

Children's Reactions to Loss: Common Behavior Patterns of the Grieving Process

SHOCK/DENIAL

General Description of Stage:

- The person appears compliant and disconnected from the event, as if the loss were of little significance. The person may be stunned, robot-like, or "shell shocked."
- The person may deny the event and/or the feelings accompanying the event. There is little emotional expression.

Behavioral Expressions in Separated Children:

- The child often seems indifferent in affect in behavior.
- The child may not show an emotional reaction to the move.
- The child may appear to make a good adjustment for a period of time, often referred to as the "honeymoon period."
- The child may go through the motions of normal activity but shows little commitment or conviction.
- The child may be unusually quiet, compliant, eager to please. In retrospect, the child's behavior may appear passive and emotionally detached or numbed.
- The child may deny the loss, and may make statements such as, "I'm not staying here. Mommy will get me soon."

Diagnostic Implications:

- Child Welfare Professionals, foster caregivers, and parents may misinterpret the child's compliant and unemotional behavior, believing the child "did fine . . . it was an easy move." When a child is thought to have handled a move without distress, later behavioral signs are often not recognized as separation trauma and part of the grieving process.
- Children who have not developed strong attachments to their parents or caregivers may not display an emotional reaction to the move at all.
- The absence of an emotional response by children in placement beyond the short time period of the "shock" phase should be of considerable concern to the Child Welfare Professional and foster caregiver, as it may indicate underlying emotional disturbance.

ANGER OR PROTEST

General Description of Stage:

- The loss can no longer be denied. The first emotional response is anger.
- Anger may be non-directional or directed at a person or object thought to be responsible for the loss.
- Guilt, blaming others, and recriminations are common.

Behavioral Expressions in Separated Children:

The child may:

- Be oppositional and hypersensitive.
- Display tantrum behaviors and emotional, angry outbursts.
- Withdraw, sulk or pout, and may refuse to participate in social activities.
- Be crabby and grouchy, hard to satisfy.
- Exhibit aggressive, rough behavior with other children.
- Break toys or objects, lie, steal, and exhibit other antisocial behaviors.
- Refuse to comply with requests.
- Make comparisons between her own home and the foster home, and her own home is preferred.
- Display sleeping or eating disturbances, and may not talk.

Diagnostic Implications:

- The child's oppositional behavior may be disruptive to the foster caregivers.
- Confrontations between the caregivers and the child may lead to a struggle for control.
- The child may be inappropriately diagnosed as "severely behaviorally handicapped," or "emotionally disturbed," or may be punished for misbehavior.
- Caretakers can be more supportive and helpful in redirecting the child's feelings if the behavior can be properly identified as part of the grief process.

BARGAINING

General Description of Stage:

- Behavior during this stage is often an attempt to regain control and to prevent the finality of the loss.
- The person may resolve to do better from now on.
- The person may try to "bargain" with whoever is thought to have the power to change the situation.
- The child may believe that a certain way of behaving or thinking will serve to prevent the finality of the loss.

Behavioral Expressions in Separated Children:

- The child may be eager to please and will make promises to be good.
- The child may try to undo what she feels she has done to precipitate the placement.
- The child may believe that behaving or thinking in a certain way will bring about reconciliation. These behaviors may become ritualized, which may be the child's attempt to formalize her "good behavior" and assure its consistency.
- The child may try to negotiate agreements with the foster caregiver or the Child Welfare Professional, and may offer to do certain things in exchange for a promise that he will be allowed to return home.
- The child may appear moralistic in his beliefs and behavior; these behaviors often are a defense against failure in upholding his end of the "bargain."

Diagnostic Implications:

- The child's behaviors represent a desperate attempt to control the environment and to defend against feelings of emotional turmoil.
- In reality, there is little chance of the child's behaviors producing the desired results or reunification.
- The Child Welfare Professional who understands this stage can provide needed support when the child realizes the ineffectiveness of the bargaining strategy and begins to experience the full emotional impact of the loss.

DEPRESSION

General Description of Stage:

- This stage is characterized by expressions of despair and futility, listlessness, with or without extraordinary episodes of fear and panic, withdrawal, and a generalized lack of interest in people, surroundings, or activities. The individual often cannot be comforted.

Behavioral Expressions in Separated Children:

- The child appears to have lost hope and experiencing the full impact of the loss.
- Social and emotional withdrawal and failure to respond to other people are common.
- The child may be touchy, "out of sorts," may cry with little provocation.
- The child may be easily frustrated and overwhelmed by minor events and stresses.
- The child may be listless, without energy.
- Activities are mechanical, without direction, investment, or apparent interest.
- The child may be distractible, have a short attention span and be unable to concentrate.
- Regressive behaviors are common, such as thumb sucking, toilet accidents, baby talk.
- Generalized emotional distress may be exhibited in both emotional and physical symptoms, particularly in young children. These include whimpering, crying, rocking, head banging, refusal to eat, excessive sleeping, digestive disorders, and susceptibility to colds, flu, and other illness.

Diagnostic Implications:

- This is a critical period in the child's relationship with the parent. Once the child has completed the grieving process, it will be extremely difficult to re-establish the parent/child relationship. There may be a lapse of time between the separation and the onset of depression.
- Foster caregivers may feel frustrated and helpless by their inability to comfort or to help the child.
- The Child Welfare Professional who recognizes the child's depression as part of the grief process will be more able to provide support, or to increase visitation to prevent the child from emotionally detaching from the parent.

RESOLUTION

General Description of the Stage:

- Symptoms of depression and distress abate. The person begins to respond to people around him in a more normal manner.
- The person begins to invest emotional energy in the present or in planning the future, and less in thinking about the past.
- The final stage of grieving ends when the person returns to an active life in the present.

Behavioral Expressions in Separated Children:

- The child begins to develop stronger attachments in the new home and tries to establish a place for herself in the family structure.
- The child may begin to identify herself as part of the new family and will demonstrate stronger emotional attachments to family members.
- The intensity of emotional distress decreases and the child can once again experience pleasure in normal childhood.
- Goal directed activities reoccur. The child's play and activities become more focused and planful. The child is better able to concentrate.
- Emotional reactions to stressful situations diminish as the child becomes more secure in the new environment.

Diagnostic Implications:

- Behaviors suggesting resolution are generally positive signs, if the case plan includes permanent separation of the child from his family.
- However, it is inappropriate and harmful for the child to resolve the loss of his family if our plan includes reunification.