

The Unspoken Trauma: Loss

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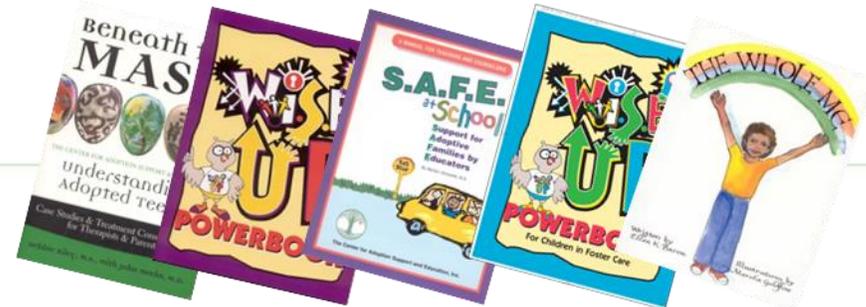




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nurture. inspire. empower.

If it is

unmentionable

It is

UNMANAGEABLE



LOSS in Foster Care and Adoption

LOSS is the affectual state that an individual experiences especially when something of significance is unexpectedly withdrawn.

Separation precipitates sense of LOSS

Grief is the process through which one passes to recover from LOSS

Separation involves fear which must be overcome

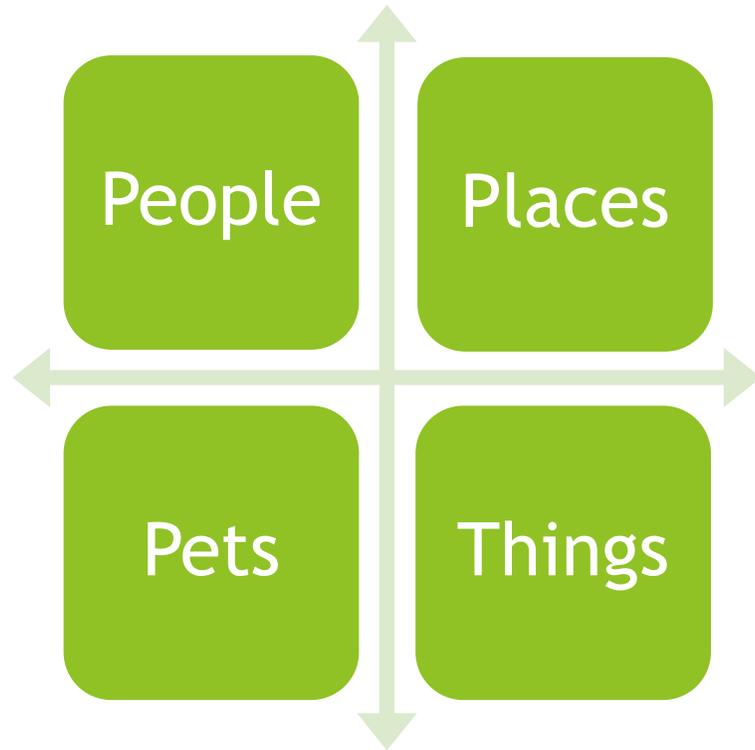
Loss involves grief that must be expressed



LOSS

Children in foster care and adopted children lose their opportunity to grow up with their biological family.

Primary Losses





LOSS creates a theme in children's development over time:

- ▶ Loss of culture and/or language
- ▶ Loss of religion
- ▶ Loss of racial connections
- ▶ Loss of medical information
- ▶ Loss of birth history
- ▶ Loss of birth order
- ▶ Loss of genealogical continuity
- ▶ Loss of power over one's circumstances
- ▶ Loss of a sense of stability
- ▶ Loss of physical connections
- ▶ Loss of traditions
- ▶ Loss of community or country

Seven Core Issues Wheel



Heart Traumas

Between the ages of 6-11 a child...

- Realizes that they have lost something in order to be in their current family, and may begin experiencing feelings of LOSS and GRIEF.
- For many children this starts much earlier, but increased cognitive development at this age often brings it to the surface.
- Persistent question inside: “Why didn’t my birth parents keep me?”



