

Critical Incident

**INFORMATION FOR
SCHOOLS**

INFORMATION ON GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

**Child bereavement theories and models
Helping bereaved children in schools
School policies**

Child Bereavement Theories

Christ's developmental theories

Christ's (2000) developmental theory of grief is based on her work with a parent-guidance intervention through the terminal illness and death of a parent from cancer. Her book discusses findings of five age groups, which are also supported by other developmental theories (eg Silverman, 2000 and Dyregrov, 2008).

3-5 year olds

A basic premise for children in this age group is that their lives are centred on their home and family and their "very sense of well-being depends on the presence of the parent"¹. Other important areas discussed by Christ (2000) are:

- Non-verbal communication
- Magical thinking and the need for concrete information
- Strong expressions of emotions by adults frighten them
- Have anxious separations from primary caregiver
- Ask few questions
- Symptoms such as night terrors, difficulty sleeping, becoming clingy, regressive behaviours
- Importance of participating in the funeral
- Can talk easily about the person that has died which can be difficult for parents/other adults

Recommendations for this age group:

- Set time aside to talk to them about the person who died
- Use concrete details to describe what 'dead' means, thinking about all bodily functions
- Suggest emotions that the child might be feeling
- Continue with positive activities
- Help them to remember the person who died
- Give the child access to the possessions of the deceased to enable more talk and provide a sense of connection
- Seek further professional support if the child's severe symptoms persist over longer periods of time (over 3 months)

¹ Christ (2000) page 46

6 – 8 year olds

The overriding themes for children of this age are that they are extremely troubled by a significant death and will show their distress and feel rejected. They begin to understand the permanence and finality of death at this age. Other important areas to consider are:

- Expression of a range of strong emotions
- Fears about the well-being of others
- Magical thinking and believing that something that they did caused the event to happen
- Huge need for reassurance from a parent that they are loved, valued and will continue to be cared for
- Feel 'different' to peers and this can lead to school being a source of stress
- Often an increase in conflict with siblings
- Delaying bad news often increases the stress felt
- Will say and act exactly how they feel which can be unnerving for adults
- Have some separation fears

Recommendations for this age group:

- Need lots of clear information about what happened
- Include the child in rituals and ceremonies as much as possible
- Answer their blunt questions honestly
- Respect a child's need to return to their usual activities
- Talk to them about their feelings and help to normalise these
- Ensure lines of communication between home and school are clear
- Remember that their expression of grief may be intense, but may only be brief – puddle-jumping

9 – 11 year olds

At this age, children are more able to think logically, have more understanding of the strategies that they can use to deal with difficult emotions, and are becoming far more engaged in activities outside of the home, leading to more meaningful participation in the world around them. Other points to consider for this age group:

- They may rarely share their emotional reactions with anyone and have a desire to cover their sad feelings
- They are likely to become hypervigilant and mistrustful if they are not given the full story
- The opportunity to take part in activities outside of the home enables them to 'have a break' from grieving, as well as developing their confidence and self-esteem
- They may experience anticipatory grief if someone close to them has a terminal illness

- May experience anger over their loss demonstrated through stubborn behaviours, as well as forgetfulness, conflict with siblings and peers, and talking back to teachers
- Are likely to have some difficulties in concentrating at school, which can lead to temporary lack of progress
- Can have huge fears about mortality and the survival of their other parent (if one parent has died)

Recommendations for this age group:

- They need to be given carefully sequenced information
- Are more likely than younger children to want to be engaged in caring for sick relatives and to be actively involved in goodbye rituals
- Allow them opportunities to have some time alone
- Support them to remember through looking at photos and having some special objects belonging to the person who died
- Help them with any separation anxiety difficulties by being allowed to sleep with the surviving parent (on a short-term basis), having a parent collect them from school, and through the use of transitional objects
- Have open discussions with them about how things might change following the death, including with their activities and encourage them to be a part of the problem – solving process
- Support them in their expression of grief and let them know that their intense feelings are normal following such an event

12-14 year olds

At this stage of development, there are many changes occurring for the adolescent which can be difficult to separate from normal grief reactions. A parental death at this stage can provoke a significant challenge and the following themes are suggested:

- Little interest in, and sometimes an active avoidance of, information about the illness/death
- Will often be adamantly optimistic when dealing with the terminal illness of someone close to them
- Will try to protect surviving parent by not showing them their feelings openly
- Struggle to find ways to manage fears - preoccupation with managing emotions and these are often displaced towards other difficulties such as homework, friendships etc
- Oppositional, argumentative, and demanding behaviours
- Tend to talk to other adults or peers, rather than parent
- Can have strong feelings of isolation and alienation from their peers due to feeling different
- Will often identify very closely with a deceased parent and have dreams about them

Recommendations for this age group:

- Opportunities for one to one time with a trusted adult
- Time to discuss their general feelings and the experiences they have had
- Remember important dates and anniversaries – marking this is helpful for their grief and rebuilding their life
- Allow times for them to talk about their memories and have the opportunity to have some of their belongings, including clothes
- Support their desire to return to school as soon as possible
- Think about the roles that they may play in a funeral/goodbye ritual and discuss this with them
- Encourage them to express their grief in whatever way feels appropriate to them – let them know that there is not just one way of grieving
- Ensure that clear limits are set and adhered to with regards to behaviour
- Help them to identify any positive outcomes about their life story

15 – 17 year olds

By this age, young people are more likely to demonstrate an adult-like expression of grief and fully understand the impact of this event on their life. They will go through a more complex mourning process and spend time reflecting on their relationship with the deceased and how to live up to their expectations. In addition, the following points should be considered:

- Gender differences – harder for girls losing a parent than boys due to their emotional investment in that relationship
- They are very aware of their parents' vulnerabilities and want to support them with these through taking on the role of the deceased
- Are likely to be more realistic about terminal illness than younger adolescents
- Maintaining school performance is often important to them
- Will often have profound fear about the future
- Previous conflicts with others will often intensify following a death
- Peers are important, although they are only likely to share their thoughts and feelings with very trusted friends, or others who have had similar experiences
- Are likely to have periods of very intense mourning a few weeks after the death

Recommendations for this age group:

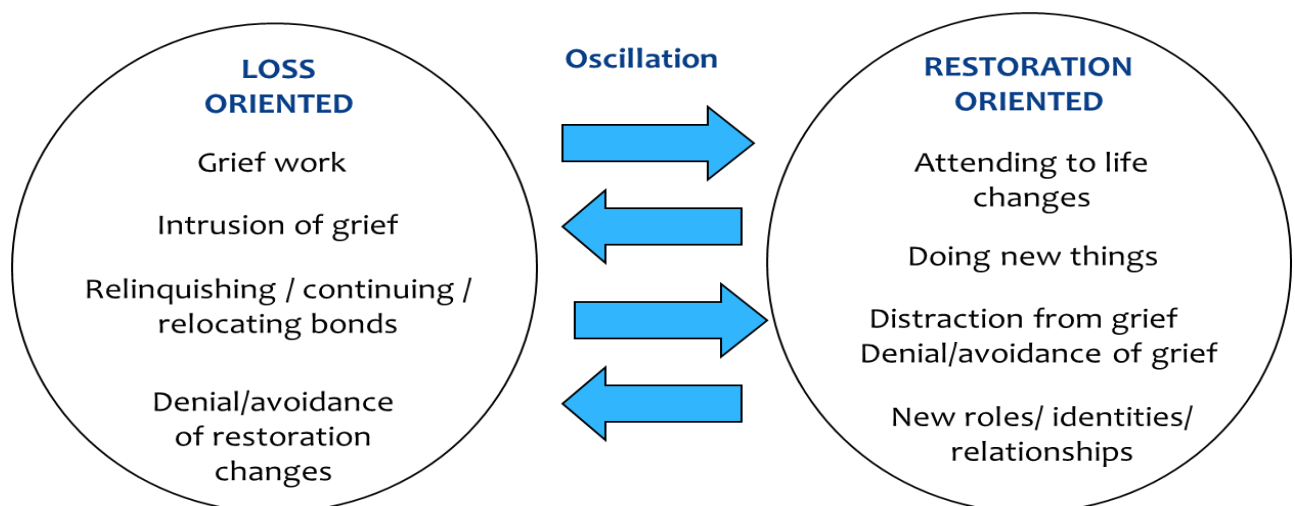
- Ensure that they have opportunities to visit a grave/place of rest either with others or on their own
- Support them to normalise the mourning process
- Communicate very closely with parents and school staff to ensure that the young person is met with understanding by school staff and is allowed opportunities to mourn when necessary
- Discuss openly about any plans for the future
- Support their need for independence and separation from their parent(s)

Worden's tasks of mourning

Worden (1996) discusses the debate surrounding the idea of the age at which children have the ability to grieve. Certain theorists believe that young people do not grieve fully until adolescence, whereas others eg Bowlby (1980) would suggest that we can see grief reactions relating to the loss of an attachment figure, at the age of 6 months. Worden's (1991 and 1996) tasks of mourning are dependent upon the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the child and are the following:

