

Helping Young Children Integrate Loss

Training For Early Childhood Educators
and Day Care Providers
Two Clock-Hour Professional Development

Unit 1: Understanding Early Childhood Bereavement

The purpose of this unit is to teach an understanding of how young children grieve so that adults may provide a safe and nurturing environment at school and day care for bereaved children to express their grief, find ways to mourn, and begin to integrate loss into their lives.

How do young children grieve?

One of the hardest things you may ever do is nurture a grieving child. **There's no question: young children do grieve.** We want to take the pain away, but we can't. Only licensed counselors or therapists may responsibly deliver therapeutic interventions; however, there are numerous ways that adults may support and nurture children in their care during bereavement, and do so with great empathy. Intuitive caregivers support by observing and honoring how young children communicate their grief through play, art and behavioral responses to loss. We help best when we cultivate safe and accessible ways for young children to grieve at school and day care.

Although children do not fully comprehend the permanence of death until about age seven or eight, **all children have unique developmental responses to death.** Some people think young children don't grieve, or they "get over it" quickly. This is not true; children deeply grieve. Experts in the childhood bereavement field tell us that "*Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve.*" Very young children don't understand the permanence of death, but they experience the pain of loss. Very young children are conscious of the absence of someone significant, and they feel the pain experienced by the adults around them. Very young children are subject to the multiple losses triggered by a death that impact home life, care settings, and routines. The rhythm of life and the emotional climate within the home changes when there is a death, and the very young child senses it all. To try and pretend nothing has happened, when clearly a crisis has occurred, will confuse and frighten a child. We help best when we

understand that young children are able to grieve, thus we must sensitively and honestly acknowledge the death.

Bereaved children never “get over” grief. But sometimes it may look like they do. In reality, children protect themselves by choosing the ways they move close to, then away from, the pain of loss. This self-regulation, or dosing, is a grieving child’s way of controlling pain levels. When a bereaved child is “not acting like a grieving kid”; for example, being playful or silly, they are finding momentary comfort. They are not done grieving. Grief will always be part of their lives. We help best when we respond compassionately to the subtle and not-so-subtle behavioral signals children emit. To assist, provide “no judgment zones” and allow young children freedom to decide how, when, and with what level of intensity they choose to engage with their grief and try to mourn.

How do the differences between grief and mourning relate to young children?

The terms *grief* and *mourning* are often used interchangeably but they are not the same. Per *New Oxford American Dictionary*,

- **bereavement** means to be deprived of a loved one through profound absence;
- to **grieve** is to feel deep, internal sorrow;
- **mourning** is to show feelings of sorrow in an outward expression.

Bereaved children often struggle to find ways and safe places to express on the outside the grief they are feeling on the inside. Engagement with grief, and the release of grief, promote the ability to mourn. Mourning is a pathway to healing. Mourning represents growth; it’s an expression, a voice to the pain going on inside. Mourning gives rise to an understanding that life will go on and allows a bereaved child to begin to reconcile a death. A grieving child must be able to mourn, or his heart may not begin to mend. This *emotional order of operations* in grief is influenced by a child’s developmental level and cognitive ability. We help best by purposefully scaffolding all bereaved children, as well as classmates and care group members, in the following ways:

- Speak gently and openly about the loss.
- Reflectively listen.
- Give all children full attention.
- Provide multiple ways for all children to express their feelings.

- Stay present, and let children know they may talk with you or ask questions about the death.
- Answer children’s questions honestly and simply, without over sharing.
- Allow as much choice in as many areas as possible. (Grieving children experience very little choice following a death. Everything feels out of their control, and even small choices at school and day care can be a huge relief.)

How exactly do you nurture bereaved young children at school and day care?