Factors in the Experience of Loss

The child's developmental level

The significance of the people the child is separated from

Whether the separation is temporary or permanent

How the loss was communicated to the child

The degree of familiarity of the new surroundings

LOSS in Foster Care and Adoption is:

Less socially recognized

More pervasive

Lifelong

More profound

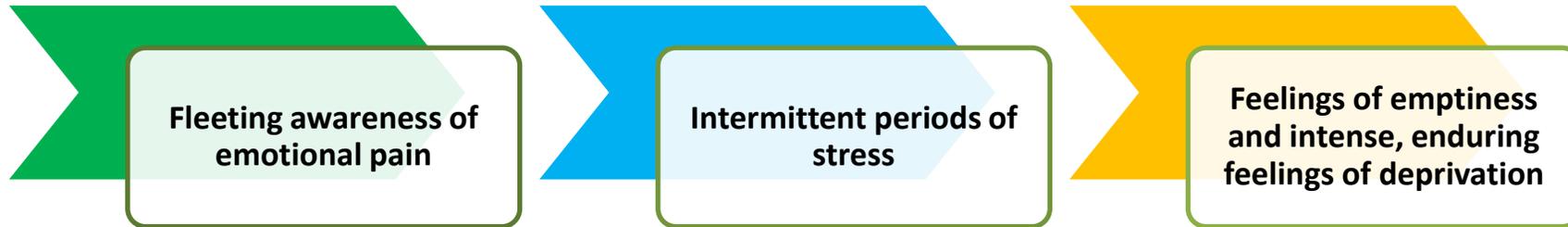
Intergenerational

No closure/potentially reversible

Few rituals to express LOSS

Now connection with LOSS figure

Children's Reaction to Loss



How do Children Grieve?



- ▶ In spurts, acting fine at times and not at others
- ▶ Grief can show up at expected *and* unexpected times
- ▶ Grief may look different than it does in adults and often shows up in behavior

Johnathon- possible diagnosis and treatment?



- ▶ Doesn't seem interested in anything
- ▶ Doesn't express any feelings about leaving their family
- ▶ Going through the motions of normal behavior and compliant, but not being engaged with activities
- ▶ Not enjoying what other children their age would likely enjoy
- ▶ Very quiet, passive, and emotionally detached or numb

Johnathon is having a SHOCK response to Grief

As a child comes into a home after being separated from familiar people and surroundings, you might see a child who is very compliant, somewhat emotionally removed, slow to interact, and expressing little emotion. They may deny having any feelings about their move, but their behavior will indicate that they are reacting to it.

Carley- possible diagnosis and treatment?



- ▶ Tantrums
- ▶ Angry outbursts
- ▶ Being oppositional and hypersensitive
- ▶ Being withdrawn
- ▶ Being grumpy and hard to please
- ▶ Being aggressive with other children
- ▶ Breaking things
- ▶ Lying and stealing
- ▶ Refusal to comply with direction
- ▶ Eating or sleeping disturbances
- ▶ Mutism or refusing to talk
- ▶ Regression in toileting

Carley is in an Anger or Protest response to Grief

When the child realizes their loss, they may experience anger. They might direct their anger at the person they think is responsible for the loss, but sometimes their anger seems more general. They might feel responsible for being taken from their family, especially if they reported abuse. They also might blame others for taking them away from their family.

Marina- possible diagnosis & treatment?



- ▶ Social and emotional withdrawal
- ▶ General anxiety
- ▶ The child is easily brought to tears
- ▶ The child is easily frustrated and overwhelmed by minor stresses
- ▶ Listless and robotic
- ▶ Inability to concentrate and short attention span
- ▶ Head bangs or rocks
- ▶ Eating and sleeping disturbances

Marina is experiencing Deep Sadness as a response to Grief

Whenever the child realizes that the losses are real and they cannot stop it, the child may express feelings of despair, helplessness, fear and panic, and a lack of interest in people, surroundings, or activities.