1. To accept the reality of the loss – disbelief and a sense of shock: Support children in telling their story through art work, film scripts, acting out events with toys or puppets etc
2. To experience the pain or emotional aspects of the loss – behaviour or physical pain: Help to normalise emotions, use of story books, exploring ways to deal with intense emotions including anger
3. To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing: Make memory jars, memory boxes and allow opportunities to talk about the person who has died in a positive way
4. To relocate the dead person within one's life and find ways to memorialise them: Plan for special days and find ways of keeping a connection with the person who has died

Dual process model – Strobe and Schutt (1999)

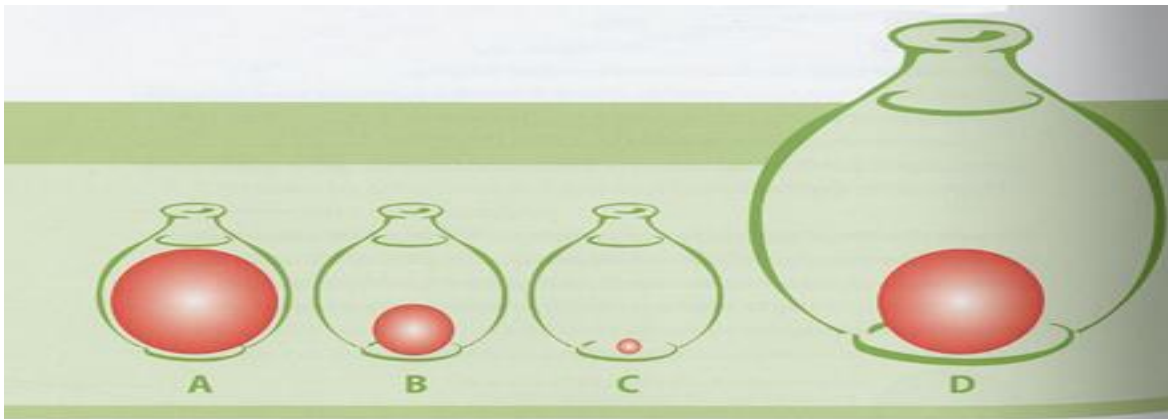


This theory is often referred to as being like 'puddle jumping' where you have good days and bad days. Children are more likely to spend less time in the loss oriented part than adults, but can suddenly find themselves feeling overwhelmed and upset with no apparent trigger.

Continuing bonds – Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996)

- Bereaved person remains psychologically and emotionally connected to the deceased
- Connection develops and changes over time
- Relationships continue
- These connections provide solace, comfort, support and ease the transition from the past to the future

Growing around the grief – Tonkin (1996)



Previous theories of grief suggested that the pain starts as being all consuming (A) and that over time this pain lessens (B and C). However, Tonkin proposes that the pain of grief stays the same, but that life experiences grow around it (D).

Helping Bereaved Children in School

- Quality and quantity of school work is likely to decline. Look out for the child who is 'miles away' – staring at some distant horizon rather than glancing about. The former type of daydreaming indicates that the pupil has something very involving on his mind.
- Look out for the social isolates. These pupils will not have the support of their peer group for discussing anxieties. Give time to these pupils to see how they are feeling.
- Remember that any work which involves coping with strong emotions in yourself or others is draining and tiring. Ensure you are supported by someone and give yourself time to recover and renew energy.
- It is vital that all staff with whom a bereaved child has contact are informed of what has happened so that expectations can be adjusted where necessary and so that no tactless or unwittingly hurtful remarks are made.

Recognition

If a pupil or teacher has died, school needs to acknowledge this as a community. It may be appropriate to make a scrapbook, devote a school assembly to the person and remember him in some way by, for example, planting a tree. A bereaved family will welcome any support and understanding the school can give.

School Policy

All schools need a policy to help children and families cope with bereavement. The policy should address:

- the normality of death. We teach children the facts of life but rarely those of death. Hopefully, death will be part of the integrated teaching in the classroom and open to normal discussion.
- a school ethos which enables pupils and adults to discuss their feelings openly and honestly.
- staff development of skills, knowledge and understanding of bereavement so that they can help children both in the short and long term through the grieving process.
- the need for a support system for children and all staff in a school.
- the recognition of individual differences in pupils and teachers which will affect their ways of coping, and the amount and type of support they find most helpful along with allowing children in particular to have novel ways of dealing with death and supporting them in the way they find helpful.
- the need for staff to acknowledge limits on their time and skills and to know when and how to refer on to outside agencies.
- the need to recognise bereavement as a continuum which includes divorce/separation as major losses and to develop ways of supporting affected children.
- knowledge of bereavement should go along with other school records at time of school transfer.
- if a child has to be informed of a bereavement while at school, or has to go home suddenly because of bereavement, a school should have a clear procedure planned in advance to respond to this.

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