

# **Play therapy: How do children grieve?**

## **Lilian C. J. Wong, Ph.D.**

### **(1) Introduction**

- **Death has become an important topic for counseling children.**
- **Saynor: “Children are the forgotten mourners.”**
- **Need to understand how children grieve.**
- **Need to understand family grief and mourning**

#### **Need to understand cultural differences in grieving**

In the past two decades, death has become a more acceptable topic of study. Because of increased incidents of school violence and domestic tragedies, educators, social workers and youth and children workers have focused on understanding the grieving processes of children and youth. Students in counselling programs are learning how to work with bereaved children and their families. Today, my lecture will focus on the effectiveness of play therapy for children and early adolescents.

Saynor observed that, “Children are the forgotten mourners... Adults find it difficult to discuss death with children because their pain increases our pain. Furthermore, they will have questions for which there seem to be no answers. This increases our own insecurity” (p.30). Parents or caregivers are facing a difficult task of how and what to tell the children about the death of a loved one. Saynor is of the opinion: “Anyone who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve. When we exclude children from the rituals surrounding a death, we deny them the opportunity to say goodbye and to begin a healthy grieving process” (p.34).

The research literature reports on stages of grief and the tasks of grief of adults but there are very few studies on how children grieve.

Stages of grief advocated by Kubler-Ross (1969) were most cited: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Panic, Worry, “Goodbye” (Acceptance stage). Research indicated that these stages are not linear. Sometimes, a combination of several stages may happen at the same time, and the bereaved may go back and forth among the stages.

The process of grief may be conceptualized as consist of Shock, Suffering (Sadness, Anger, Guilt, Anxiety, Physical, Behavioral and Cognitive symptoms) and Recovery.

### **(2) How children grieve**

#### **The tasks of grief according to Saynor:**

- 1. Accept the reality of the loss**
- 2. Experience the pain of grief**
- 3. Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing**

- 4. Withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in other relationships or activities.**

### **The impact of the death of a parent on a child**

- **One of the greatest crises or traumatic events in a child's life**
- **Loss of a mother may have a lifelong impact on the daughter**
- **A parent's suicide may create a lifelong problem of guilt in children**
- **Death of a parent may severely hinder the development of a sense of trust and security**

How do children's responses to death differ from those of adults?

"One of the greatest crises in the life of a child is the death of a parent. Never again will the world be as secure a place as it was before" (Grollman, 1967, p.15). Since the death of a parent, especially the mother, weakens the family's coping system. An adult who is sensitive to bereaved children's needs and available to understand and work through their sorrows has a direct impact on children's ability to face the reality of their loss and to adapt to that loss. The loss of a parent is an overwhelming, confusing, and traumatic event for children. The impact of the permanent separation from a mother shatters children's sense of family security and parental protection.

Research indicates that children are deeply affected by loss, whether by separation, divorce, or death (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982). Children can be more vulnerable than adults because they do not have the same cognitive and emotional equipment to cope with these losses that adults have. Thus, children need adults to help them express and communicate their inner feelings and needs (Winnicott, 1965). Children need to be empowered by an understanding adult to identify their feelings, communicate and process them in a safe and secure environment.

**Children's vulnerability to death may be due to:**

- **Their immature cognitive development**
- **The unknown circumstances surrounding the death**
- **The lack of secure attachment and support systems**
- **The intrapersonal characteristics of the child**
- **Lack of opportunities to grieve and mourn publicly**
- **Certain features of religious rites of funeral and mourning**

### **The role of play therapy in counseling children**

- **A brief history of play therapy**
- **Different modalities of play therapy**
- **The usefulness of sandplay therapy**
- **Sandplay as a means of understanding the child**
- **Sandplay as a means of healing**

There can be wide variability in children's responses to death. Many factors are involved, such as, levels of cognitive development, the circumstances surrounding the death, the personal relationship with the dead prior to the death, social and cultural practices, religion, and intrapersonal characteristics of the child in time of crisis, etc. Sometimes children show an inability to mourn or even a sense of detachment; these may be their ways to defend themselves against the intense pain of the loss. The immediate responses are feelings of denial, sadness, anger and fear.

Very young children may view death as a departure or sleep. Children, five years and older may fear things that personify death (e.g., skeletons, ghosts). In latency period (6-9 years), children may have a more realistic concept of death as a final and permanent biological process. Death, especially of a peer or sibling, can cause considerable distress based on a fear for their own security. Adolescents understand death in a more abstract way (e.g., violence, abortion, suicide and other death-related issues). They may react in a highly dramatic and intense fashion. Their energy can come in great spurts and their responses can be unpredictable.

Because of the varying degrees of their understanding of death, children of different age groups will behave differently. Children show their feelings more by what they do than by what they say. According to Stroebe and Stroebe (1987) children cannot manage the intensity of the emotional pain for extended periods of time and thus their process of bereavement is extended. Edelman (1994) supports this notion, "Adapting to the loss of a parent requires some elements young children have not yet acquired. Some of these elements include: a full understanding of death; the language and encouragement to talk about their feelings; the realization that intense pain will not be forever; and the ability to shift their emotional dependence from the lost parent back to the self before attaching to someone else. These capacities develop and accumulate as the child grows" (p. 6).

For examples:

Very young children may become more demanding and seek attention. Nightmares, fears and sleeping problems may also be common.

Older children may act as if nothing has happened. They might even blame themselves for the death. Sometimes fighting or talking back could be the child's way of dealing with the crisis in his/her life. The child may have trouble paying attention and there may be school problems.

Teenagers may be embarrassed to talk to adults about their feelings. They can be very emotional and dramatic and their responses are sometimes unpredictable. Time with friends is very important for teenagers.

The terms grief, mourning and bereavement are often used interchangeably. In the literature, grief has been defined as an affective response (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987), emotional pain (Dersheimer, 1990), and a response to loss (Bowlby, 1980; Rando, 1988,

1993). Mourning has been defined as social expressions of grief, (e.g., rituals that are culturally specific). Bereavement has been defined as a process of recovery following the loss of a loved one.

Because of the intensity of their emotional response caused by the trauma of the death of a loved one, the family members often are at a loss as how to work with the children. Since the children usually lack the language to clarify the intense feelings, play therapy provides the necessary tools for them to explore and express the inner thoughts and their perceived world.

Play therapy has been proved to be effective with very young children as well as early adolescents. I will present three case studies to demonstrate the various stages of grief, variety of activities appropriate for the respective stages, and establishing long-term support for the children as they learn to adjust to the loss.

### **Case studies**

- **Three stories illustrating the effectiveness of play therapy**
- **Lisa's loss of her mother through cancer**
- **Mary's loss of her father through suicide**
- **Johnny's anticipatory grief of both parents**

Lisa's loss of her mother, from anticipatory grief to accepting the loss and healthy adjustment after one year of death.

The case of an adolescent girl who lost her father through suicide and was not allowed to grieve.

The case of a boy who was anticipating the deaths of both parents who have been diagnosed with cancer.