

CARE DISCUSSION SHEET:

Coping with Grief and Loss



Overview

This discussion sheet provides the caregiver with strategic ways to respond to a mokopuna who is experiencing grief or loss. It is important to recognise that a child or young person will not necessarily have control over their grief or loss, and equally important is the responses during the grieving phase.

Indeed, the way a caregiver responds during this phase can create a trust bond with the child or young person. When a child or young person moves from their own family into care, they may feel a deep sense of loss and grief. They have been separated from their parents, are likely to feel confused and may feel angry that they have no control over what is happening to them. They'll also be impacted by the things that have happened in their past, and the events leading up to them going into care.



Note

A discussion sheet aims to encourage caregivers to seek opportunities for networking and sharing experiences and knowledge to enhance consistent and safe care practice. The content can be used as a focus point for small groups of caregivers, at a caregiver review with the Caregiver Social Worker or individually accessed online.

Learner Outcomes

By the end of this facilitated discussion caregivers will:

- Have a good understanding of the grief and loss process
- Respond appropriately to a child or young person dealing with grief or loss.

Suggestions for Discussion Starters

- Think of a time when you were experiencing grief or loss, share the process you went through – did it follow any of the stages below?
- Identify and discuss some of the losses the child may be experiencing
- Share a time when you encountered a child coming into care, experiencing grief or loss? Can you recognize any of the stages below? Did they follow the same sequence? How long did they take in each stage?
- What actions did you use to show empathy? What words did you use to comfort the griever?



Grief and Loss

Every child will follow their own unique cycle of grief. The length of time it lasts and the way they express their grief, will be different for everyone. Children are not often able to express themselves verbally, so they tend to show their feelings and thoughts by their behaviour. A child who may have been very cooperative at first but who is now rebellious and angry, can be experiencing different stages in the grief cycle rather than being 'out of control'.

The following table outlines some of the stages of grief, along with ways you can help the child or young person in your care cope as they go through their grief process:

Grief stage	Process	Strategies
Honeymoon	The child can be overly cooperative and extremely well-behaved, or indifferent and anxious.	Use this time to introduce good boundaries and develop trust and a sense of security.
Acting out	<p>The child is testing the limits, and can be rebellious, demanding, hostile and aggressive.</p> <p>The child may also blame themselves, reject you and try to negotiate a return home.</p> <p>This is usually a sign of progress, and means they are beginning to trust you.</p>	<p>Be consistent when setting boundaries and your expectations of the child.</p> <p>Listen to why they are crying or angry. Try to build up their self-esteem and confidence by telling them what they are good at.</p> <p>Try to teach them anger management strategies, and try to take the guilt that they feel for coming into care off their shoulders. Persevere and be honest.</p> <p>Acknowledge openly what they might be feeling, for example, "You are feeling angry about what is happening to you. It's okay to feel that way. We can work it out together."</p>
Withdrawal	The child can become sad, depressed, distrustful or indifferent.	Don't try to constantly cheer them up or to ignore their feelings. Instead help them to accept and express their feelings. Your support and reassurance are very important.
Adjustment	The child shows signs of self confidence, is again able to form relationships and begins to show emotions appropriately. If faced with another separation or the potential for separation the child may regress and exhibit behaviour from another stage.	<p>Remember the previous stages of grief are not constant. There may be periods of anger and depression after this apparent adjustment.</p> <p>Explain the situation to the child as honestly and in as much depth as appropriate.</p> <p>Listen to and acknowledge their feelings.</p>



Ways to help the griever

- **Acknowledge** the death or loss of parents and help the child accept the reality of it. Talk to them about what will not change as a result of it.
- **Never** compare losses. All loss is experienced at 100%. There is no such thing as half grief. This is particularly true for children.
- **Remember**, time doesn't heal-actions do. Recovery from grief or loss is achieved by a series of small, correct action choices made by the griever.
- **Listen** without speaking. Simply acknowledge the child's grief and reflect their feelings. 'Sounds like you are disappointed' or 'Sounds like you miss your mom' and 'I bet you were scared.' These statements open up more communication, help the child understand what has happened, and doesn't pass judgment on what the child has shared.
- **Encourage** children to ask questions, and answer their questions truthfully.
- **Share** the child's feelings and help them to put them into words. Reassure them that these feelings are normal and necessary.
- **Help** children to express their feelings in safe ways. Give them a journal and let them draw their feelings.
- **Provide** ways for the child to release their feelings through various physical activities like playing games, acting, etc. Help them to farewell the person, pet, or object lost by writing a letter, drawing a picture, or talking to them.
- **Respect** the child's desire to be alone for a while, if that is what they have asked.
- **Give** clear, truthful information repeatedly, and tell them realistically what will be happening to them as they grieve. Be patient and do not force them to say or do things they are not ready to do.
- **Know** not to promise things that cannot happen. Know that you don't have the answer to why the loss occurred; however, you have the means to help a child to find their own answer to that question.
- **Offer** explanations by linking things to what the children already know.
- **Reassure** them that the death or illness is not contagious, or that they are in no way responsible for the fact that their parents cannot care for them. Reassure them that they are still loved by their parents, in spite of what has happened.
- **Show** physical affection by hugging the child if appropriate. Show your willingness to help and your genuine concern and understanding.
- **Provide** extra stability, order and routine so that the child feels safe and secure.
- **Anticipate** behavioural problems and don't punish the child or make negative comments. Try to see such behaviours maybe linked to a grief response Support the child as they overcome the various barriers to readjustment. Try hugging rather than isolating.
- **Be aware** that grief has physical symptoms too, such as tension pains, fatigue, rashes, poor appetite, cold sores, etc. Be aware of negative reactions to grief such as guilt, anger or rejection, and encourage open expression of these feelings.
- **Help** the child to retain a close connection to their family – talk about them, help the child to send letters updating their parents on their achievements etc



- **Offer** lots of support - the child will need support before and after family visitation. Prepare yourself and know that the child may act out with [different grieving behaviours](#). Start a tradition of doing something after visitation if possible like getting ice cream, going for a walk or taking a drive. This gives the child time to talk about the visit and relax.
- **Work** on the child's life book. **Allow** children to keep and talk about photographs, toys, pictures and other objects that are important to them.
- **Respect** the child's cultural and religious beliefs and don't question them.
- **Involve** the whole family, including whanau, in supporting you and the child during the grieving process. Accept support from others, and don't be too hard on yourselves.
- Probably, you are grieving too! So make time to attend to your own needs.
- **Be sensitive** to your family's grieving patterns and help your child through the process in order to prevent denial occurring.
- **Get help** from your social workers, doctors, district nurses, teachers, psychologists, professionals, church representatives to get help on a practical and emotional level, if the child's grief turns into depression. If the child's grief turns into depression it may be time to find professional help. Warning signs of depression may include:
 - The child loses interest in daily activities and interests.
 - Inability to sleep and loss of appetite.
 - Acting much younger than chronological age for an extended period of time
 - Sharp drop in school performance.

Remember: Get your own personal support, as emotional pain and suffering is draining.

For further information:

Please attend the NCTP Identity & Belonging Workshop

References:

- <http://adoption.about.com/od/parenting/a/griefandchild.htm>
- <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org>
- <http://wifostercareandadoption.org/Reading-Room/Tip-Sheets/Grief-Attachment/What-Grief-Looks-Like-for-Children-Youth-in-Foster-Care>
- <https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz>

Other Resources:

- Oranga Tamriki—Ministry for Children Foster Care Handbook 2017
- Contact your local Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children or NGO Caregiver Social Worker