Too Many Losses, Too Soon: Loss and Grief among Foster and Adopted Children

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Loss in Foster Care/Adoption
Children in foster care and adopted children lose their opportunity to grow up with their biological family.
Usually before age 5, they experience the loss of their birth family and all that is familiar!
Ages 6-11

Realizes that he lost something in order to be in foster care, begins feelings of LOSS and GRIEF.

Persistent question inside: “Why didn’t my real parents keep me?”
Nothing hurts like relinquishment hurts!
LOSS in Foster Care and Adoption

LOSS is the affectual state that an individual experiences especially when something of significance is unexpectedly withdrawn.

Separation precipitates sense of LOSS

Grief is the process through which one passes to recover from LOSS

Separation involves fear which must be overcome

Loss involves grief that must be expressed
LOSS in foster care and adoption is unique from other losses...
LOSS in Adoption is:

- Less socially recognized
- More pervasive
- Lifelong
- More profound
- Intergenerational
- No closure/potentially reversible
- Few rituals to express LOSS
- Now connection with LOSS
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<th>LOSS creates a theme in children’s development:</th>
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There are 2 kinds of AMBIGUOUS LOSS:

1) Physically absent, but psychologically present
   *(Foster care – parent viewed as physically absent)*

2) Physically present, but psychologically absent

A significant difference is that LOSS in Foster Care is AMBIGUOUS!

- Will I go back home?
- Can my mom get it together?
- Can I stay at my school?
- Should I let my foster dad get close to me?
- Who will be there for me if I age out of foster care?
A significant difference is that **LOSS** in adoption is **AMBIGUOUS**!

- Will I ever see my birth parents again?
- Do I have any brothers and sisters?
- Does my birthmother think about me on my birthday?
AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Of all losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is most devastating because it is:

- Unclear/confusing
- Indeterminate
- Most distressful
- Immobilizing—can’t problem solve because they do not know if loss is final or temporary
- Lacks resolution
Children’s Reaction to Loss

- Fleeting awareness of emotional pain
- Intermittent periods of stress
- Feelings of emptiness and intense, enduring feelings of deprivation
Ambiguity may . . .

- Erode children’s sense of mastery
- Cause them to feel incompetent
- Create feelings that the world is unfair, unsafe, unpredictable, unmanageable

*If a child can obtain information, that eases the stress of ambiguity.*
Impact of Unresolved Loss on Children
RISK

The greater the AMBIGUITY surrounding child’s life, the more difficult they will have in mastering it

- Increased depression
- Increased anxiety
- Increased internal conflict
Factors that influence a child's reaction to loss
Factors that influence a child’s reaction to LOSS

1. Child’s attachment to parent
2. Age at placement
3. Cognitive and developmental immaturity
4. Developmental immaturity affects understanding & emotional reactions to loss

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Factors that influence a child’s reaction to LOSS

5. Past experiences with separation
   - # of moves decreases child’s reaction to separation: “numb”
   - Increased moves decreases forming close attachment
   - Lack ability to form “intimate” relationships
   - Develop fear of abandonment and self doubt

6. How child sees LOSS
   - Lack of control over situation
   - People outside of family have more power than parents
   - Someone gave me away – didn’t quite measure up (sadness, guilty, depression)
   - Taken away (anxiety & fear)
   - Caused the separation
   - Adults not trustworthy
Factors that influence a child’s reaction to LOSS

7. Temperament/personality of child

8. The way LOSS occurs and is communicated to the child

9. How successful we are in validating child’s grief
   - Permit/invite children to express feelings
   - Share similar experiences of other children
   - Accept child’s “continuum of feelings

10. Information – keep child informed as to why separation occurred & what is happening now
To support grieving children, we must be comfortable with HELPNESS.
The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

1. Understanding
2. Grieving
3. Commemorating
4. Going On

Trozzi, Maria, *Talking with Children About Loss*, 1999
1. UNDERSTANDING

Knowing what happened to the person who left and why, or knowing what situations caused the loss and why it happened.
2. GRIEVING

Experiencing the painful feelings associated with a loss.

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3. COMMEMORATING

Remembering the persons, places, things that are no longer part of the child’s daily life.
4. GOING ON

Child learns that the pain of grief subsides and the legacy of their loved one lies within themselves.
New attachments are not to replace old ones:

• acknowledge birth parents/previous foster families
• find ways for direct recognition of birth family members
Share their story and talk about it over time. We can free children from the past by providing process to grieve past losses.

Throw pebbles
Give children permission to grieve
Model how to communicate thoughts and wondering. Show support of child’s emotions as he copes with grief.
We can’t FIX the loss, so validate and affirm child’s feelings
Adult get in touch with own grief
Seek professional support by adoption-competent therapist
Certificates of Attendance

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