Grieving Might Look Like

Developmentally stuck

Increased magical thinking

Assume role of victim

Hyper independent/lack of intimacy with others

Expectation that others will leave

Undefined guilt

Chronic worrier

Compulsive behaviors: fear and obsessions

Difficulty feeling calm, nurtured - may move toward addictive behaviors

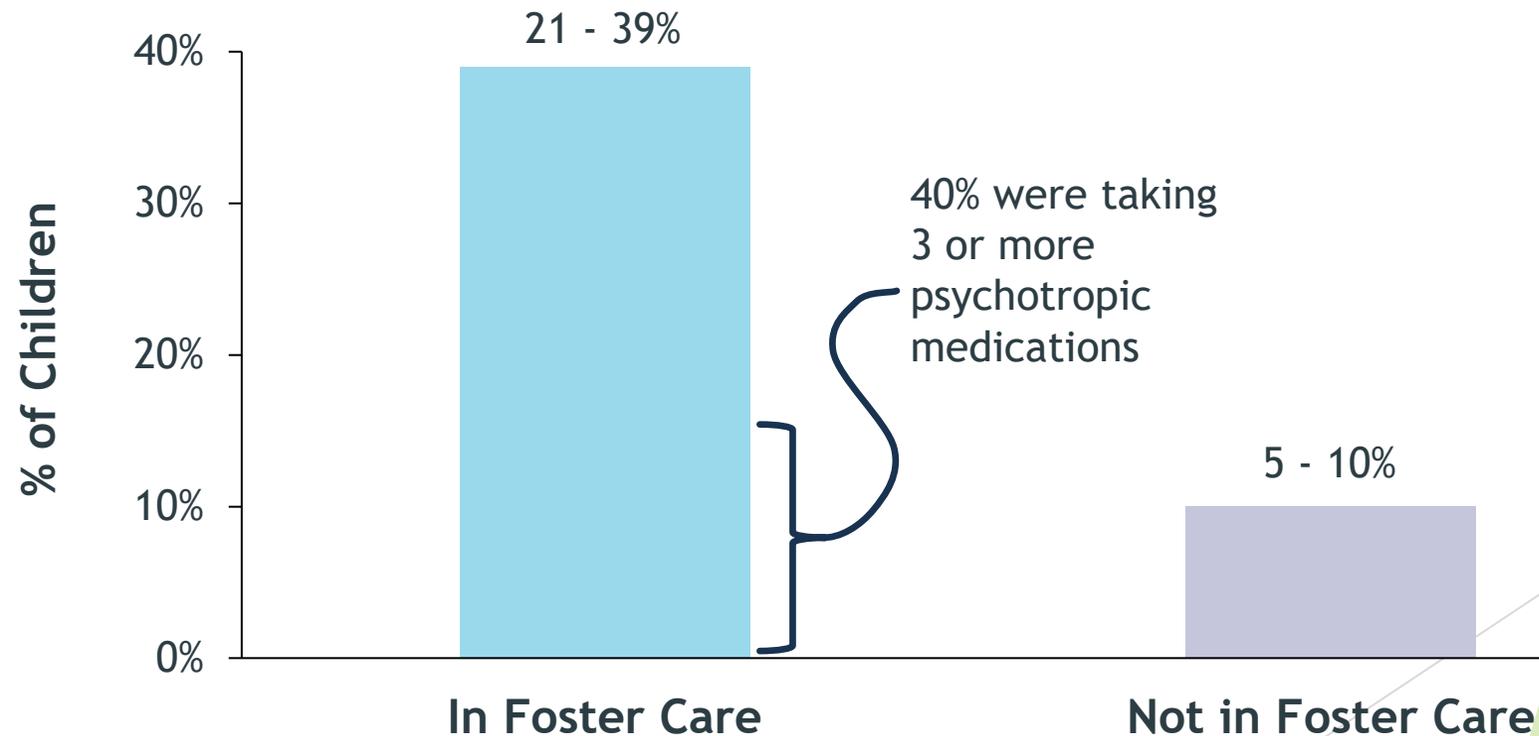
Less open to love/hard to form attachments

