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# The guidance counselor's role in helping children and adolescents deal with grief and loss

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# The guidance counselor's role in helping children and adolescents deal with grief and loss

## **Abstract**

Death is a natural part of life. This is a difficult lesson to learn and can be especially confusing for children and adolescents. It is natural for adults to want to protect children from negative emotions and shelter them from the loss. Also, many adults feel uncomfortable or incapable of talking with children and adolescents about death. It is the guidance counselor's role to educate teachers regarding the grief and loss process and to provide support to the student, and well as information and resources to the parents or guardians of the student.

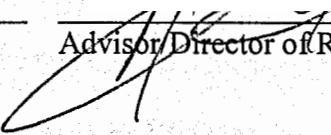
The purpose of this paper is to identify the grief and loss process at each developmental stage from infant to adolescent, to identify the role of the guidance counselor in working with the bereaved, and to specify numerous helpful interventions.

This Research Paper by: Brandie Erickson

Entitled: THE GUIDANCE COUNSELOR'S ROLE IN HELPING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS DEAL WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

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## Abstract

Death is a natural part of life. This is a difficult lesson to learn and can be especially confusing for children and adolescents. In an attempt to teach children and adolescents about death, it is also important to teach them about life. It is natural for adults to want to protect children from negative emotions and shelter them from the loss. Also, many adults feel uncomfortable or incapable of talking with children and adolescents about death. It is the guidance counselor's role to educate teachers regarding the grief and loss process and to provide support to the student, and well as information and resources to the parents or guardians of the student. The purpose of this paper is to identify the grief and loss process at each developmental stage from infant to adolescent, to identify the role of the guidance counselor in working with the bereaved, and to specify numerous helpful interventions.

## The Guidance Counselor's Role in Helping Children and Adolescents

### Deal with Grief and Loss

Kubler-Ross (1983) explained that humans are born with five natural emotions: fear, grief, anger, jealousy, and love. We as humans have a way of twisting these emotions around to make them very unnatural. Therefore, it is necessary to teach young children that throughout life, it is normal and expected to experience emotions of fear, grief, anger, jealousy, and love. Children educated about these five emotions as well as natural ways to express emotions are better equipped to handle emotions in a healthy manner, rather than a distorted, unnatural manner. Adults cannot only educate children about how to deal with emotions, but also must also model healthy expression of emotions. In relation to grief, modeling distorted and unnatural ways of dealing with grief can lead to self-pity, guilt, and shame. Grief and loss includes many aspects that are important to be aware of, especially as an individual in the helping field.

This paper will address many issues surrounding grief and loss and is divided into seven sections. The first section includes the grief and loss process, which includes the stages of grief. The second section addresses the psychological tasks of grief, which include understanding, grieving, commemorating, and going on. The third section addresses the magnitude of grief and loss. This section addresses how individuals are impacted by grief in many ways. The fourth section is developmental implications for dealing with grief and loss. This section depicts each developmental level and characteristics that accompany grief. Secondary effects of bereavement is the fifth section in this paper, which explains how death is a chain reaction of multiple losses. The sixth section is the guidance counselor's responsibility in recognizing presenting

issues. The seventh section is techniques for helping children and adolescents through the grieving process, which includes providing support and education, parent and teacher contact, student contact, and specific interventions. The goal of this paper is to help guidance counselors gain a deeper understanding of the grief process and to identify ways to assist students throughout the grieving process.

### *Grief and Loss Process*

Kubler-Ross (1983) has developed a five-stage model of the process of grief and loss. Although grief is a natural emotion, it does not follow a distinct path of expression. The stages are a unique experience for each individual and can fluctuate from one stage to the next. The stages are as follows: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Denial is utilized as a defense mechanism to avoid our accepting the truth of the loss. Anger can be expressed through pointing blame at others or self for the loss. The individual may be overcome with feelings of rage and resentment. Bargaining is an attempt to postpone the loss by making a personal deal. Children in the bargaining stage following the divorce of their parents may attempt to bargain by stating that they will never fight with their siblings again if their parents remain married. Following the bargaining stage is a stage of depression. This is when the individual is at a point of mourning the loss. The final stage of grief and loss is acceptance. At this stage, the loss has become reality and the individual has learned to go back to daily routine. Individual stages can surface following the acceptance stage and can be triggered by things such as anniversaries or holidays. Naierman (1997) explained that young people may grieve intensely, but sporadically since a major loss in early childhood can reverberate as the individual progresses through life's milestones.

