**Supporting children with change and loss**

When we think of change and loss we often think about obvious events, such as the death of a loved one. However, many other circumstances can evoke feelings of grief and loss. Any change in life produces an associated sense of loss. During the COVID-19 pandemic many of us have experienced a change in circumstances which have left us grieving for a world that no longer exists.

Children may yearn for people, places and activities they haven’t been able to connect with over the lockdown. They might worry about what the future looks like with continued restrictions. They might worry about things we wouldn’t think about as adults.

Although change is hard, there are also opportunities in change, which we can see if we develop our optimism. The differences we are living with just now may bring lasting positive changes and new ways of doing things. Feelings of trust and safety can help us exercise our optimism.

Grief is a universal experience, yet it is also a deeply unique journey, with no clear path to follow and no end point to reach. Theoretical models of grief try to emphasise that grief is not a linear process, rather it is an ongoing cycle that we revisit as often as we need to. This is particularly true for children who will develop their cognitive and emotional understanding of events over time. We rarely just feel one emotion at a time – we feel a mixture of emotions at different intensities at different times.

Grieving is hard work. We feel grief throughout our bodies and all our senses. It’s normal to feel numb, sore, tired, have a tight chest, to shake in shock and to cry or not cry as the months pass. Grieving doesn’t happen by accident, or by time passing, it is an active process. You may observe problems with memory and concentration and sleep and appetite and motivation. Children may have changes in their activity levels, regress to younger behaviours, withdraw, become irritable or anxious. These are all common reactions to loss. We often want to protect children from the pain of loss and research tells us it’s really important that they have permission to and opportunities to grieve. It is also important that children are given honest information.

Grief is the price we pay for love. Grief has been described as love with nowhere to go. Developing strategies can help us to find somewhere to place our love.

Just now children might have all sorts of fears or worries and our first job as adults is to LISTEN to these. Make time for talking and listening together. Listening means that – don’t jump to trying to fix the feelings or situation – acknowledge their feelings are valid. It is a hard time, and it’s OK not to feel OK sometimes. It’s important to remember that the same life events will produce different reactions in different people. It doesn’t matter if other people seem to cope with the situation better, or get through even harder events, as our feelings are what matter.

Usually there is some consistency to be found in our life so it’s nice to work through some of the things that will be the same, and think about those that might change. You can draw these on the same piece of paper so it’s clear for children.

Give children life skills to cope with their difficult feelings. See getselfhelp.co.uk for ideas on a range of activities including breathing for calm, mindfulness and grounding techniques. Grounding techniques are helpful as they make use of all our senses and can be personalised e.g. by creating a soothe bag full of items that provide us comfort through touch, smell, vision etc.

Culturally we expect people to move on as quickly as possible and often rush to the idea of counselling if someone is taking longer than is comfortable for us. It’s important to give children as much time as they need to work through difficult feelings. It’s also important that children know that all feelings are OK to experience. Acknowledging and validating the feelings children have is more important than getting them “over it”.

We often use the research of Worden, to conceptualise the needs of children who face change and loss. His research was based on extensive studies with bereaved children. Worden identified **10 key needs in children and young people**, which equally apply to adults:

1. The need for adequate information – age appropriate and concrete, avoid euphemisms.
2. Having their fears and anxieties addressed – it’s normal to experience them and better to chat these through.
3. Reassurance they are not to blame – children think differently from adults and may not have fully developed their understanding of cause and effect and consequences.
4. Careful listening and watching – be curious about what they think.
5. Validation of feelings – feelings are real, naming them helps to reduce the intensity.
6. Help with overwhelming feelings.
7. Involvement and inclusion in funerals and decision making.
8. Continued routine activities – life goes on and familiar things are comforting.
9. Modelled grief behaviours – if adults don’t talk or show emotions children learn from this, so remember you are a teacher for your child in everything you do.
10. Opportunities to remember – ways to keep our connection going.

**Opportunities to remember. Keeping a sense of connection to a person, place or activity.**

Familiar routines and expectations are important for young children to feel secure. [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org) has some useful information for parents.

[www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org) also has a range of useful resources.

**Interventions which facilitate a healthy continuing bond:**

Research tells us that children who are highly connected to the deceased person are better able to show their emotional pain, to talk to others about death and to accept support from others. Therefore we need to offer practical opportunities to maintain connections.