Anxious/depressed

Disconnected from others

Over medication of Children in Child Welfare

% of Children Receiving Psychotropic Medications

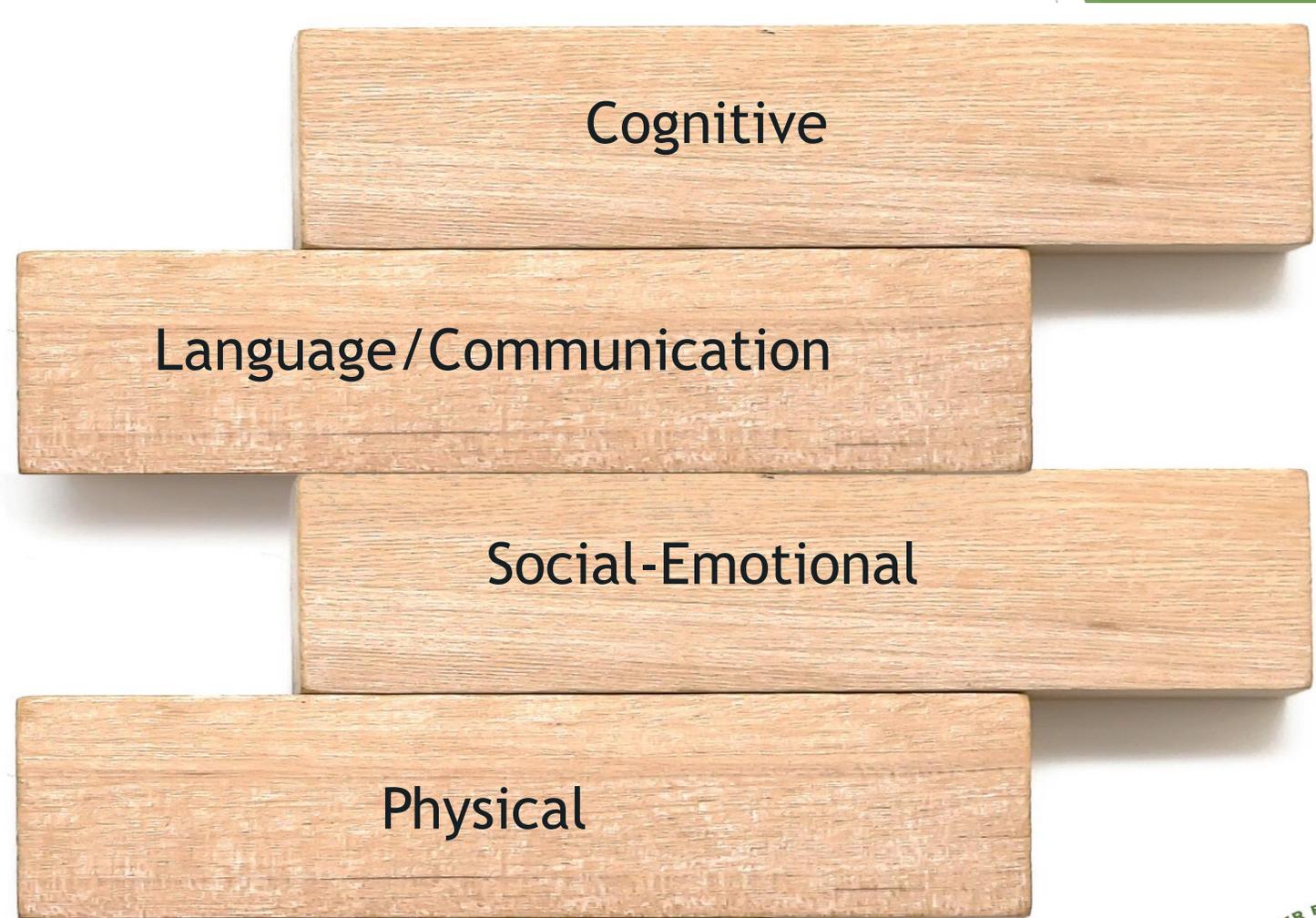


Information was obtained from: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/mental-health-and-foster-care.aspx>

The Interactional Effects of Loss, Trauma & Development



Trauma and Loss affect a child's development



AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Of all losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is most devastating because it is:

- Unclear/confusing
- Indeterminate
- Most distressful
- Immobilizing-can't problem solve because they do not know if loss is final or temporary
- Lacks resolution

What is Ambiguous Loss?

There are 2 kinds:

- Physically absent, but psychologically present
(Foster care – parent viewed as physically absent)

- Physically present, but psychologically absent

Boss, Pauline. Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief, 1999



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The reality is that...

LOSS in Foster Care is painfully **AMBIGUOUS!**

- Will I go back home?
- Can my mom get it together?
- Can I stay at my school?
- Should I let my foster dad get close to me?
- Who will be there for me if I age out of foster care?
- Will I ever see my birth parents again?
- Do I have any brothers and sisters?
- Does my birthmother think about me on my birthday?



Complications due to Ambiguous Loss

- ▶ A sense of being “unwanted”
- ▶ A lost person is alive but is not available or is less available to the child.
- ▶ The person may not return or just never returned one day.
- ▶ The relationship may not be the same as it was.
- ▶ Lack of clarity over where ‘home’ is.



Common symptoms of ambiguous loss and/or unresolved grief

- ▶ Difficulty with transitions or changes
- ▶ Difficulty making decisions or choices, feeling overwhelmed
- ▶ Difficulty coping with normal childhood or adolescent losses and disappointments. Feeling “stuck”
- ▶ Depression and/or anxiety - fearful that they will keep losing people, and they don't feel safe
- ▶ Learned helplessness or hopelessness
- ▶ Social isolation to protect from loss again
- ▶ Feelings of guilt and shame
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Confusion about what happened and whether they were to blame
- ▶ Holding on to unhealthy relationships



Ambiguity may...

