

Addressing the Unrecognized Grief of Elementary Students

Experiencing Relationship Loss

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Abstract

Unrecognized grief (also called disenfranchised grief) is an emotion experienced when a loss is not socially supported, mourned, or acknowledged (Doka, 1989). Elementary students often experience unrecognized grief when relationships with friends, family, teachers, support professionals, and pets change or end. While these developments are often a normal part of life, elementary students experience grief that may lead to academic or behavioral difficulties in school. The purpose of this article is to review the concept of unrecognized grief experienced by elementary students due to relationship loss and provide school counselors with individual, group, and system-wide strategies.

Keywords: school counseling, disenfranchised grief, elementary schools

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Experiencing Relationship Loss

Elementary students often experience the loss of relationships with friends, teachers, caregivers, and support professionals. When relationships are discontinued, elementary students often experience grief. Grief is a natural developmental response to a loss resulting in feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, and guilt (Morlin, 2019). Elementary students often experience normal relationship changes and losses; however, those losses often cause grief that can contribute to academic and behavioral problems. Unrecognized grief (also called disenfranchised grief) is an emotion experienced when a loss is not socially supported, mourned, or acknowledged (Doka, 1989). Examples of relationships losses that may be missed or unrecognized by school counselors include the following: a friend moving away; death of a pet or giving a pet away (Cordaro, 2012); parental miscarriage or stillbirth; incarceration of a family member (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Miller, 2006); family disruption (Abel, Chung-Canine, & Broussard, 2013); deployment of a family member; parental job transfer; teacher or school staff leaving; parental incapacitation (e.g., serious physical or mental illness); and death of a non-family member (e.g., dentist). While some losses (e.g., death of a family member) are more likely to be addressed by parents or school counselors, students who experienced unrecognized losses are likely to experience grief alone.

The incongruence between the depth of feelings experienced by the elementary student and the appropriateness of the response by the caregiver can determine if the grief is unrecognized. Developmentally, elementary students are at an age when they

are beginning to learn how to form relationships and typically have limited experience with changes in relationships. Learning to emotionally cope when a friend, teacher, or family member is no longer in their life can be challenging. While the professional literature has addressed the concept of disenfranchised grief (Attig, 2004; Cordaro, 2012; Doka, 1989; Lenhardt, 1997), there is a lack of research about the unrecognized grief experienced by elementary students due to relationship loss. The purpose of this article is to review the concept of unrecognized grief experienced by elementary students who have a relationship loss and to provide strategies for school counselors to address that loss.

When elementary students are not afforded the opportunity to grieve a relationship loss, they are disenfranchised from the grieving process. Elementary students are often unintentionally disenfranchised due to the belief of some adults that children lack the capacity or depth to fully grieve a loss. School counselors may not recognize the grief experienced by elementary students or that a student may grieve over a particular relationship loss (e.g., separation from family in foster care, separation from caregiver who is incarcerated, separation from parent who is transferred due to employment, separation from a sibling who leaves home for college, suspension of social media). School counselors may also ignore relationship losses due to shame or embarrassment (e.g., suicide, drug overdose, death of a family member while committing a crime), thus minimizing the loss. Disenfranchised grief is not a binary concept where some losses are recognized and others ignored, but rather it is conceptualized on a continuum in which the experiences may be ignored, minimally recognized, or fully processed (Robson & Walter, 2013). Attig (2004) reported that

adults might dismiss the grief of elementary students because the 'loss' does not rise to the level of something that adults believe should be grieved. Ignoring the loss minimizes the pain of the griever, disrespects their right to their emotional experience, and interferes with their process of healing.

Elementary Student and Grief

Grieving is a developmental activity of "relearning the world" for elementary students. Dismissing the process of grieving from elementary students can weaken their conceptualization of self-potential to overcome sorrow and to understand their world in a way that has meaning (Attig, 2004). Feldman (1995) stated that relationship loss could result in social and emotional isolation. In cases where a student's grief is unrecognized, the typical feelings of sadness and anger become internalized and intensified (Lenhardt, 1997). Elementary students who experience grief that is unrecognized may exhibit academic and behavioral problems. There is evidence that students who are unable to develop coping skills (e.g., due to age or ability) are at risk for behavioral problems (Lenhardt). School counselors have the responsibility of advocating for elementary students to help them cope with their feelings of grief. The characteristic of disenfranchised grief as being *not recognized* makes it even more difficult for the school counselor to be aware of situations in which elementary students are experiencing relationship loss. Some students who are experiencing grief may have their symptoms misunderstood and mislabeled as more serious mental disorders (Mosher, 2018). To be effective in recognizing grieving elementary students, the school counselor needs to be visible and involved in daily interactions with all students. A relationship exhibited by open lines of communication between the school counselor

and the elementary students' families and teachers should be encouraged. This type of relationship may produce opportunities for school counselors to be notified by parents or teachers regarding potentially problematic life transitions that impact students.

