

Loss and Grief

by Brenda McCreight, Ph.D.

Loss is considered to be one of the core issues of adoption culture and it is a profound part of the adoption experience. For many years, this aspect of adoptive culture was unrecognized. It was believed that children forgot their early experiences and did not have any feelings regarding their birth families. And it was believed that most adoptive parents resolved any feelings of loss that they may have experienced about infertility simply by adopting a baby. These myths have been dispelled over the last twenty years by the many adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth families who wanted their grief recognized and respected.

What Have Your Adoptive Children Lost?

The children, of course, have likely experienced loss in every setting in which they have lived. This includes the loss of their birth parents, siblings, and extended family, the loss of friends, pets, toys and caregivers. The child may also experience loss when she leaves a negative situation, because even the bad experiences were, at least, familiar.

Children who are older when they are placed for adoption have experienced broader losses. Some children may have experienced the loss of their native language and country or culture of origin. Culture is often more subtle than it appears. For example, an American child who has grown up in a foster home in a large city will face cultural loss if he is placed with a family in a rural farming community. The language is English, but the accents and the use of language will differ. There also are significant differences between urban and rural lifestyles. This type of placement can lead to as severe a sense of loss as a child from a Cambodian orphanage may face when placed with an affluent North American family.

For many children who have moved between relatives or foster homes, the losses have accumulated without ever being identified, acknowledged, or resolved. This can leave the child unable to identify the experience and feelings of loss, because loss is the norm in his life, rather than the exception. He may say that he does not miss anyone or anything from his past, because he has lived so long with hurt feelings that he no longer understands that they are a source of emotional pain and stress. Or, in order to survive, he may have stopped allowing himself to feel the loss. Unfortunately, when people shut off one set of feelings, they shut down many others, too, so your child may be equally shut off from feeling of joy. Sometimes children cope with past losses by refusing to attach to, or care about, anything new that is brought into their lives. This can mean that the child will not allow himself to get close to you or to anything you are offering.

While some children will have lost their ability to feel their own emotions, others may have lost a sense of their right to exist in this world. And for some children, there is also the loss of hope that they will ever get to live in a “normal” family. That is, a family where the children look like the parents and they have always lived together. The child may understand that he could not remain where he was being neglected or abused, and he may be very happy with the family who adopted him. Still, like you, the neighbors, the schoolteachers, and everyone else, the child knows that a family created through older-child adoption is different from other families.

Recovering From Loss

Loss that is followed by adequate grieving can be resolved at least well enough that you and your child can begin establishing new bonds. However, loss that is denied and grieving that is unsupported can lead to emotional obstacles that prevent the development of new and healthy emotional ties. Unresolved and unacknowledged losses can leave both you and the child fearful of beginning new relationships, because of a belief that the past relationships are still viable or can be reestablished. Loss that is acknowledged and grief that is given support make it possible for the formation of healthy adoptive families.

Stages of Loss and Grief

There are many different theories about the stages of grief but the foundation of most is the work of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (Kubler-Ross 1969). She worked with patients with terminal illness and developed her theories by examining how the patients and their loved ones came to terms with impending death. Dr. Kubler-Ross noted that there were definite stages to the grieving process:

- **Denial.** The person refuses to accept that the loss has occurred. Example: "This cannot be true and cannot be happening to me."
- **Anger.** Intense feelings that the condition is not fair and should not have happened. Example: "How could you have let this happen to me? I hate you for that."
- **Bargaining.** Trying to find a way to fix the problem so that the loved one can be restored. Example: "If I can have the loved one back, I will never be bad again."
- **Acceptance.** Example: "I know I can't change it and I will go on."

Other theorists have suggested that there are more stages, including:

- **Shock.** This comes before denial and puts the person into a state of emotional numbness: "I can't think straight and I don't understand what is happening."
- **Fear.** The person is afraid that he cannot live without the loved one and he is afraid of the loneliness that accompanies the loss, "I am afraid I will die if I never see my mom again."
- **Guilt.** This can result from the person feeling that she should have been the one who died, or that if she had been a better baby, her mom could have been a better parent.

These stages do not happen in strict order, and the person can go through each of them many times before getting to resolution.

Over the years, this basic concept of loss has broadened from simply looking at loss that comes from death, to understanding that feelings of loss can come from any major or negative change, particularly when most or all of the change has been out of the control of the person who experiences it.