- Erode children's sense of mastery
- Cause them to feel incompetent
- Create feelings that the world is unfair, unsafe, unpredictable, unmanageable

If a child can obtain information, that eases the stress of ambiguity.

**When we work with
grieving children,
we must be
comfortable with**

HELPLESSNESS

Healing



REMOVED

REVEAL MY STORY

Activity



I NEVER KNEW GRIEF
WOULD FEEL SO MUCH
LIKE
FEAR – C.S. Lewis



The Four Psychological Tasks/Goals of Grief Work

1. Understanding
2. Grieving
3. Commemorating
4. Going On



Trozzi, Maria, Talking with Children About Loss, 1999

The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

1. Understanding

Knowing what happened to the person who left and why, or knowing what situations caused the loss and why it happened.





My counselor told me that the reason my birthmother never came back was that she was sick. She did too many drugs. I remember now, my mom did drugs and I couldn't live with her. My mom still does drugs and lives in a hospital - will I ever see her again?

The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

2. Grieving



Experiencing the painful feelings associated with a loss.



When I was 3, my mama hit
me
When I was 4, those people
took me out our door
When I was 5, my mom was
barely alive
When I was 6, my feelings
were mixed
When I was 7, my mama
went to heaven
When I was 8, all I felt was
hate
Now I'm 9 and trying to put
the past behind.
- Samantha, age
9

The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

3. Commemorating

Remembering the persons, places, things that are no longer part of the child's daily life.





My Childhood Treasure

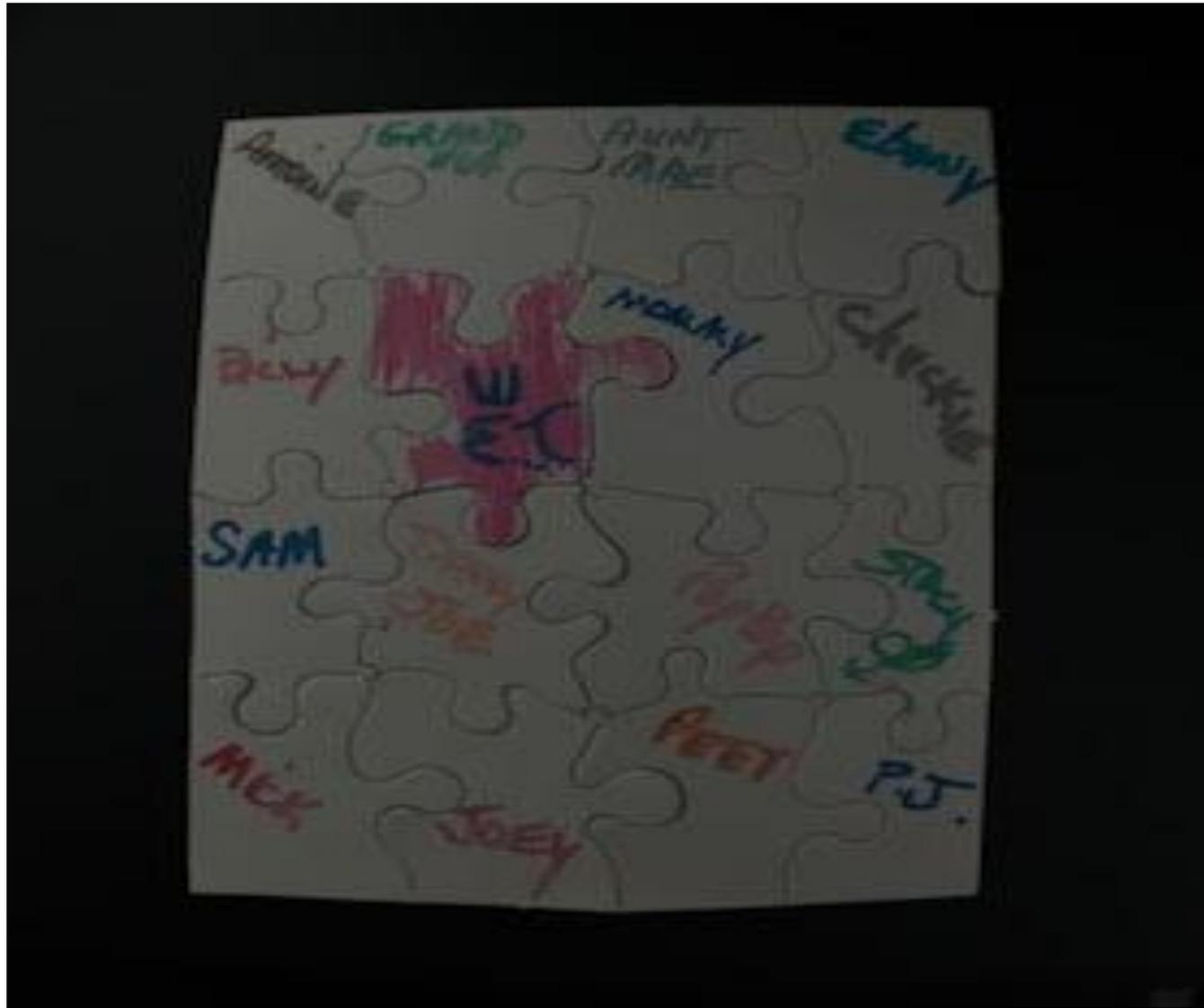
I began making my family and relatives from clay with hidden cry and fear inside; knowing that I will never see them again on this earth. After I made all of my family members, I closed my box as if I were saying good-bye for the very last time. I said to myself one day that I have to let this go because it won't help me with my dilemma with grief. So, I let it go...it was one of the most arduous decisions I have made.

