

FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health

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DEALING WITH LOSS AND CHANGE



When Alice was three years old, her family moved to a new town. She lost the babysitter who had taken care of her while her parents worked, but they never explained why the babysitter didn't come with them. All of a sudden she wasn't there and Alice didn't know why. Alice reacted the only way

she knew how – she refused to speak to her dad for nine months because she blamed him for the move. (This is a true story.) How might Alice's parents have helped her cope with the loss of a beloved babysitter?

KINDS OF LOSS AND CHANGE

A teacher leaving in the middle of the year, a friend moving away, divorce, move to another town and school, death

WAYS YOUNG CHILDREN EXPRESS GRIEF:

- Emotional shock, often expressed by withdrawal and not showing any feelings
- Immature behavior, like needing to be held, difficulty separating from parents
- Acting-out behavior, demonstrating the child's internal feelings of anger, fear and helplessness
- Asking the same questions repeatedly, like why did this happen, where is so-and-so?

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN HANDLE THE INEVITABLE LOSSES AND CHANGES THAT ARE PART OF LIFE:

- Recognize that children will notice the loss/change and don't ignore it.
- If you can, explain ahead of time what will happen. This helps children begin to prepare and develop confidence that they can successfully manage grief and loss.
- Again, if you can, give children the opportunity to say goodbye—for example, to a teacher who is leaving.
- Reassure children that you will continue to love and care for them even while things are changing.
- Encourage children to talk about how they feel. This normalizes feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness.
- Talk about how change is a normal part of everyday life: for example, children outgrow their clothes, learn to write their names, tie their shoes, ride a bicycle.
- Assure children that they are not to blame for what happened and do not lie to them.
- Use the opportunity to help children learn new skills, like being flexible and working with others.
- Acknowledge and treat children as though you understand that what affects them *is* their business.

RESOURCES

- "Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death, and Grief: Tips for Teachers and Parents," National Association of School Psychologists; <http://tinyurl.com/7lvige2>
- "Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss," by Claudia Jewett Jarrati; <http://tinyurl.com/5bsfp2>
- "Dealing with Change and Loss," Partnership for Children; <http://tinyurl.com/7yltyyk>



Pennsylvania Early Childhood Mental Health Advisory Committee

Ensuring that coordinated and effective mental health services are available for all young children across the commonwealth

FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health factsheets: www.parecovery.org
Pyramid Model graphic courtesy of the Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning