

A Grip on Grief
How to help children cope with loss
By Barbara Schiller

With downcast eyes, 11-year-old Chad walked into the classroom one Monday night during “Just Me & the Kids,” a 12-week support ministry for single parents and their children. He was pale and had dark circles beneath his eyes.

Chad began to argue with the other children, insisting he didn’t need to attend the class. Determined to convince the others they didn’t need to be there either, he jeered, taunted and lashed out at everyone.

Chad was angry. But determined as Chad was to leave, Michael, his leader, was just as determined to be his friend. Over the next three months, Chad’s grief began to unfold. Confused and disoriented by his parents’ emotionally charged divorce and the family’s subsequent relocation, he even tried suicide. His mother took the advice of a caring psychiatrist and enrolled him in “Just Me & the Kids,” where Chad wrote this poem:

Questions
Should people hate me because I’m white?
I can’t understand why people want to fight.
Is Jesus really God’s Son?
Will I ever reach 21?
Why is my heart trampled and torn?
And why does my dad not love me anymore?
Is it something I did or something I said?
And why is everyone only interested in getting to bed?
So I say to the world with all my heart,
Keep us together or we’ll be far apart.

As the author of “Just Me & the Kids,” I offer leadership training and conferences to church staffs and educators to help them understand the unique needs of single-parent families. My conferences provide beneficial information to single parents and their children. While conducting these seminars, I see and hear stories like Chad’s too often.

How can we help our children grieve following divorce? Why do they exhibit certain behaviors? Are there practical ideas we can use in the home, school and church to assist our children? I believe there are, and with God’s help, children like Chad can again find hope.

Claudia L. Jewett, in her book Helping Children Cope With Separation and Loss (1982, The Harvard Common Press, Harvard, Mass.), says that children often experience three “phases of grief” when they go through a loss. With each phase, she identifies behaviors and practical ideas to assist in understanding these stages. The phases are early grief, acute grief and integration of loss and grief. The duration of each depends on how many losses the child has suffered and how much continued strife occurs between the parents.

Phase 1: Early Grief

According to Jewett, there are four common reactions in children – shock, alarm, denial and hyperactivity that is physiologically related – that indicate whether they are experiencing early grief.

- **Shock and Numbing.** Children who find out Mom and Dad are getting a divorce go into emotional shock. These children, normally outgoing and gregarious, become sullen and withdrawn.

After a seminar one afternoon, a young mother said, “I have always had to work outside my home, and my 3-year-old son has gone to the same day care since he was an infant. My husband and I recently separated. Now when I drop him off at day care, my son cries, whines and clings to me. His caregiver tells me he sits by himself, not wanting to play with his friends. I now realize my son is suffering from emotional shock and fear of abandonment. He thinks I am not coming back to take him home.”

- **Alarm.** Jewett says, “Because children look to their parents to keep them safe, the loss of a family member heightens their sense of vulnerability” (p.25). Children experiencing this tendency will exhibit insomnia, loss of appetite, food binges and physical ailments such as earaches, sore throats and colds. When the stress does not subside, their immune system begins to break down, and they become prone to infection.

Dave’s children were an example of kids experiencing alarm. He and his family attended “Just Me & the Kids,” but when they failed to show up three times in a row, I made a phone call. Dave told me why they had stopped attending. In a matter of just three weeks, one of his children had gone from a cold to strep throat to bronchitis. Chaos was occurring in his home, and Dave’s children were either acting out through negative behavior or becoming sick.

- **Denial and Disbelief.** When shock and numbing wears off and reality becomes too difficult to handle, a child often experiences denial. The child may think, *Everything is going to be like it used to be. Dad will come back and we will be fine.*

Five-year-old Tiffany conveyed that she did not want to face reality. The children in her class were asked to cut out magazine pictures of people who resembled the members of their families. Tiffany’s pictures represented her mom and dad, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and a dog and bird.

I commented on the size of Tiffany’s family to her mom. Her mom responded with a puzzled look, then explained that Tiffany didn’t have any brothers or sisters or grandparents or dog or bird. And her dad lived many miles away. Tiffany was responding to her deep emotional pain by choosing to distort reality. She was in denial.

If children choose to be in denial, do not try to pull them out. Rather, be available and support them, but don’t force reality. If denial continues for an excessive time, professional

help should be considered. Your place is to love and accept your children and listen to their concerns.

- **Hyperactivity.** This impulsive behavior, when found in children of divorce, is thought to be related to high stress levels.

Seven-year-old Jimmy and his two older sisters were living with Dad after Mom walked out on the family. She then came back and initiated a custody battle, which was when I met the family at a church program designed for single parents.

The program leaders had trouble handling Jimmy's high intensity and impulsivity. While the other children sat at the table doing crafts, Jimmy ran around knocking down chairs. His hyperactivity was related to the trauma occurring in his home.

One evening, an exasperated children's leader massaged his shoulders to calm him down. Jimmy's body wilted. With his head bowed and his shoulders bent, he said, "My mom used to do that." His behavior improved from that moment on. The children's leader had not only touched Jimmy's shoulders, she had also touched his heart.

When children are in early grief, Jewett suggests there are several practical ways in which you can help them:

1. **Use flannel bed sheets.** I recommend flannel pajamas, too. Flannel has a calming and nurturing effect on children.
2. **Play the radio softly as you put the children to bed.** Bedtime is often frightening for children in a quiet environment.
3. **Serve foods that have a mushy, milky texture and are high in potassium** – an essential stress combatant. Jewett suggests mashed potatoes and applesauce. I also recommend bananas.
4. **Buy a watch for the child.** It provides him with a sense of control as he asks questions like, "What time are you coming home tonight?"
5. **Give the child a house key.** Fear of abandonment may make it hard for children to be away from their parents. By having house keys of their own, they will have a constant reminder that Mom or Dad will return. Caution: Children can lose their keys often. Decorating them with ribbon will help.