Irena, 16 years





“You will never be forgotten” Star memorial artwork piece in remembrance of birth parents



Puzzle memorial for family and friends

The Four Psychological Tasks of Grief Work

4. Going On



Child learns that the pain of grief subsides and the legacy of their loved one lies within themselves.

Tips for Parents to Help Children Deal with Loss & Feel Belonging

Help the child identify and connect to what was lost.

Discuss loss and ambiguity.

Redefine family.

Give permission to grieve.

Use the Life Book.

- When possible, incorporate celebrations, rituals, food, and other cultural elements into your family life
- Connect to people, places, communities, religion, and/or history that represents identity.

Tips for Parents to Help Children Deal with Loss & Feel Belonging

Help the child identify what was lost.

Discuss loss and ambiguity.

Redefine family.

Give permission to grieve.

Use the Life Book.

- Speak about any ambiguity and acknowledge the losses.
- Let the child know that what they are feeling is normal.
- Adults can share an experience of their own losses.

Tips for Parents to Help Children Deal with Loss & Feel Belonging

Help the child identify what was lost.

Discuss loss and ambiguity.

Redefine family.

Give permission to grieve.

Use the Life Book.

- Redefine what makes up a family.
- Allow for openness to family members and to other important relationships in the child's life.

Tips for Parents to Help Children Deal with Loss & Feel Belonging

Help the child identify what was lost.

Discuss loss and ambiguity.

Redefine family.

Give permission to grieve.

Use the Life Book.

- Give the child permission to grieve the loss of family without guilt.
- Give the child tools to express grief and opportunities to talk about it.
- Help the child learn to use drawing, journaling, working with clay, vigorous exercise, sports, and dance as safe ways to vent feelings.
- Make time to join the child in these activities.

Tips for Parents to Help Children Deal with Loss & Feel Belonging

Display pictures of people, places and things that are important to the child

Be conscious of how special occasions can trigger intense feelings of loss

Keep your expectations realistic

Model healthy responses to loss

How can
professionals help
children with the
grieving process?

We need to understand...



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New attachments are not meant to replace old ones.

Acknowledge birth parents/siblings previous foster families

Find ways to honor the role/legacy of birth family members



“My parents of my past are always loved the same if not even more than I imagined.”

My Memorial Room





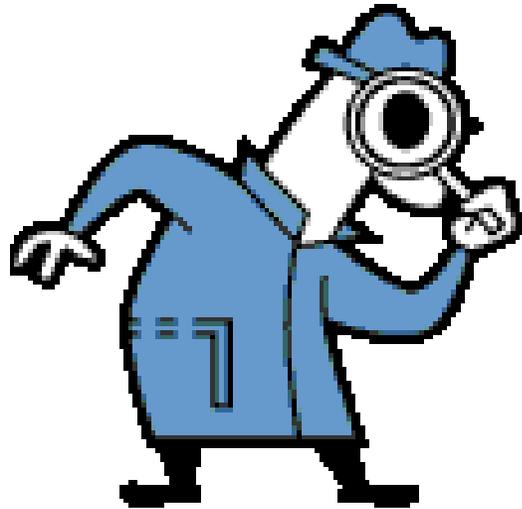
Talking is important! Share their story and talk about it over time.