Making a **memory Jar** –

You need:

* A small jar with a wide neck
* Salt
* 5 differently coloured chalks
* 6 pieces of paper

What you do:

* Fill the jar to the brim with salt, on one piece of paper write down five things you remember about the person (e.g. things they liked, a shared memory of a trip etc.). Pick a colour to represent each memory and put a dot of the colour next to it.
* Spread out the 5 sheets of paper and divide the salt from the jar equally between them
* Colour each pile of salt using one of the chalks (rubbing it into the salt, the harder you rub the brighter the colour will become).
* Pick up each piece of paper one at a time and fill the jar with different colours
* Once all colours are added, tap the jar to settle the salt (don’t shake it unless you want to mix all the colours). Fill any remaining space with salt to help to keep the colours from mixing.
* Secure the lid. Keep your colour code of memories close to the jar (or make a label from them). Keep the jar in a special place.

Using a **memory box**

Purpose made Memory boxes can be bought from Winston’s Wish. Alternatively you can make your own from old shoe boxes which are decorated and have a photo of the person to be remembered on the lid. You may like to use card to divide the inside of the box for storing different objects.

What’s the idea?

Memory boxes show children that it is normal to need help to hold on to and retrieve memories. They indicate that there are both times when you want to remember, and times that this doesn’t feel OK, they can have control over which time it is. They offer an opportunity for rehearsal of memories, which can be shared with others. Winston’s wish provide further ideas of how to use the boxes. Children can keep important memories in these boxes (e.g. photos, cards, smells, music or any items which remind them of the person). Memory boxes facilitate story telling about the person and enable children to retain realistic memories of the person. It is a common fear that we will forget over time and developing a physical reminder can provide reassurance about this.

It is important to take a developmental perspective towards memory. In general terms younger children are more likely to remember physical appearance and older children can recall features such as personality. Therefore memory activities may have to be revisited over time as children’s cognitive and emotional skills develop.

Some other ideas include:

* having a sensory garden – with smells, colours, sounds and textures that remind us of what we have lost
* using symbols such as rainbows or feathers to be a reminder of the person/ place or activities
* releasing balloons (get biodegradable ones to save our planet)
* photos somewhere at home
* carving initials into your tree
* cosmic kids yoga or mindfulness
* painting stones

**Interventions focused on looking towards the future**

It is important that we offer children problem solving strategies which they can utilise in the future.

You might like to make a “first aid kit” which includes ways of helping when you need it. Children may be able to follow the analogy of this kit doing something similar as a first aid kit does for physical pain. Children can create little models or pictures of what they might do (e.g. when I feel sad I go fast on my bike). The box can serve as a reminder of emotional first aid strategies – for younger children it may also help to share ideas about coping strategies from others.

Other Ideas include bulb planting/ growing plants to talk about life cycle. You may like to make use of the analogy of the changing seasons representing our different feelings as we work through a change and loss cycle. Noting the importance of all seasons for changes and growth in the world around us, that none last forever etc. if you grow a plant, children can hang items on it which represent what they feel they need to grow personally just now e.g. compassion, hope and memories.

If the child or children you are supporting have additional support needs which relate to their communication and/ or empathy you may find it useful to discuss their needs directly with supporting agencies such as Speech and Language Therapy, Educational Psychology or Moray Autism Services. You may find it useful to make use of arts and crafts activities as these can be very visual, rather than linked to language concepts.

Keep messages clear and to the point. You might like to make a booklet for your child with pictures so that they can look at it over time. All children will revisit loss and change over their lifetime, both as their understanding develops and as new challenges come their way. Be open to questions and ongoing discussion, model that it is OK to talk about the loss.

Every school in Moray has a change and loss box, with a range of books to help support children manage change. Whatever your child is struggling with, talk to the school or early years setting about it as they can support you.

**Feelings**

Make use of role play, dance & craft activities to help children express feelings. Puppets can be used both to tell a story and to model feelings. Introducing children to relaxation skills may also help them to cope with feelings. Cosmic kids is available on line and offer story based yoga and mindfulness for children.

Make or buy a worry muncher for children to be able to give away their worries.

Writing down as many feelings words as you can think of to help children find useful words. This can also be done by drawing around your child and showing what each emotion feels like in our body. Try to describe out loud what you are feeling, whether this is a physical sensation or an emotion.

**What else do we know about supporting children?**

An often forgotten point is that adults need to look after themselves first, so that they are able to support others. Chances are if your child is experiencing a loss you have also felt the impact of that loss. Looking after yourself can include:

* making time to eat well
* getting enough sleep
* reducing numbing coping strategies such as alcohol and substances
* taking enough exercise
* connecting with friends
* talking about your feelings
* asking for help if you feel overwhelmed
* doing things you enjoy
* developing our own coping strategies such as mindfulness
* being compassionate to yourself
* accepting imperfection
* noticing what has gone well
* have fun with your children - we all need fun, even during strange and sad times.

Good luck, you are probably doing better than you think!