underground can return months or even years later to haunt the child.

- When the child's feelings or the duration or timing of those feelings differ from your own, respect the differences, and don't criticize or appear upset by the child's statements and feelings and actions. It is the recognition, acceptance, and validation of each emotion as it occurs that lets the child move from one emotional state to another so that grief can be completed.

- Remember that children often just want someone to bear witness to their pain and grief. If you have a close relationship with a child, what you say may not be as important as what you do. The touch of a hand on a knee, an arm around a shoulder, a lap to sit on, or a shoulder to cry against can offer profound comfort.

- If a child seems to be playing up grief for attention, this is a signal that some other need is likely not being met. Giving extra support and showing ample authentic positive interest will usually make the problem disappear.

If caregivers are inclined to encourage the suppression of feelings, sending the message, overtly or covertly, that some feelings are good or right and others are bad or wrong or responding to expressions of feeling with recrimination, withdrawal, or retaliation, then the child will need to have another trusted, supportive person to talk with.