We can help children integrate past losses and begin to grieve when we share information in an age appropriate way



Throw pebbles

Finally, Your Opportunity to be an Investigator...Where is it and Who's got it?

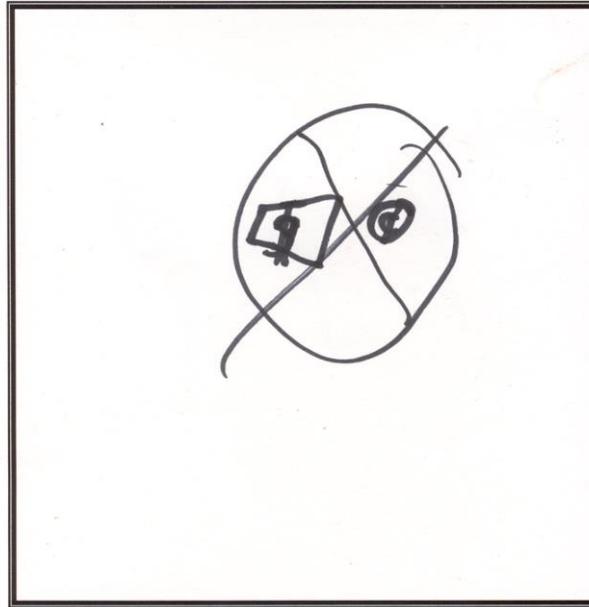


- ▶ School teachers
- ▶ Physicians
- ▶ Lawyers / Judges
- ▶ Present and previous Child Care Providers
- ▶ Workers...Social Workers, Case Workers, CASA Workers,
- ▶ Respite Care Takers, Guidance Counselors, Therapists,
- ▶ Mentors, Coaches...
- ▶ Records...Case Records, Medical Records, Vital Statistic
- ▶ Records, Court Records, School Records
- ▶ Neighborhood Religious/Spiritual places of gathering...
- ▶ Children's and Parents' friends and acquaintances
- ▶ Year books, newspaper clippings
- ▶ Neighbors
- ▶ Families... Extended family, Birth family, Foster family

When I came home, my family
my mom cried



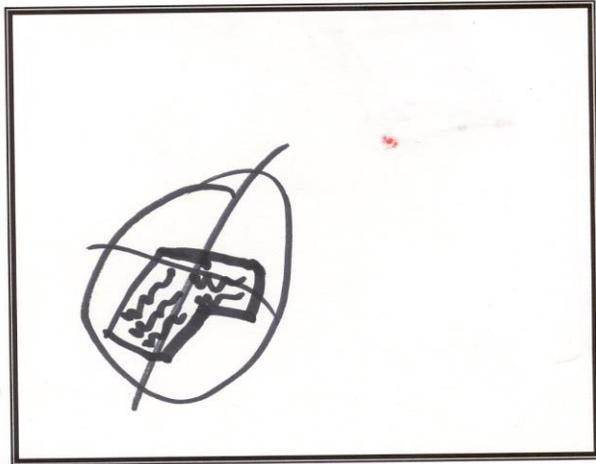
I know this about my birth
mother or birth father:
was poor,



I *donot* to share
(like or don't like)