Symptoms of Grief

Grief is a normal response to loss. Everyone has a different way of expressing grief, but there are some common grieving experiences:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Apathy

- Anger
- Guilt
- Sleep disturbances
- Eating disturbances
- Irritability
- Social withdrawal
- Intense sadness
- Depression
- Numbness
- Feeling lonely, separate from others
- Inability to find meaning or purpose in life

The Impact of Loss and Grief

You may find that a child who was fun and emotionally warm on pre-placement visits suddenly appears sullen and controlling after the first few days of the placement. You may feel you are now seeing the child's true nature and that you have adopted a child who has more problems than you were led to believe. The reality is that often, when an older child is placed in a new adoptive home, the grief brought about by this change overtakes the child's initial excitement. The grief may be a response to the changes, or it may be that the child is missing the foster parents, or it may be that the adoption has forced the child to realize that she will never again live with her birth family. Whatever the reason, the child's experience of grief is greatly at odds with your joy.

Some children may be in a home for quite a while before they begin to act out their grief. Sometimes after months or even years in a new family, a child begins to undergo emotional changes brought about by love and security. When she drops the defenses, or walls, that kept her feelings at bay, she may be overwhelmed with the pain of grief. Because this can happen so long after a child comes to live in the home, it is often unrecognized and misdiagnosed. She does not understand why she has started to feel so bad, and you cannot understand what is causing the sudden anger and acting out. Without appropriate treatment, she can develop depression or may begin to use drugs and alcohol in an attempt to return to the more familiar condition of emotional numbness.

When Emotions Collide

It can be very difficult for you to accept that the event for which you have waited so long is, for your child, a time of heartbreak and stress. When the emotions of the parents and the child are in conflict, the child is at risk for having her experience of grief misinterpreted as an adjustment disorder or an attachment challenge. In order to reduce this risk, the parents must first acknowledge that the child has the right to grieve. The task of adoptive parents is to help the child identify her losses and claim her grief. This takes time and support.

The grieving process may take years to resolve. That does not mean that the child cannot establish meaningful relationships or enjoy her life in the meantime. She can, but only if she is also receiving respect and support for her losses. Sometimes it's difficult to recognize the effects of grief...

Overcoming the Challenges of Loss and Grief

Dealing with loss and grief are important steps to healing and to developing a family identity. Following are some techniques to make the challenge more manageable.

Accept that your joy may conflict with the grief of your child. You should be forthcoming in showing your delight at having your older child join the family. However, you should also understand and acknowledge that your child may not be able to relate to the joy until her grief has been identified and validated, when she is on the way to resolution. This takes time and patience on your part as you must set aside your own need for immediate reward in the parent/child relationship.

Acknowledge the loss with your child. Talk with your child about all the things she has lost in her life, and do this on more than one occasion. These should not be forced conversations, although you will likely have to be the initiator. The correct moments will present themselves, and it's important not to be afraid to enter into, and initiate, these discussions.

Don't reject or fear your child's pain. Most loving parents tend to avoid issues that appear to hurt a child. You may view this as a form of protection. However, in relation to loss, it is important that you make it clear to the child that you can hear how much your child misses the language, or the birth mother who beat her. Your child's grief over the past can sometimes feel like rejection to you. But you must be able to put your feelings aside. What counts is that your child learns that she can tell you about what she misses and how much it hurts. Sharing feelings of grief can facilitate bonding, and, if she cannot say it with words, she will express it with behavior.

Reassure your child that he did not cause his loss. Many children who are in foster care have a belief that they are at fault for the bad things that have happened in their lives. Your child may believe that if he had been a better baby, then his parents would not have taken drugs. Or, he may believe that if he had been a better little boy, then the foster parents would not have gotten divorced and he would not have had to move again. The child may have come to this belief on his own, or he may have been told this in the past. Either way, your task is to constantly reassure the child that he did not have the power or the ability to control what has happened and that it is not his fault that he has lost so many people from his life.

Have your child join a peer group for dealing with loss. It could be best for your child to go into an adoptive children's group, but if there are none in your area, then any counseling group that focuses on loss would be useful. Children are able to normalize each other's experiences better than adults. Your child may need to participate in this type of group at each stage of development.

Remember that anniversaries can trigger grief. A child with a traumatic background will have many significant anniversaries, some that he will recall without difficulty, and others that will be repressed from memory. The latter is most likely when an event was experienced before the child was verbal. These may include memories of when he was first removed from the birth parent, left a favored caregiver, or last saw a beloved grandparent. Other anniversary responses may arise at the time of year when the child was physically brutalized or around a certain time each month when the birth parents were less functional. Most of these significant times will not be known to you. Make note of the patterns of acting out and the events that seem to coincide with them and give this information to your therapist so that she or he can determine if the problem behaviors are related to a specific pre-placement date or event.