While elementary students can grieve, they may not have the coping skills to effectively regulate their emotions following the loss of a relationship. Since the concept of a relationship is a new experience to many elementary students, Feldman (1995) noted that friendship is one of the first independent self-directed experiences of elementary students. Early friendships are extremely important because of social support, learning, social comparison, affiliation, and the need to engage in activities. Students also value the reciprocity of liking, in which they like peers who also like them as friends (Feldman, 1995). Seifert and Hoffnung (1994) stated that a child experiences a friend as someone they can trust and depend upon, and that a child seeks permanent and stable friendships. A student's concept of who is considered their friend depends upon their age and level of social-cognitive development.

Loss of a friend, family member, teacher, pet, or other close relationship can be a sad experience. When children with few support systems lose their only friend, they are more likely to be lonely, unhappy, and less competent (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1993). Friendships frequently change and parents can inaccurately perceive that children are not capable of experiencing close friendships. Consequently, when a relationship is lost, the parent may minimize the situation and not recognize the grief (Feldman, 1995). The student may report sadness or anger and complain of stomachaches, headaches, or sickness in general, but be unaware of the cause. Teachers may notice those students having difficulty concentrating, isolating during free

time, and exhibiting behavioral problems. It is the responsibility of the school counselor to uncover the underlying issue and provide appropriate interventions.

School Counselor Strategies

School counselors may help elementary students understand that their sadness due to the loss of a relationship was not ignored and their feelings were validated. Strategies should be tailored to the developmental stage of students. Encouraging the elementary student to express their feelings is the initial and primary intervention. The goals within grief counseling include: helping the student recognize and express feelings of relationship loss, seeing that the student reengages in previous activities (e.g., appropriate classroom engagement), beginning the acceptance process, moving forward from relationship loss, forming new positive relationships, controlling aggressive behavior or inconsistent mood, and creating a positive outlook for the future (Knapp & Jongma, 2012). These goals in conjunction with specific interventions tailored to the student may be implemented with elementary students who are experiencing grief. School counselors may implement interventions to assist students with unrecognized loss through individual/group counseling, classroom core curriculum lessons, and school-wide activities. It is important for school counselors to be aware of situations and intentionally communicate that the student's grief is acknowledged, recognized, and understood.

Individual, Group, and Classroom Interventions

Individual, group, and classroom interventions may help students learn about relationship loss and increase their ability to form new relationships. Coping skills may be provided to students who otherwise would utilize repression as their main defense

mechanism to handle their grief (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009). The focus of counseling should be to help the student discuss the loss and for the school counselor to empathize with the students. Interventions that allow the student to explore their relationship loss in ways that provide meaning will help them conceptualize their own perspective about loss within the grieving process (Lenhardt, 1997). Students who are grieving often have similar feelings as adults, but lack the understanding, maturity, or resources to utilize coping skills (Glass, 1991).

Lenhardt (1997) provided a series of interventions to work with students experiencing disenfranchised grief. School counselors may educate students regarding the normal grieving process. School counselors may utilize several of the following interventions: educating elementary students on the topic of grief, using expressive techniques to clarify student's thoughts and feelings, suggesting rituals to work through grief; increasing self-assurance so that they can recover, and creating a support system. School counselors should reflect if they are providing time, space, protection, and social support for students who are grieving (Attig, 2004). Individual counseling interventions may include talking about the details of what happened and the associated feelings, creating the student's own definition of grief and the healing process, identifying emotions connected to the relationship loss, creating coping strategies (e.g., journal writing, letter writing, painting, drawing, research, bibliotherapy, music) (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady, 2010), or using play (e.g., puppets) to facilitate an elementary student's expression of feelings (Knapp & Jongsma, 2012). School counselors may provide specific suggestions of activities students can do within the counseling session or outside of school. These can include interviewing adults or peers

who have experienced a similar loss, making a list of questions about their loss, writing a story or drawing pictures representing the phases of their loss (i.e., past, present, and future), and journaling their thoughts and feelings about the loss. An example of a counseling intervention that involves journaling is to encourage a student to write a letter from their future self (Kress, Hinkle, & Protivnak, 2011). A student who is grieving a best friend who moved away could be encouraged to imagine they are living six years in the future looking back at this event. The school counselor might ask them to write what they think their older self would suggest they do to move through the grief.