my adoption story with
friends because

*it is sometimes
privat*

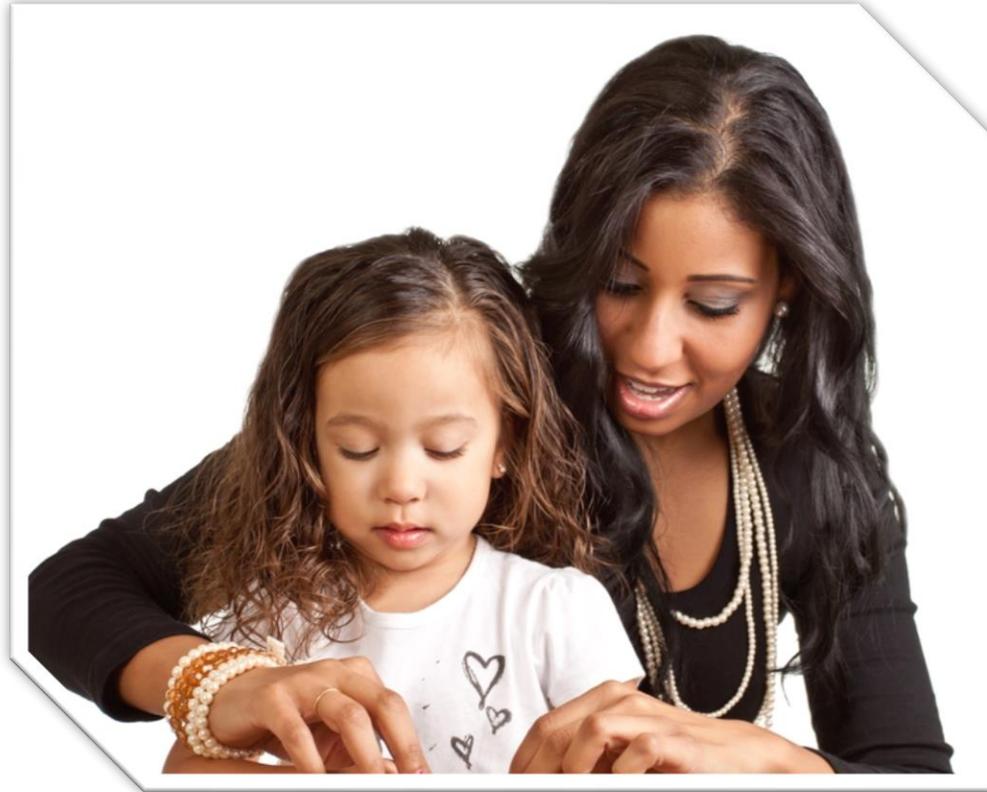


I have *photo book*
that helps me remember my
adoption story.





It is important to give children permission to express all feelings, and give them the tools they need.



Difficult Issues:

- The social worker, parent/ caretakers fear of stirring things up
- Talking to children about his/her birth parent's problems
- Lack of information, actual pictures and/or artifacts
- Need to contact significant people from the child's past
- Child's reluctance and disinterest in participating in the process

THANK YOU

**Thank you Grandma Da Da
for Caring and taking me
places. You were Always with
me. And I'm always going to
be with you even tho I can't
see but you see me.
Love ya by Stanley your
Grandson.**



What is a therapeutic LIFEBOOK?

A tool that gives children the opportunity to understand and process their past. It helps them to turn their attention to their present and prepares them for the future. It helps the caseworker / social worker and parents to know the child.

Introducing the Concept to a Child: Creating a Healing and Therapeutic Experience

- ▶ There is NO “One Way” or “Right Way” of putting together a Lifebook
- ▶ There are many different means of communicating and documenting information
- ▶ The discussion before, during and after the Lifebook is completed highlights the value of the Lifebook itself
- ▶ Being available and open to helping the child express and process his/her past in a supportive environment
- ▶ Anticipating Grief and Loss work

Loss Box





Model how to communicate thoughts and wondering.

Show support of child's emotions as she or he copes with grief.

Sometimes
you'll have to
look hard to
see what's
beneath the
mask





We can't FIX the loss, but we can validate and affirm the child's feelings.



When they don't I really?



Why do I still...

What if...

Why is my life so complicated



Why

Why

Why would they

could I stay with

choose to abandon me?



Adults need to be aware of their own loss and grief history.

Adults must be aware of how it impacts their ability to carry the grief of the child.



**Grief shared is
grief diminished.**

**Going on means
shifting the attachments,
not severing.**



Supportive adults are key!

- Griefwork brings families closer together.
- This is now their family's story.

~~UN~~WANTED

“I always felt like I was born a mistake,” said Becca during a session. “I thought that if they – my birth parents – didn’t want to keep me then I had to been a mistake. I was not worthy to be here. My birth mom didn’t want me, my birth dad didn’t want me. Those words kept pounding my brain.”



“Then something incredible happened. I pushed my parents in therapy to get me more information about my birth parents. My therapist helped me with this. My parents were really nervous about what I would find. We called the agency where I was adopted from and I found out that my birth mom tried to parent me for four months – she really did care about me!! She cared enough to try to keep me, the records said that she tried but eventually found it was too hard by herself to raise me. For fourteen years, I believed I was a mistake! Providing me with some of the missing information allowed me to no longer see myself as a kid that no one wanted!”