### *Psychological Tasks*

Goldman (2000) explained grief and loss as occurring differently from that of Kubler-Ross' model. Goldman's stages of grief and loss are reportedly stages children and adolescents need to work through in order to grow in a healthy manner beyond the loss. Goldman noted that there are four psychological tasks children and adolescents must undergo: Understanding, commemorating, grieving, and going on.

#### Understanding

The first task is the task of understanding. Children need to make sense out of death. Family members and counselors can explain death by stating that the body stops working and further discussion can be held with the child by family members about spiritual beliefs. It is important to point out to children that most people live until they are very old; however, there are times when an accident, illness or injury causes a body to stop working. "Magical Thinking" can affect children's understanding of death.

Goldman (2000) described "Magical Thinking" as an inaccurate conclusion regarding a loss experience, where children feel responsible and believe they have the power to fix the loss. For example, children may believe that if they are good, this will bring their parent back. Children and adolescents' understanding of death is based on their developmental stage, which will be addressed in greater detail later in this paper.

#### Grieving

Children and adolescents as well as adults, experience grief and loss. Throughout the grieving process, children undergo feelings of despair and may believe, for example, that if a sibling died that their parents may allow them to die as well. The grieving stage is a complicated process, as it holds four interchangeable and continuous stages within it:



Shock and disbelief, searching and yearning, disorganization and despair, and rebuilding and healing (Anisworth-Smith & Speck, 1995). This initial stage of shock and disbelief involves confusion and denial regarding the loss; it is typical to have feelings of numbness. Searching involves a process of attempting to make sense out of the world and understanding the reason for the loss. Despair is a feeling of misery and may present itself as acting out behaviors in children or adolescents. Rebuilding and healing occurs when a child or adolescent has learned to accept the loss and move forward with life.

Throughout the grieving process, it is important to be aware of symptoms of normal grief and to educate teachers and parents about these symptoms. This will allow the student to feel supported in working through the grief process.

#### Commemorating

Ainsworth-Smith and Speck (1995) explained that children and adolescents may be continuing to experience the grieving stage, while faced with the commemorating stage. There are both formal and informal ways to commemorate a death. Formal commemorating includes attending funeral services. Informal commemorating includes planting flowers in memory of the deceased or creating a memory book. Children and adolescents should be involved, on some level, in both the preparation for the informal and formal commemoration.

#### Going On

The final stage identified by Goldman (2000) is the stage of going on with daily routine. Emphasizing fun activities in life without forgetting to talk about the loved one. When children are able to do this, it signals a release of guilt they may have once felt.

Going on can signal a release of guilt that is often felt by survivors.

Recognizing the four stages of grief (understanding, grieving, commemorating, and going on) allows counselors to help a student through a stage they may be stuck at or simply to support the student throughout the natural progression through the process.

### *Magnitude of Grief and Loss*

Davidson and Doka (1999) explained that the nature of loss and how students are impacted in the school environment take on a magnitude of characteristics. Davidson and Doka (1999) stated that the nature of loss encompasses the following: must be mourned, must not be compared, sparks fear, is universal, alters direction, erodes trust, disrupts life flow, affects development, has creative opportunities, is stressful, changes forever, is isolating, takes time, magnifies individual differences, involves meaning making, and depletes energy.

Losses should not be compared; each loss is different in personal importance. Children and adolescents often feel a sense of fear following a loss. They fear for their own safety as well as for the loved ones around them. Loss as being universal is especially true in a setting such as a school. One student may be most affected and then others in the school community become affected as the ripple effect takes place. Loss begins to alter children and adolescent's perceptions that their parents will protect and take care of them. "Loss forever changes one's perception of self" (Davidson & Doka, 1999 p. 105). Loss causes a great deal of stress and can lead children and adolescents to engage in negative behaviors and turn to inappropriate groups as an outlet for feelings of stress. Loss magnifies individual differences in that each individual has a unique timetable for dealing with grief and loss.

### *Developmental Implications for Dealing with Grief*

McHutchion (1991) reported that the way one's first experience with death is handled is significant when looking at how future losses and crises are managed.

Therefore, the developmental stage at which a child first experiences a loss is significant.

When working with students dealing with grief and loss issues, it is important to first identify what developmental stage they are at. Identifying the developmental stage helps the counselor to recognize how a student would typically understand and react to grief.

#### Infant-Toddler

Children aged 0–2 are capable of experiencing feelings of loss. Smith (1999) explained that children at this developmental stage are likely to search for the person whom has died and may refuse to eat or experience a disruption in their bodily functions. The child is unable to understand the permanence of death and will expect the individual to return.

