The Child Care Worker's Response to the Death of a Child

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ABSTRACT: Although every child will grieve in an individualized manner, several factors convey to influence a child's mode of grief. Among these factors are development stage, status in the group, relationship with the deceased, and supports of the environment. A child care worker can play a key role in helping children cope with their grief over a lost peer. The first task is to understand the normal patterns of grief work employed by each age group so that the worker can recognize normal reactions. The worker can then apply various techniques to guide the group or individual children through the stages of their unique grieving process. These techniques include verbal exercise, play, routine, and ritual.

Without question, the death of a boy or girl in a child care setting produces an impact of crisis proportions for the surviving staff and children. The intensity and duration of the crisis vary from individual to individual and from group to group. The crisis of mourning precipitates emotional and behavioral reactions which often prove unsettling due to their apparently irrational nature. The child care worker experiences the strain of helping the children with their sense of loss while he or she copes with his own. Offered below is a "roadmap" for understanding and dealing with the mourning of children in our care.

Normal Grief of Children

People must accomplish two general tasks in order to complete mourning successfully: (1) accept the fact that there is a loss in the external world; (2) make emotional and intellectual changes in the internal world. Experiencing and adjusting to these outer and inner realities is called grief work. Lindemann (1965) found that

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grief work includes a series of four stages which proceed in a pattern over time. This movement from one stage to the next occurs as a normal and therapeutic process. Even infants experience a phasal response to loss, suggesting the natural process of grief work (Bowlby, 1973).

The first stage of grief, denial, parallels the state of shock so often encountered after serious bodily injury. Upon learning of a major loss, a person enters a state of unfeeling numbness, a “this can’t be true/real” state of mind. He does not face the fact of loss and often may not behave as a bereaved person is generally expected. “His sister just died and he doesn’t seem to care.” Usually the “this can’t be true” becomes “this isn’t true.” Often a person will cognitively recognize the fact of loss but will deny feelings about the loss.

As the denial wears off, the griever enters the second stage, anger. As he weeps and feels helpless, the bereaved craves the return of the lost. Because the lost does not return, the bereaved feels a free-floating anger which is aimed at the deceased and at the environment. He may curse an uncaring God who allows the tragedy to occur. He may view the world as hostile or unfair. His central question during this stage is, “Why did this have to happen?” He blames others for the death, including the deceased. “Tom was stupid in standing so close to the highway.” Or, “Damn my father for dying without enough insurance.” In this helpless, yet angry, state of mind the mourner often seeks, and then rejects, help.

Eventually, the bereaved begins to find irrational answers for the “why” of the second stage. He enters the third stage by concluding “It happened because I deserve it.” In short, he feels guilt, first over his previous anger and second over imagined reasons for self-blame over the death. For example, he searches the recent past for clues that suggest he was linked to the death. “He was on his way to visit me when he had the accident. I invited him; it’s my fault.” Often the bereaved finds self-blame in remembering he had once wished harm for the deceased. Children, who believe “wishing makes it so,” are especially vulnerable to this response to guilt. The grieving also feels guilty about unfinished business with the deceased (unpaid debts or favors). This stage includes the most pain: despair, hopelessness, anxiety, regression.

The mourner completes his grief work in the fourth stage, redefinition of relationship with the lost. His task is three-fold: emancipation from preoccupation with the deceased; readjustment to an environment wherein the lost is missing; formation of new