Loss in the Lives of Late School Children (10-13 years old)

Joseph A. Santiago
University of Rhode Island, balanceheart@hotmail.com

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Joseph A Santiago
A TIME TO GRIEVE

• Although grief is one of life's most painful experiences, it is also one we can get through, learn from, and eventually integrate into a richer more fulfilling life.

• Grief is not an illness to be treated, but an experience to be lived. You don’t need to be fixed because you’re not broken! Most who have done so describe the journey as work; it is an active, not passive, process.

• The course of grief is intensely individual, and is in some ways predictable. Grief counselors have learned a great deal which can assist the bereaved in this process.
5 Principals of Late School Age into Teen Grief

• Each person’s grieving experience is unique. People may grieve similarly, but it is always in their own way.

• Grieving is a natural reaction to death and other losses.

• There isn’t “Right” & “Wrong” ways to grieve.

• Grief is ongoing. It isn’t something you just get over. It is something you as a person have to come through.

• The grieving process is influenced by many issues.
10 Needs of Grieving Children

- Good modeling
- Honest, Clear Information
- To Be Understood
- Inclusion
- A Sense of Control
- Consistency
- A Sense of Security and Safety
- Permission to Express (or not)
- Avenues to Express
- Memorialization, Connection, and Meaning Making
Healthy Grieving

• Involves both Avoidance and Reminiscence
• Everyone needs to find their own methods of expression and understanding
• Excessive avoidance leads to a failure to develop the necessary ability to tolerate the sadness of death, failure to confront the changed realities of one’s life situation, and failure to reorganize one’s life in acknowledgement of the loss.
• Children need to learn to balance avoidance and expression.
Why late school age children react differently to death & loss than other age groups?

Late school age children (10-13 years of age) react differently to loss than younger school age children or adults do primarily. Their loss can complicate developmental changes and they can develop a morbid curiosity about death. They question physical details not emotional aspects.

At this time most late school age kids begin to understand their own mortality, and begin to wonder about mind- body- soul issues.

Start noticing mourning, want to know “rules” and do it the right way.
Late School Age

It’s a time of transition between being a child and being an adult.

• At this age group a loss can be difficult because it occurs at a point in time that is already filled with constant life altering changes.

  - Changing bodies
  - Changing sexuality
  - Changing values
  - Changing intellectual processes
  - Changing Social identity
  - Changing family relationships
Late School Age

• **Erikson’s stage of “Industry vs Inferiority”**
  – Tries to develop a sense of self-worth by refining skills
  – Acquire skills for & develop competence in work and Enjoy achievement
  – Feelings of Inferiority develop when there is repeated frustration and failure

• **Piaget ~ “Concrete Operations”**
  • Understanding of symbols, logical thinking, and organizational skills.
  • Seek cues from others for reinforcement
  • Try to be good and act tough, ashamed of tears
How Older School Age Children Perceive Death

- Older school age children tend to see death in the form of some tangible being, such as a ghost, bogeyman, or a hooded figure with a scythe.

- Children of this age know that death can happen to young as well as old, and that death has many different causes. However, they still think that death only happens to other people.
How does loss affect these every day changes?

• A significant loss could result in a heightened interest or disinterest in physical appearance or extreme changes in body weight.

• There can a complete logical approach to the grief. Where the child notices what mourning is and wants to know and act out the rules.

• Parents often become overly protective which can result in the child becoming more rebellious.

• Fear may develop in the child about death, disfigurement, and mutilation.
Things to watch for

• Lack of concentration or day dreaming.
• Changes in behavior.
  - misbehavior
  - acting out
  - aggressiveness
  - obsession about death
  - withdrawal from friends
  - mood swings
  - imitation of the deceased
  - role confusion
  - suicidal thoughts

At this age group 10 - 13 late school age children will experience a wide range of emotions after the loss of someone significant in their lives. They will often find it difficult to express these emotions outwardly.
Denial

• Faced with more than they can handle, children often step out of the real world into one they find more acceptable.

• Blocking out the unpleasant is a natural thing for them to try to do.

• The finality of death is overwhelming and hard for a child to understand.

• It is difficult to know when the normal period of shock is leading into an unhealthy denial.

• Simplicity and honesty are the best tactic for talking to the child, it will give them a sense of security.
When Anger comes into the picture

- Anger is normal for griever of all ages. The cause of anger in pre-teens and teens is often because they feel it is unfair they should have to suffer the death of someone in their lives.
When Anger comes into the picture

- Pre-teens & teens can also be angry at specific people
  - The deceased
  - Themselves
  - The police
  - Parents
  - Medical professionals
  - God
  - Fate
  - The world

Anger does not have to be completely logical process. It is an emotional process that can be used as a defense mechanism.
Expressions of Frustration

- Pre-Teens & Early Teens often experience frustration when affected by loss because their world is drastically and/or unexpectedly changed. Frustration can be overwhelming and effects their goals, relationships, academic pursuits, financial stability, even to the point where the way the child use to cope with stress no longer works for them.
Frustration can arise when...

- There was no chance to say good-bye
- There is unfinished business with the deceased
- Financial problems come up
- Parent begins dating again
- Parents become overprotective
- Grades decline because of difficulty focusing
- Denied the truth surrounding death
- Peers tease teen
- A body cannot be located
- Questions of death go unanswered
- Changes in school after death
- Change in guardian after death
- A perpetrator is not apprehended
What **NOT** to do when frustration turns to anger

- Responding to destructive behavior by telling the pre-teen/teen they should not feel a certain way and demanding they stop the behavior.
- Don’t say “You are feeling this way because you are at such and such a stage and you will move on.”
- Sometimes a person doesn’t need or want to be fixed only validated. Every one of us at times needs to know that what they feel and doing about their emotions are normal and okay. You don’t need all the answer if you can share that is ok to just be uncertainty.
Guilt or Regret

• During late school age, children understand death is final, but often believe their actions or lack of action may have contributed to the death.

• When to be concerned:
  – Child suddenly becoming “too good” doing everything they’re told, terrified at making a mistake or not wanting to cause anger.
  – Child experiences anxiety about doing anything wrong because they fear someone else will leave their life.
  – Child tries to blame the death on someone else
  – Child needs to be told the death would have occurred no matter what the child might have done to prevent it.
Depression

• The signs of depression are similar to adults
  – Poor concentration
  – Irregular eating/sleeping
  – Less interest in people/activities they used to enjoy

• Coping techniques:
  • Drawing favorite memories
  • Keepsakes
  • Photographs
  • Scrapbooks
  • Reminiscing
Fears

- The death of someone close tends to shatter the child’s perception that the world is safe and secure.
- Their emotions can be confusing and overwhelming
- Their routines are interrupted and discipline is altered
- Coping techniques
  - Identify specific fears
  - Drawing what is troubling them
  - Discuss nightmares, have them make up a happy ending
  - Reestablish routines
  - Stick to the rules (children need to feel there are boundaries and limits to feel secure)
  - Balloons (have the child write their fears on a balloon and release them into the air)
Unfinished Business

• There are often unresolved issues with the deceased person that prevent children from moving on
  – Didn’t get to say goodbye
  – Didn’t say sorry for a wrongdoing
  – Unresolved argument

➢ Ways to Bring Closure:
  ➢ Drawing a comic strip with dialogue between child and deceased
  ➢ Empty Chair (child addresses deceased in empty chair)
  ➢ Letter Writing (child writes a letter to deceased)
When things get overwhelming

- Try to help the pre-teen/early teen sublimate their anger/frustration/anxiety in a constructive way.
  - i.e. athletics, reading, boxing a punching bag, writing, art, teaching another child about the experience, playing with play dough.

- If negative emotions keep coming up because they are failing to meet their goals, break down tasks into manageable steps.
  - Talk to teachers to get everyone informed and on the same page
  - Ask them to maybe do homework with a friend.
  - Include another step by sharing some time together and going out to museums & the real world to see how each step connects together.

- Consulting services, other sources
Common reactions to Loss

• Academic Problems
• Crying
• Physical Reactions
  – Weight loss or gain
  – Headaches
  – Anxiety or panic attacks
  – Insomnia
  – Fatigue or sleeping more than usual
  – Muscle aches
  – Digestive problems
  – Dizziness
  – Visual Impairment
  – Dehydration
  – Weakened immune system
  – Inability to concentrate
Common reactions to Loss

- Eating Problems or Disorders
- Nightmares or Dreams
- Playing
- Regressive Behaviors
- Struggling with Core Belief System
- Suicidal talk or behavior
- Lack of concentration
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Wanting to be alone all the time
- Fear of being alone
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Promiscuity
What is *Complicated* Grief?

- When life issues are unexpressed or un-acknowledged, they become locked in "*frozen blocks of time".*

*These *frozen blocks of time* stop the normal grief process denying the child the ability to grieve. It can feel as if life stops and time stands still. The natural flow of feelings is inhibited. There is no movement forward until the issues are resolved and the feelings released. Suicide, homicide, AIDS, abuse, and violence are familiar examples of situations that lead to complicated grief.*

The grief process is normal and natural after a loss. When children become stuck in this *frozen block of time,* they are denied access to this normal and natural flowing process. Overwhelmed by frozen feelings, the grief process seems to be "on hold" or nonexistent. The child is not in touch with his or her feelings of grief, or those feelings are ambivalent and in conflict with each other.
Categories That Contribute to Complicated Grief

1. Sudden or Traumatic Death
   Sudden or traumatic death can include murder, suicide, fatal accidents, or a sudden fatal illness. Immediately an unstable environment is created in the child's home. Children feel confusion over these kinds of death. Desire for revenge is often experienced after a murder of fatal accident. Rage and/or guilt emerges against the person who has committed suicide. Terror of violence and death unfolds, and the child feels shock and disbelief that suddenly this death has occurred.