#### Toddler-Early Childhood

Children aged 2-5 have developed a greater degree of self-control and heightened independence. Experiencing a death can cause the child's world to become unreliable and insecure, causing the child to cry and become clingy. Children will often need to be retold about the loss due to their inability to retain information and will be unable to understand an explanation for the loss.

#### Early-Middle Childhood

Children aged 5-9 are acquiring skills for social integration and developing a wider network of friends. Smith (1999) explained that these children may hide their feelings in order to protect the adults around them, they will model adults' reactions to

grief, and they may feel responsible for the death by engaging in illogical reasoning. At this stage of development, children are curious about the facts of death such as the functions of dead bodies and the rituals surrounding death.

#### Late Childhood-Early Adolescence

Children aged 9-12 is the stage of development where children are able to recognize that death is permanent, irreversible, and universal, which can lead a child to recognize the possibility of his or her own death (Smith, 1999). Children at this stage of development are more likely to induce psychosomatic symptoms.

#### Adolescence

Adolescence is a difficult stage of development. With a loss added to the typical developmental stressors, adolescents must feel supported in order to work through the grief and loss process in a healthy manner. Grieving adolescents often have high expectations of support from their peers, whom may not be able to provide what is expected of them. It is important for the guidance counselor to provide the support needed. Smith (1999) reported that adolescents may have thoughts of suicide or self-harm, they may question their identity and the meaning of life, and they may engage in acting out behaviors such as alcohol or drug use and becoming sexually active.

As children and adolescents grow and experience the next stage of development, they may reexperience the loss as they reach a new level of understanding. Guidance counselors must be aware of this since they will continue to work with the student throughout their stages of development. The typical American way of thinking about a loss is that the loss is a *single* event, however, this is not true (Klass, 1996). The effects of a death or major loss extends over one's lifetime, as one has a new realization of the loss.

### *Secondary Effects of Bereavement*

Counselors and educators need to maintain consistency as a death is usually the catalyst for a chain reaction of multiple losses. Following a loss, such as a death, children and adolescents experience secondary effects that can create an even greater sense of loss. If children or adolescents lose a parent, secondary effects could include living with a relative. This in turn creates many changes for the individual, including a possible move to a new town, change of school, and a loss of friends. Children and adolescents may lose a sense of security or a sense of belonging. Secondary effects of loss can then signal a new process of grief and loss for the individual. During this time, it is important for loved ones to reassure children and adolescents that they will not be left alone (Auez & Andrews, 2002).

### *Guidance Counselor's Responsibility in Recognizing Presenting Issues*

Grief can manifest itself in many ways. It is pertinent for the guidance counselor to be aware of presenting issues that can be a sign of a student struggling with feelings of grief. Behavioral responses to grief can include delinquency, an inability to concentrate, sexual activity, a change in academic performance, acting out, and substance abuse (Davidson & Doka, 1999).

Following the recognition of presenting issues, it is also important to note that these issues are likely to arise again as the student experiences a year of "firsts" without their loved one. "It is almost as if you have to get through the first year of acute pain before the true healing can begin" (Metzger, 1995, p.12).

*Techniques for Helping Children and Adolescents through the Grieving Process*

It is not the counselor's job to protect students from inevitable losses, but to assist them through the natural progression of life (Davidson & Doka, 1999). Often, adults to attempt to protect the child from pain and suffering by acting pleasant and as if nothing has happened. This creates barriers for the child or adolescent to effectively work through the grief and loss process (Jewett, 1982). There are critical principles for developing interventions to help students deal with grief and loss. Interventions must be developmentally appropriate, as the needs of a middle school student are greatly different than that of an elementary student. Interventions appear to be most helpful when developed collaboratively with the student (Davidson & Doka, 1999).

**Provide support and education**

Ideally, children would be educated about death prior to experiencing a loss. However, Davis & Yehieli (1998) stated that we most often we wait for "death education by necessity." When this is the case, the guidance counselor must be prepared to provide support and education to teachers, parents, guardians, and to the student. This helps to ensure the adults actively involved in the student's life are aware of how to best help the student throughout the grieving process. The counselor will be a part of helping the student as well; however, the counselor does not have nearly as much contact with the student as a classroom teacher or guardian would have. Therefore, it is just as pertinent to educate the teachers and guardians about the grieving process and ways to best help the child.