Begin with great practice and develop a protocol for early childhood grief support. (Even if you are now responding to a death, the thoughtful and experiential response plan you are trying to create will help.) Reliable, emotionally competent teachers and predictable classrooms help bereaved children adapt. The following is a comprehensive, research-based framework to help you create your own plan of compassionate bereavement support within your unique setting. These guiding principles incorporate evidence-based bereavement support theory with best teaching practice:

Guiding Principles for Providing Grief Support at School and Day Care

- Allow young children to direct their own grief journeys.
- Understand young children’s responses to grief.
- Integrate early childhood bereavement support with good teaching practice.
- Proactively teach young children about life and death.
- Work to prevent isolation for grieving children.
- Identify and share local bereavement support resources with families.

Allow young children to direct their own grief journeys:

Child-led grief support includes giving bereaved children agency to choose how they will engage with their grief and how they will express emotions, as well as the right to never be pushed to “get over it.” We know the most impactful learning is self-directed. When young children self-regulate their own grief journeys, while feeling the full support of the adults around them, they are able to cope better. So we can’t plan a grief-support timetable. The goal is to create open-ended social and emotional learning opportunities for all children to express themselves. We help best when we

observe and respond compassionately to grieving children's unique and ever-changing needs and cues, without judgement or redirection.

Instead of telling the child what he should be feeling, we respond to what he IS feeling. This will mean talking openly about the death with the child. It's very hard to talk about death with children, but if we help them feel safe to talk about scary things such as death, children will not be quite so frightened. If we act afraid or uncomfortable, children will think they should not be talking about the death. Sometimes grieving children don't want to talk about what has happened. If so, we must respect that they are not ready, and never force them. We help best when we let children know they are accepted and understood, and then help them to feel safe to talk -when they're ready. Voice your understanding: *"It's okay if you don't feel ready talk about what happened to your Uncle Bob. If that changes, I am always here to listen or maybe draw a picture with you about it."*

As long as no harm is done to another person, property, or himself, the grieving child must feel safe with you to express his feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and confusion. At school and day care it is the responsibility of supportive adults to set secure boundaries for children to express pain, while gently safeguarding the setting. Children need to know an adult will keep school and day care feeling safe for everyone, especially when a child is learning to cope with powerful emotions. Voice your safe boundary setting: *"Billy, I can really see you're having some big feelings today. We can't throw the markers, but we can use the colors on paper to let out some feelings. What does red feel like today? And what about blue, or yellow? Let's find out together."*

After a death, be prepared for children's emotional reactions to elevate unexpectedly, even to small events. Overwhelming feelings like fear, anger, and confusion can be masked by aggression, impatience, and regressive behaviors in young children. We help best when we are patient, talk through the circumstance, and deliver compassionate support. At the same time, **it's crucial for both the grieving child and all other members of the classroom community to honor classroom guidelines.** Consistency, even during upsets, will keep everyone feeling more secure and deliver a much-needed sense of normalcy for the grieving child. Voice your limit-setting and empathy: *"We need to keep everyone feeling safe, so we are careful to not bump our friends with our bodies. The good thing is, we have this bubble wrap over here for squeezing the big feelings out whenever we need to. That feels safer than*

bumping.” Provide reliably accessible, “go-to” choices for grieving children when they are feeling overwhelmed by emotion. Partner with children who need to learn how to express overwhelming emotions, and demonstrate safe ways to let feelings out. When adults provide what author Dr. Alan Wolfelt, one of America’s leading grief counselors, calls *safe holding environments* of trust, empathy, and respect, grieving children are more able to experience agency as they work to cope with the crisis of death. (centerforloss.com)

Reflective listening:

Reflective listening is one of the best ways to comfort a grieving child. Reflective listening involves *reflecting back* what the child is communicating rather than telling her what she should be feeling. No one can tell another person how to feel.

Understand young children’s responses to grief:

Developmental responses to grief are not universal; every child’s response to death is unique. It’s common for children to regress to developmentally younger behaviors when experiencing trauma. When this happens, we help best when we support a child’s reach toward emotional competency by offering encouragement that they’ll be able to complete the task once again. Voice your patient and gentle reassurance: “It looks like it’s hard for you to put the book away. We’ll do it together this time, and next time you might do it yourself.”

Developmental Responses to Grief in Children Aged 2-4

Developmental Stage/Task

Egocentric. Believe world centers around them. Narcissistic. Lack cognitive understanding of death and related concepts. Limited language skills.

Concept of Death

Death seen as reversible, as abandonment, not permanent. Common statements: “Did you know my mom died? When will she be home?”

Grief Response

Intensive response but brief. Very present oriented. Most aware of changes in patterns of care. Asking questions repeatedly.

Signs of Distress

Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, bed wetting, general irritability, and confusion.

Possible Interventions

Short, honest answers, frequent repetition, lots of reassurance and nurturing. Consistent routine. Play is their outlet for grief.

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Grief is not sequential and it is never orderly for anyone. This is especially true for young children because they have not yet developed the operational thinking skills to understand death. Grief is a simultaneous experience of reoccurring painful emotions. Author and groundbreaking bereavement researcher Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross identified *Five Stages of Grief*, which are **mistakenly** interpreted by many as the formula for grief, but to clarify:

The five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance— are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live without the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we are feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through them or goes in a prescribed order.

—Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*.

We cannot think of grief in terms of stages. Harvard Medical School educator, scientific researcher and clinician J. William Worden tells us that grief work happens in tasks that are not necessarily managed in any specific order. These emotional tasks will be revisited and worked at again and again by the grieving person over time. This is especially true for children, who are moving through changing levels of cognitive, emotional, and social development.

For children, this adjustment goes on over time. As they mature into adolescence, they realize in new ways what has been lost to parental death. Mourning for a childhood loss can be revived at many points in life, especially when important life events reactivate the loss.

—J. William Worden, *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*.

Grieving children will experience several emotions of grief at one time, numerous times, and not in order. It makes sense to think of this work as tasks. **Children will re-mourn the death each time they reach a new developmental stage and at every milestone.** They'll revisit the significance of the loss with a new understanding shaped by the development that has occurred as the child grows and matures. This means that if the death of someone close happens in the life of an infant, she will emotionally revisit this event every time she reaches a new developmental level. She will work to integrate her previous knowledge about the death while reaching for a new level understanding of life without the person she lost. This will happen in repetitive cycles. A child never outgrows grief, she grows through grief. Grief and loss become part of a

child's intimate life story, something he will carry with him always as a beloved, often hidden, treasure. Bereavement leaves an imprint on a child's life. It is a forever thing. It's the work of a nurturing caregiver to help grieving children know they are not alone as they learn to live with their losses. We help best when we offer hope, but sometimes hope needs hands.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt, founder and director of *The Center for Loss and Life Transition*, offers an accessible model of companion care to guide adults who must nurture grieving children. Dr. Wolfelt teaches that in order for grieving children to heal, Six Reconciliation Needs of Mourning must be met.

- Need 1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.
- Need 2. Move toward the pain of the loss while being nurtured physically, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Need 3. Convert the relationship with the person who has died from one of presence to one of memory.
- Need 4. Develop a new self-identity based on a life without the person who died.
- Need 5. Relate the experience of death to a context of meaning.
- Need 6. Experience a continued supportive adult presence in future years.

© Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. Excerpted from *Companioning the Grieving Child: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers*. Visit www.centerforloss.com for more information.

Integrate early childhood bereavement support with good teaching practice:

Young children lack the cognitive skills to know that death is permanent. They need repeated, gentle reminders that death cannot be reversed. It is great practice to offer all children multiple opportunities to construct new knowledge about life and death. This is practical, empathetic teaching. We support young children's limited cognition and limited language skills when we supplement curriculum with life cycle and grief-themed literacy. We cannot ask or expect young children to talk about their feelings because these skills, although emergent, are underdeveloped. Offer open-ended learning experiences, for example, by recording children's personal narratives and stories. Read the stories together and with the group (always and only with the young narrator's prior permission) to foster empathy, nurture inquiry, and create understanding. We help children best when we use clear and concrete terms when talking about death. Idioms like "sleeping or lost" confuse and frighten children.