Providing unconditional positive regard, empathy, and active listening with students who are sharing stories of loss can help students learn to identify and express their emotions. School counselors may encourage students to share their stories, while reassuring them that the loss is not their fault, reminding them that they have support, and assisting them in finding calming strategies or new routines (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014). Additionally, school counseling is a safe space for students to express unrecognized grief and feel empowered to share their emotions when other adults may be unwilling to take the time to listen. Working with elementary students on an individual level may be modified for developmental stage and specific needs (e.g., autism, Down syndrome, or learning disabilities) (Hume, Regan, Megronigle, & Rhinehalt, 2016). For those elementary students with different abilities, interventions will need to be tailored to their developmental, emotional, and communicative levels. The school counselor may also work with the elementary student to understand their desired goals and determine if the elementary student's goal has a realistic outcome.

Group counseling in school settings provides students experiencing unrecognized grief the chance to authenticate their grief within a supportive environment. Working through unrecognized grief with other students may also normalize their feelings and provide a sense of connection between students who similarly experienced loss of relationships. Addressing unrecognized grief in a group encounter may promote empathic and compassionate relationships between students within the group (Lenhardt, 1997). Acknowledging a relationship loss in a group counseling session may help reduce the shame in the loss and help participants process their feelings (Doka, 1989). Marino, Thornton, and Lange (2015) shared that group work allows students to gain support from their peers in difficult situations. It publicly recognizes the loss and normalizes the situation. School counselors may include students who have experienced specific types of unrecognized loss in their grief groups (e.g., students with parents who have been transferred and are spending long periods of time away from home due to employment changes). Activities might focus on working toward a memorial service as a way to honor their losses as a group. A friendship group could include ways to create and maintain new support systems after the change in the relationship. Strategies may include a school counselor-led book sharing on loss with discussion to prompt identification of feelings and exploration of coping skills followed by partner activities such as interviewing each other, reading a book together, playing together at recess, and sitting together at lunchtime.

An example of a group lesson for students in third grade is entitled “Muddy Waters.” This is a group for students who are feeling sad due to a friend who has moved away. Students in the group identify positive thoughts and memories of their

friends by placing a stone for each thought or memory into a vase filled with water. Then students drop food coloring into the vase. For each drop, the students share a feeling about the loss. Students are prompted to recognize how it is sometimes difficult to see and remember the happy thoughts when negative emotions overwhelm them. Students then identify learned coping skills while the school counselor puts a few drops of household bleach into the vase, making the water clearer and the stones more visible.

For students experiencing grief that is unacknowledged, it may be beneficial to have a classroom developmental curriculum on the topic of grief and the different types of loss that can cause grief. A number of the individual interventions or small group lessons may be adapted for classroom guidance lessons. The guidance lessons may be scheduled as students prepare to transition to a different grade or building where they will not have the same teacher or same classmates or during times when there is a disruption to the community (e.g., large business closing and family members transferring). In utilizing this opportunity to discuss an unrecognized loss, school counselors may integrate other topics to explore and process. Creating an environment where students' feelings are recognized, normalized, and connected with their peers allows students to understand that their feelings of loss are important, and the school counselor is interested in speaking with them about their feelings. Asking elementary students to define unrecognized loss may also enlighten the school counselor on additional grief topics that may be beneficial. Guidance curriculum lessons about what to do when a friend moves away might include drawing pictures with the friend, discussing feelings about the loss, sharing stories about the friend, and plans to stay connected to the friend. A key component of a classroom curriculum is the use of

stories by school counselors within classroom guidance lessons. The Appendix provides a list of books for school counselors to use to address unrecognized grief in individual, group, or classroom guidance interventions.

An example of a specific classroom guidance lesson for students in first grade is entitled “Pieces.” This is a guidance lesson for students who are grieving a parent away on a military deployment. The guidance lesson includes reading the book *Deployment, One of Our Pieces is Missing* (Cook, 2018). It is a story about the emotions and changes families endure while a family member is away serving in the military. Students then draw a picture or write their personal feelings and experiences surrounding the deployment. Students who do not have a family member in the military practice empathy by imagining how they may feel if one of their family members was away. Students are given an opportunity to share with the class. The lesson concludes with each student sharing ideas for how to increase positive thoughts and feelings.