### Parent and teacher contact

When a student experiences a loss, communication between school personnel within the school environment is critical to best meet the needs of the student (Davidson & Doka, 1999). It is also crucial for communication between school personnel and the family to occur. This communication can be most helpful to the student and models to the student that is okay to talk about the loss. The counselor should talk with a parent or caregiver before the student returns to school to find out how the child is reacting at home and once the student returns to school, it is necessary to keep the parent informed of the student's progress (Naierman, 1997). It is also important to have contact with the parents or guardians because grief is a family process. Loss impacts the entire family system; therefore, children learn about grief through observing, listening, and talking to family members (Lehmann, 2001). If the parents or guardians are struggling a great deal with the loss, the guidance counselor is available as a resource for the parent in seeking individual counseling. The student will likely experience ongoing feelings of grief and loss, if this is what is observed at home. It is necessary to educate teachers to ensure they are knowledgeable of the grief process, leading to a greater appreciation to offer support to the student. Also, a teacher may not feel capable of dealing with discussions about loss; however, training can increase feelings of self-efficacy for this role (Rowling, 2003).

### Student contact

Prior to the student returning to school, it is important for classmates to be informed of their peers' loss and to be educated regarding how to respond to their classmate. Teachers can encourage classmates to write letters and make pictures to send

to the grieving student. The counselor should provide classmates with facts surrounding the loss and encourage them to ask questions or state concerns prior to their classmate returning to school (Goldman, 2001). The classmates should be educated about the importance of keeping a day-to-day routine and respecting their classmate's feelings by not blurting out questions or comments about the loss. If the grieving student wants to discuss the loss, he or she will be the initiator of the conversation.

When the student does return to school, the guidance counselor's role is to meet individually with the student on a regular basis and to discuss the death with the student openly and honestly. The guidance counselor will then provide support and education on an individual basis. Death education gives students permission to share attitude, concerns, and fears regarding grief and loss (Silverman, 2000). The counselor must be available to even lower elementary students. Even young children have developed concepts relating to death and, with help, are able to understand that death is universal and irreversible (Black, 1996).

### *Specific interventions*

Throughout the grief process, it is important for students to express their feelings; this can be a very unique process from student to student. Because some students are highly verbal in sharing their feelings and others tend to utilize a physical outlet to release feelings, it is important for counselors to be aware of a variety of interventions.

Counselors must present themselves as approachable and compassionate for students to feel comfortable sharing their feelings. The counselor's office will become a place of security for the student as the counselors provides the student with consistency



and routine. Routine and consistency are important in creating a sense of security for children and adolescents (Metzger, 1995).

### Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is an excellent tool to assist children and adolescents in understanding the grief and loss process. DeSpelder (2002) defined bibliotherapy as using books as an aid to coping. Appropriate books that relate to the student's loss will give the student the opportunity to begin talking about personal experiences. Pardeck (1994) stated the goals of bibliotherapy include the following: to provide information about problems, to provide insight into problems, to stimulate discussion, to communicate new attitudes, to create an awareness that others have dealt with similar problems, and to provide solutions for coping. The counselor's role is to read a book with the student and utilize content and personalization questions upon completion. For a list of appropriate books to utilize with children and adolescents, refer to Appendix A, which includes an annotated bibliography, and both content and personalization questions.

### Talking

Allowing students to talk about their loss is an obvious, yet highly important intervention. Talking about how much a loved one is missed or sharing memories about that person can be healing. The student may repeat the story over many times and over time, what students say and how they say it may change. The circumstances of the loss do not change, but the student's perceptions of the loss will begin to change as they work through the grieving process (Bovuard & Gladu, 1998). It is not the counselor's role to point out the changes in the student's recollections, rather the counselor's role is to provide

the student with a listening ear. Allowing the student to feel heard creates an environment in which the student feels cared for and also works toward healing.

### Journaling

At times, it is important to be alone and reflect privately on the loss. Encouraging the student to utilize private time to journal about experiences and observations can contribute to a sense of release and understanding (Metzger, 1995). Older children can be encouraged to journal about their feelings of anger and abandonment and possible feelings of guilt surrounding the death (Prestine, 1993) The students may journal day-to-day thoughts or write poems. The counselor must allow the student to choose to share the writings or keep them in a safe and private location. The guidance counselor may choose to utilize a structured activity by assigning the student a journaling assignment. A more structured approach to journaling could include the counselor supplying the student with a paper, with a title stating "The Story of My Loss." If it appeared that the student was better able to journal with a small bit of direction, the counselor would continue to supplying the student with a paper entitling something unique each session. The papers could then be collected and put together into a journal or added to a memory book.