When talking with young children about death, use simple and honest communication.

If the person died from an illness, it's good to name it—say “cancer” or “leukemia”—rather than saying, “She got really sick and died.” Being too vague and general in this situation can create anxiety for young children. For instance, the next time someone gets a cold or flu, preschoolers may worry that the sick person will die.

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If it feels safe to play it, it feels safe to say it. Play is the primary outlet for a young child's grief. Child development theorist Piaget taught that a child's interactions with his world help create learning; thus a child constructs knowledge by assigning meaning to people, places and things. Often, a worried or grieving child may replay scenes or concerns she is experiencing at home to try to make sense of them. When you create safe spaces for children to play out emotions, scaffolded by adults, you strengthen children's ability to feel secure enough to talk about what they are feeling. And by enhancing play settings when offering props promoting replay of events important to children, you support intrinsic learning (coming from within) while nurturing extrinsic learning (delivered by an adult or the child's environment). Cultivate peer support and engagement by offering all children materials for making their own play props, fostering greater social competency. If invited, engage in play with the grieving child, and let him give you a role in the play scene. Ask how he wants you to act, what you should do, and how you may be feeling. Playing this way with bereaved children may create a pathway for them to articulate their experiences, wishes, worries, and fears.

Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.

—Fred Rogers, © The Fred Rogers Company, www.fredrogers.org

Engaging in play with grieving children and classmates is an opportunity to enhance new vocabulary. Voice your willingness to explore and question: “*What is a funeral? Has anyone ever been to a funeral? What happens there?*” When adults signal to children the topic of death is not taboo, all children benefit from feeling their classroom is a secure place to ask questions and learn about topics that may confuse or frighten them. It's hard, but we help best when we weave nurturing and open spaces for young children to hold difficult conversations with caring adults.

Proactively teach young children about life and death:

Teaching that all living things have their own unique lifespans will help young children begin to understand the cycle of life and death. Work with children to notice and make comparisons between the natural rhythms of the lives of plants, animals, and humans. But be especially sensitive when approaching the topic if a death has recently occurred; you know your children best, so if a crisis is recent, determine whether time and a little healing distance may be necessary before this topic is broached. Examine lifespans of indigenous plants and animals to provide relatable experiences for children. We help young children understand life and death when we provide concrete learning experiences with living things found in local and natural environments.

It is culturally relevant pedagogy to teach about traditions and ceremonies with young children, including ways to honor a person or pet who has died. When you open your classroom as a space to share diverse and personal customs related to death, you encourage a sense of belongingness. This can be as simple as sharing stories about how people of diverse cultures honor the dead, or holding your own multicultural funeral if a class pet dies. Make comparisons, share family traditions, and learn new vocabulary. We help strengthen social and emotional competency for young children when we help them discover commonalities, share resiliency, and model empathy within the classroom community.

Work to prevent isolation in school or care:

Creating a caring environment for bereaved children and families elevates a school's culture of inclusiveness. Death is frightening, and many people don't know how to interact with grieving people. We help best when we model how to gently acknowledge the crisis and offer support to help prevent isolation. Reach out and partner with the grieving child's family or guardians as part of your plan to cultivate an empathetic and inclusive classroom. Be intentional about checking in regularly and often. Offer extra help and patience with paperwork and/or school communication tasks for overwhelmed grieving adults. Ask parents and guardians how they would like their child to be supported, and honor this. Your support plan may include the following:

- Before a bereaved child returns from a death-related absence, talk with classmates about what has happened using developmentally appropriate language you and your

administrator have selected. Remember, less is more. Do not over share. Young children are egocentric and self-oriented; you will need to accept them right where they are, even if that means they cannot engage with the topic. They may not yet have the language skills required. Reassure classmates that it's okay to talk about the person who died and ask questions. Explain what their friend may be feeling, and discuss ways they may be able to help. *“When Sally comes back to school she may be feeling sad/missing/lonely/hurt. It will help Sally if you play together in all the ways you have loved before. It may even help a little bit if you ask her how she is feeling.”*

- Manipulate peer groupings. Partner the grieving child with the most nurturing and socially and emotionally developed children in play, mealtime, and project settings. This will help the bereaved child secure a sense of belonging.
- Consider creating a classroom memory space. Provide all children the opportunity to use this space to remember people or pets they loved who have died. This is a concrete and compassionate way for grown-ups and children to empathetically share their missing feelings in death and loss. The grieving child will know she is not alone.

Help young children remember their person or pet who died.

Young children may not have many memories about the person who died. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life:

“Your daddy really liked this song,” or “Your mom was the best painter I know.” Children often appreciate having pictures and possessions of the person who died. With photos, it's helpful to make copies to give to young children so that they can carry them around without the fear of tearing or damaging the originals. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures preschoolers might like, ask which ones are important to them.

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Identify and share local bereavement support resources with families:

Bereavement support groups are bridges of hope for many children and families, but they are not right for everyone. Some children do thrive in a support-group setting, and others need more intimate support; the decision is not ours, it is best left in the hands of the bereaved families. Familiarize yourself with local child and family bereavement support organizations so you can serve as a capable and ready resource. Share what you learn with your administrator and colleagues, and work together to form a protocol for how your community will share bereavement support information with families. If

your center or school has a social worker on your team, learn about referral processes used to help families access outside support. Above all, remember: **you are not a therapist, and you must never try to deliver therapeutic care.** If you sense the grief is more than you can handle as a lay companion, partner with your administrators to help struggling families find the level of professional support they may need.

If families do choose to connect with a local children's bereavement center, they will often have access to support meetings and services designed to nurture both the adults and the children in the family. It is commonly a free service. Every person in a family grieves differently, and each requires special care. Assistance designed to nurture the needs of all family members will promote healthier outcomes for grieving children. **Children do better when the adults taking care of them are getting support, too.**

A child's ability to process the pain of loss will be influenced by observing the adult's experience of this process.

— J. William Worden, *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies.*

When children and families attend grief support group activities, they often feel moments of normalcy. ("I found my tribe!") Everyone participating is grieving, trying to mourn, and although they're working on different tasks of grief, they're doing it together. Grief is a little easier when you can hold the hand of someone who knows the pain of loss. Nobody has to explain the tough stuff; everybody knows. Nobody expects you to act a certain way, and everyone is accepted right where they are. Bereavement support groups help mitigate isolation and loneliness for children and families by providing a safe place to feel and articulate the pain of loss.

To access local bereavement support networks in your community, link with the National Alliance for Grieving Children map of service providers: <http://www.childrengrieve.org/local-support>.

Finally

It's very hard to sustain the role of nurturing caregiver over time. Take steps to practice good self-care so you can stay strong and steadfast. Find someone you can trust to talk with while assisting children in crisis. Recognize **and act** if you need help by reaching out to professionals, your colleagues, or people in your own family system.

We are laypeople, and we help by providing layers of safety and comfort for children, but we must never forget to care for ourselves in the process. We help best when we are emotionally intelligent and willing to ask for help if we need it.

If you were asked to describe the top three ways to help a grieving child at school or care, you'd say:

1. Give children as many ways to talk about and express their grief as you can.
2. Understand grief will not go away and it will be integrated into life.
3. Help children know they are not alone.

Suggested internet resources:

centerforloss.com: The Center For Loss and Life Transition, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director

childrengrieve.org: The National Alliance for Grieving Children, accessible nationwide support

dougy.org: The Dougy Center, peer support model, materials to assist at school, day care or home

suzannejbayer.com: Support material for educators and caregivers nurturing grieving children

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