School-Wide Interventions

It is important that school counselors contribute to a school-wide environment that makes students feel open to the process of sharing about their relationship loss. This involves school counselors assisting the entire school community (e.g., teachers, principals, bus drivers, coaches, etc.) and caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents, foster parents) to be attentive if their students are exhibiting atypical behaviors and discussing a specific relationship loss. It is also helpful for school personnel and caregivers to reflect on their own personal attitudes toward relationship loss and to understand the community resources available for individuals who are grieving. By providing the means for school personnel and caregivers to feel at ease discussing grief and grieving creates

additional opportunities to model and assist elementary students processing relationship loss. Opportunities to help students deal with feelings of grief on a school-wide level may address many students that may have been missed.

Schools that have students who are transient would benefit from creating school-wide approaches to addressing the frequent changes in student relationships. Mauk (2011) stressed the importance for a school to be an environment in which students can receive healthy support from their teachers, administrators, and counselors. A memorial bulletin board with photographs of students who moved away or poems about that student can contribute to the healing process for students. It also provides normalization for students to see other students who are experiencing similar situations. School counselors may also implement a *day of remembrance* each term in which students who are experiencing sadness about the loss of a relationship can join in a memorial during lunch. These could focus on friends who have moved away, teachers/staff who have retired, family members who are absent from their lives, the death of a pet, or other relationship losses that are often unrecognized. Anticipating the feelings of loss and organizing a goodbye recognition for students or staff who are leaving the school can be a proactive way of helping students process their feelings. For example, early elementary students often experience sadness at the discontinuation of a classroom student teacher and there can be benefits of discussing and acknowledging the end of that classroom relationship.

Parents and teachers are primarily aware of the relationships that are important in the lives of their children/students and the impact if those relationships are discontinued. School counselors may develop handouts on the types of relationship

loss, the signs and symptoms of unrecognized grief, the importance of intervention, ways the school counselor can help, common classroom interventions, and community resources. Workshops on the topic of grief, the different types of grief, stages of grief, responses to grief, and supportive ways to show empathy may be offered. Additionally, counselors could offer parents brief after-school webinars with information specifically highlighting tips for discussing loss and practicing healthy coping skills at home.

Summary

Individual counseling, classroom guidance curriculum, and school-wide interventions are strategies that address the unrecognized grief of elementary students. Peer-to-peer, parent-to-child, teacher-to-student relationships are central to the lives of students and grief is a normal life process. Schools that are located in areas of high crime, poverty, economic instability, or refugee immigration may have high relationship disruption, and many students could be experiencing unrecognized grief. These factors may create challenges for school counselors in determining priority for the issues to address and time to meet with students. Students who exhibit a number of abnormal symptoms such as: sleep, eating, regressive behaviors, psychomotor behavior, mental processing, physical symptoms, and/or have a collection of symptoms that meet the criteria for a mental health diagnosis should be referred for services by a mental health counselor. It is impossible for school counselors to individually address relationship loss with each student. However, they can prioritize counseling interventions for students who are exhibiting academic and interpersonal difficulties and differentiate between a student who is progressing through a normal grieving process and one experiencing trauma.

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Appendix

Books About Unrecognized Grief

| Title | Author | Topic | Age |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Before I Leave | Jessica Bagley | loss of a friend | 3-6 |
| Faraway Friends | Russ Cox | loss of a friend | 3-6 |
| Goodbye Book | Todd Parr | loss of a friend | 5-6 |
| Goodbye Friend! Hello Friend! | Cori Doerrfeld | loss of a friend | 4-8 |
| What Do I Say About That? | Julia Cook | incarcerated parent | 4-8 |
| Missing Daddy | Mariame Kaba | incarcerated parent | 3-7 |
| My Daddy is a Soldier | Kally Mayer | deployed parent | 5-8 |
| My Military Mom | Claudia Harrington | deployed parent | 4-8 |
| See You Later, Alligator | Sally Hopgood | moving | 3-6 |
| Rainbow Bridge | Adrian Raeside | pet loss | 4-9 |
| What is Doggy Heaven? | Darren Saligari | pet loss | 3-8 |
| Why Do Family's Change | Jillian Roberts | divorce | 6-8 |
| Standing on My Own Two Feet | Tamara Schmitz | divorce | 3-7 |
| Not Your Fault Koko Bear | Vicki Lansky | divorce | 3-7 |
| Why Does Mommy Hurt | Elizabeth Christy | parent with illness | 4-8 |
| Big Tree is Sick | Nathalie Slosse | parent with illness | 3-7 |

Biographical Statements

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