### Play Therapy

Students experiencing a loss may not feel as if they are heard, especially with all of the changing that may be taking place within the home. The guidance counselor can help to provide an opportunity for self-expression. The main goal of utilizing play therapy with bereaved students is to provide an opportunity for self-expression (Bertman, 1999). Play therapy utilizes play, which Kottman (2003) has described as the natural language of children. Kottman further explained that in play, much of what a child does

or says takes the form of symbolic, metaphoric communication about the relationships within the child's world.

Playing with puppets can be especially helpful for younger students. This is an unstructured, nondirective form of therapeutic play, which allows the student to communicate in a nonthreatening way (Bertman, 1999). The counselor would be available to the student during sessions to play as the student directs. By allowing the student to direct the play, the counselor is assisting the child in working through the grief and loss process in a way the child may only understand.

#### Art Therapy

Using art as a means of therapy functions as a means of expressing pain and tension rather than keeping these feelings bottled up inside the mind (Spencer, 1997). Art is available in many forms, including drawing, painting, creating a memory book, using clay. Drawing provides students with a tool to safely project feelings and thoughts about their loss (Naierman, 1997). The guidance counselor may ask a student to complete a drawing of life and death. The student is to write "Life" on one side of the paper and "Death" on the other. The student would then be asked to draw, write, or create what the words mean to him or her (Busch & Kimble, 2001).

Creating a "Rainbow Jar" of regrets can also be a helpful art activity for grieving students. The student is provided with a jar and multiple colors of sand. The student will fill the jar with colored sand and name a regret with each layer (Busch & Kimble, 2001).

Students can be assisted in developing a "Trouble Box." The student can create or imagine the box and then place each feelings of guilt or regret into the box (this can be

written, drawn, or imagined). When the box has been filled, the student's mind has been cleared and they will put the box away (Pristine, 1993).

Some students experience difficulty sleeping following a loss. In situations such as this, a student can be given a pillowcase, permanent markers, and paints. The student would be asked to create pictures of "happy thoughts" on the pillowcase. This pillowcase would be sent home with the student and this student would be encouraged to think about the happy thoughts on the pillow while trying to sleep.

Creating a memory book can help the student to store special memories of their loved one, including pictures or poetry. This is helpful by allowing the student to add to the book as desired and to pick up and look through the book when feeling sad.

### *Conclusion*

Grief and loss is a complex process. Counselors must recognize that a loss is not a single event, rather a loss encompasses many changes. There are many techniques that are useful when working with students suffering from grief and loss. It is important to be aware of a variety of interventions since not all students will benefit from the same intervention. Throughout the grieving process, it is necessary to be aware of symptoms of normal grief and to educate teachers and parents about these symptoms. This will allow the student to feel supported in working through the grief process.

## APPENDIX A

Blackburn, L. (1991). *The class in room 44*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

The class in Room 44 faces the loss of their classmate, Tony. They share their feelings surrounding this loss. Ages 6-10.

Content Question: How did Tony's classmates feel about Tony dying?

Personalization Question: How have you been dealing with feelings of loss?

Bode, J. (1993). *Death is hard to live with*. New York, NY: Dell.

Teens discuss different ways they can cope with death and grief and loss. For adolescents.

Content Question: What is one coping strategy identified in this book?

Personalization Question: What strategy do you feel would be most helpful for you?

Campbell, J. A. (1992). *The secret places*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. A story about Ryan's through grief explains to the readers what childhood grief is about. Ages 6-11.

Content Question: What does grief mean?

Personalization Question: Have you experienced feelings of grief?

Ferguson, D. (1992). *A bunch of balloons*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. A book for children to help them understand grieving and how it feels when someone dies. Ages 5-8.

Content Question: How did those in the book feel when someone died?

Personalization Question: What do you do when you are feeling sad?

Heegaard, M. (1988). *When someone very special dies*. Minneapolis, MN: Woodland Press. This is a workbook that uses art and journaling to tell the personal story of their loss. Ages 5-12.

Content Question: What does it mean to journal your story?

Personalization Question: How did it feel to write the story of your loss?

Kremetz, J. (1996). *How it feels when a parent dies*. New York, NY: Knoph. Children and adolescents aged 7-16 discuss their feelings and experiences after losing a parent. Ages 7-16.

Content Question: How did the children and adolescents express feelings of grief?

Personalization: How do you express your feelings of grief?

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