

## Getting Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable: Dealing with Grief and Children

As a professional who has worked in one capacity or another with children for the past twenty five years, the topic of grief and loss has been consistently present in all my interactions with children, an uninvited and menacing elephant in the room. Long before I decided to return to graduate school for social work, I found myself encountering young people from all walks of life struggling to cope with issues of loss, from the grief attached to a parent's divorce to the grief associated with the death of a pet, a friend, a teacher, a parent. I found the topic in hushed tones of colleagues, in open rap groups for teen girls, acted out in games at a shelter for abused women, as quiet conversation among middle school students on a field trip, and as a random question or comment seemingly out of the blue during some recreational event, like a baseball game or Halloween Party. Most times the topic emerged there was a tentative look or brief pause where I sensed a combination of hope and caution, curiosity and reservation.

For me as a young adult with a myriad of my own grief experiences, both those stemming from my childhood and those experienced as an adult, I recognized these occasions as both an opportunity and challenge. I would not be the adult who shifted uncomfortably in my seat, quickly changed the subject nor would I be the adult who said all the textbook things while beginning to feel my body temperature rise under the stress. I would not be the adult who assumed the role of therapist and expert and forged ahead with a therapeutic treatment plan instead of a gentle conversation. What I determined with each interaction is that I would honor and accept the uniqueness of each child and their pace in grieving. I would continue to simply be me, warm, caring, intuitive, and always a listener. My stance, my calm, my willingness to allow children the space and time to deal in starts and stops with their grief seemed always a surprise and relief to the young people I've met. Once given the permission and opportunity to discuss their losses, many of these young people had a lot to say, ask, wonder, and solve. And they always seem both surprised and relieved to be setting the tone and pace of the exploration.

As rewarding as the direct work with children has and continues to be, the broader goal of providing support and training to professionals in this area has been a personal mission for me. It became abundantly clear to me in my work with schools and youth agencies that one can have the correct letters before or after their name, be in an assigned role of a counselor, and be uncomfortable dealing with this

topic with children. Parents as well as professionals too can be bombarded with myths about children and grief that further breakdown the communication and build roadblocks instead of bridges toward understanding. It seems to me that if you can deal with this topic you're obliged to dispel the myths, share your experiences, discover effective tools and activities, and increase the comfort and skill level of other adults, both professionals and the community at large. I subscribe to the belief Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross shared with a reporter who asked her who was qualified to work with issues related to death and dying . . . "Anybody who loves to work with people and is compassionate, understanding and willing to get rid of their own unfinished business. That is the only requirement."

I've shared that statement with every group, small or large, of adults I've spoken to on the topic of grief and children. It is indeed "the elephant in the room", a topic that makes most of us on some level uncomfortable and unsure of what to say or do. This discomfort seems only magnified when children are factored into the equation. What if I say the wrong thing? What if I say too much? What if they are too young to understand? What if I make them feel worse? What if they ask a question I can't answer? What if I don't know what to say at all? So many questions and yet I believe at the heart of all the questions and all the uneasiness is what Dr. Kubler Ross referred to as "unfinished business." You can know the textbook things to say, understand all the theories, and be unable to work with children who are grieving. In my experience it is a matter of learning to get comfortable with sometimes being UNCOMFORTABLE. It is being willing to notice and talk about the proverbial elephant in the room. When we learn to ride out the periods when we are uncomfortable or uncertain, we leave space for our continued personal and professional growth.

In this area as well as others social workers, counselors, teachers, adults in general must be acutely aware of their own feelings, beliefs, and thoughts related to death and dying. We need to push past the discomfort and remember the greatest gift we share with any client, of any age, is the gift of our compassionate presence. If we are to be helpful to those we serve we must constantly look inward to recognize our own core beliefs, values, fears, and misconceptions. To work with grieving children is to embrace the losses we have already experienced as children and now as adults and to bravely meet those losses that inevitably await us on this brief stay on earth. One's attitudes and thoughts on the issue of death and dying greatly impact on the efficacy of the therapeutic relationship. The commitment to know thyself becomes paramount to this work and one's success.

We are first and foremost, human, long before we ever chose the profession of social work or counseling. I believe taking inventory, not once, but on a regular basis, of our experiences of loss as children and adults and our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual responses, is a worthwhile process and one that only sharpens our ability to work effectively with children who are grieving. By thinking back to our childhood losses we can reconnect with the perceptions and perspectives we had about death. We can also more easily identify our own fears and biases. It has been my experience that when dealing with children of all ages, honesty and empathy are the greatest communication builders. Sharing our humanity with children sets the stage for understanding and self-awareness, both are critical to a relationship of therapeutic integrity and authenticity.

In practical terms this means a lot of self-reflection and internal exploration of those very grief experiences we've sustained. For many people this is an uncomfortable process but I believe short-circuiting this process will only interfere with one's efficacy with children. It is a complicated and highly charged emotional dance between a therapist and client. The process can become even more difficult if the professional is not aware or not dealing with unresolved grief issues. We can find ourselves inadvertently stifling communication or unknowingly displacing our feelings onto the child. Again I say "know thyself." If it's uncomfortable then good - it should be - if you're never uncomfortable than it maybe that you are not digging deep enough. For me it has always been a wake-up call to complete any activity I would bring to a group prior to that group. I've colored, made collages, selected music, written letters, and completed many other tasks revisiting my own grief work again and again. Grief Work then is all about getting used to sharing space with the elephant, taking time to remember the elephants in your own childhood and adulthood homes, and assuming the position of Companion in a child's grief journey. This article is merely a teaser, an invitation to reflect on the too often overlooked topic of grief, a chance to wet your appetite, consider your own experiences, and hopefully inspire you to continue your own education and professional development in the area of supporting grieving children.

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