Phase 2: Acute Grief

According to Jewett, the second phase of grieving is acute grief, which can be seen in several behaviors: yearning, pining and searching; strong emotions; disorganization or disorientation, and despair or depression.

- **Yearning, Pining and Searching.** This phase is painful. The children are no longer living in denial, and they feel the deep impact of their circumstances. As the pattern of denial breaks down, they try to understand what has happened to them. They look for something good in their past to help them cope with the present and anticipate the future.

One day as a single mother was driving with her 6-year-old son, the boy said to his mother: “Mom, isn’t this where we used to live? Could we drive by and see the old house and neighborhood?” As they drove through the neighborhood, the boy reminisced. “I remember how you used to push me on the swing when you didn’t have to work before the divorce,” he said. “I remember when we went into the garden – it used to be over there – and we worked in the garden together. I remember when Dad played with me in the sandbox. I remember... I remember...”

Mom turned her head away and looked out the car window. Tears streamed down her face. She realized this process was necessary for her son. He needed permission to remember the good times before their family broke apart. He was pining and searching for something good by grieving over how his family used to be.

- **Strong Emotions.** The release of your children’s anger is a process. Several years ago when I was a camp counselor, seven of us spent our day off hiking in the Rockies. We agreed that whoever found the first snowfield would let the others know.

We were several thousand feet up when Sheila discovered the first one. She didn’t wait for us, though. Putting on her rain poncho, she slid down the snowfield. Sheila lost control, and by the time we got to her, her forearms were bloody. We rushed her to the emergency room, where the doctor tended to her lacerations and told her to return in one week.

When Sheila saw the doctor again, he pulled the scabs off the wounds to avoid premature healing. The pain she endured was excruciating. She had to return three more times to repeat the process. When she asked why, the doctor replied: “If I don’t remove the scabs, massive infection could result in gangrene. You must heal from the inside out.”

So it is with our children’s grieving. We should allow our children to be angry, scared or sad. When they “own” their emotions by expressing them, their emotional pain will not last as long.

Some ways you might help children release anger are: crumpling paper and stuffing it into a bag, pounding clay or playdough with your fist, beating a pillow, getting involved in sports, and engaging in fun activities around the house to burn any excess energy. But most importantly, allow them to move at their own pace and be available to listen.

If anger is not properly vented, it will reveal itself in outbursts, violent temper tantrums, ulcers and high blood pressure. Anger is one way of peeling back the emotional scab and allowing further healing – from the inside out.

- **Disorganization or Disorientation.** Grieving children are often disorganized and disoriented. Though once quite competent and energetic, they find themselves sitting aimlessly with blank stares. Decisions are exhausting, and concentrating on a task becomes overwhelming. Is it any wonder that school can also become an obstacle? Because of the child’s inability to concentrate, learn and retain information, his or her grades usually drop.

- **Despair (or Depression).** Children’s depression often resembles a profound sadness. This was especially true of 13-year-old Maria. She was sad and needed to be given permission to openly grieve. Only then was she able to begin healing. She expressed this pain through a poem written to Jesus one afternoon:

Just Someone Who Cares (Jesus)

*Every once in awhile
I sit and tell You how I feel.
My thoughts go for miles,
But physically it’s not real.*

*Only You know how much
I miss my dad.
Only You know how it makes me sad.
Only You know how I can’t compete.
Only You know how I’m always beat.*

*Sometimes I’m so scared,
Sometimes I wish someone cared.
Some people fake it and say they do.
I don’t believe them, do You?*

Phase 3: Integration of Loss and Grief

Jewett cites three behaviors to watch for in this phase, each of which shows that your children are anticipating their future.

- **Talking About the Loss.** Children begin to talk freely about their parents’ divorce as their shame and embarrassment lessen. The divorce may still bother them, but acceptance comes even though things didn’t turn out the way they wished.
- **Getting Involved Again.** The children’s self-esteem is being restored. They are starting to be involved in activities again, and they are not as withdrawn. They desire to deepen their healthy relationships and want to walk away from unhealthy ones.
- **Caring About Others.** The children’s pain has been replaced with sensitivity and caring, and they begin to think about other people’s needs as well as their own.

One morning after church, a kindergarten Sunday school teacher described an event involving Nicole, one of the children whom we had met during a recent session of “Just Me & the Kids.” “In our Sunday school class is a little friend of Nicole’s whose parents are getting a divorce,” the teacher said. “Today she crouched in a corner crying. Nicole put her

arm around her and said, ‘I know it’s hard because my parents are divorced, too. But remember, it is not your fault.’” Nicole was caring about others. She was healing.

- **Communicating at School.** Your children’s schoolteachers need to know what is happening in your home. Divorce is devastating for everyone involved, and children need the support of those at school.

Communicate with your child’s teachers. Share the telltale signs of stress your child may manifest. Let them know that many behaviors may continue throughout the school year and how important it is that the child not be isolated for misbehavior. Emphasize how much you want to be involved in your child’s progress.

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Remember Chad from the beginning of this story? A year after his participation in “Just Me & the Kids,” Chad, his brother and his mom attended a single-parent family retreat. It was a joyful reunion for this family and the leaders of our ministry. While roasting marshmallows beside a campfire, Chad asked if he and his brother could sing a duet. Under the starry skies of Missouri, two small voices rang out bold and strong, singing the melody “Our God Is an Awesome God.”

As we listened, there was not one among us who did not marvel about the depth of God’s unconditional love and faithfulness in our lives. That moment reminded us to never give up hope, to always be encouraged and to never forget that “Blessed are those who mourn, for they *will* be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). That’s a promise that can help anyone get a grip on grief.

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