2. Social Stigma of Death
   Social stigma and shame frequently accompany deaths related to AIDS, suicide, and homicide. Children as well as adults often feel too embarrassed to speak of these issues. They remain silent out of fear of being ridiculed or ostracized. These suppressed feelings get inwardly projected towards themselves in the form of self hatred. Often times these kids feel lonely and isolated. They cannot grieve normally because they have not separated the loss of the deceased.
Categories That Contribute to Complicated Grief

3. Multiple Losses

Multiple losses can produce a deep fear of abandonment and self-doubt in children. The death of a single parent is a good example of a multiple loss. When the only remaining parent of a child dies, the death can cause this child to be forced to move from the home, the rest of his or her family and friends, the school, and the community. The child is shocked at this sudden and complete change of lifestyle and surroundings, and may withdraw or become terrified of future abandonment. Nightmares and/or bedwetting could appear.

4. Past relationship to the deceased

When a child has been abuse, neglected, or abandoned by a loved one, there are often ambivalent feelings when the loved one's death occurs. A five-year-old girl whose alcoholic father sexually abused her felt great conflict when that parent died. Part of her may have felt relieved, even glad, to be rid of the abuse yet ashamed to say those feelings out loud. She may carry the secret of the abuse and become locked into that memory and be unable to grieve. Children often feel guilt, fear, abandonment, or depression if grief of a loved one is complicated by an unresolved past relationship.
5. Grief process of the surviving parent or caretaker

- If the surviving parent is not able to mourn, there is no role model for the child. A closed environment stops the grief process. Many times the surviving parent finds it too difficult to watch his or her child grieve. They may be unable to grieve themselves, or unwilling to recognize their child's pain. Feelings become denied and expression of these feelings withheld. The surviving parent might well become an absentee parent because of his or her own overwhelming grief, producing feelings of abandonment and isolation in the child. Children often fear something will happen to this parent or to themselves and as a result become overprotective of the parent and other loved ones.
Activities to help young children with complicated grief

1. Read stories to children that allow them to project their feelings onto the story characters. This opens a dialogue with a child in a way that is not threatening.

2. Allow children to visualize their hurt, fear or pain. They can then draw, use clay, or imagine these symbolic feelings being able to talk. If the hurt could talk, eight year old Nancy explained, it would say "Why me?" Nancy had experienced multiple losses, including the death of her younger sister. Feelings of having bad luck or being punished began to emerge.
Activities to help young children with complicated grief

- 3. Invite children to make a Loss Timeline, filling it in with people and dates in chronological order according to when they died. This Loss Timeline becomes a concrete representation of all the losses one has experienced.

- 4. Create with children a geneogram of family tree using a circle and square to represent those people still living and those people who have died in their life. Kids can not only see the extent of the losses they've had, but the support system of the people that are still remaining.
The Story of Star

• Star was Tom's pet dog. He was hit by a car and severely injured with no chance of recovery while Tom was in school in second grade. He came home and his dog was gone. He needed to understand why. His mom tell him, "Star was put to sleep." Tom imagines he will wake up soon and Star will be back. Mom says, "No, he's gone forever." Tom begins to worry that if he goes to sleep he too might not come back.

It's O.K. for him to see his mom crying because she saw Star's favorite ball. She loved him too. Kids need explainations of what is happening so that the missing pieces won't be filled in with their own imagination and interpretation.

Give young children the simplest information possible while still sharing needed facts for their growth. "How did Star die? What did the vet do? Who took him to the vet? Did he cry? Where was he buried? Can I see him?" All of these questions need to be answered. Finally we need to say, "Star won't be back. We won't see him again. His body has stopped working. It is very sad and we will miss him very much." We can give him a funeral and say goodbye to Star.

• Life & Loss (2000)
Common Feelings, Thoughts, and Behaviors of the Grieving Child.

- Child retells events of the deceased's death and funeral.
- Child dreams of the deceased.
- Child feels the deceased is with him or her in some way.
- Child rejects old friends and seeks new friends who have experienced a similar loss.
- Child wants to call home during the school day.
- Child can't concentrate on homework or classwork.

*Life & Loss (2000)*
Common Feelings, Thoughts, and Behaviors of the Grieving Child

• Child bursts into tears in the middle of class.
• Child seeks medical information on death of deceased.
• Child worries excessively about his or her own health.
• Child sometimes appears to be unfeeling about loss.
• Child becomes "class clown" to get attention.
• Child is overly concerned with caretaking needs.

Life & Loss (2000)