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Grief & At-Risk Behavior: A look at the effectiveness of grief counseling groups for adolescents in public schools

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Grief & At-Risk Behavior: A Look At The Effectiveness of Grief Counseling Groups in Public Schools

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*Endorsed by the International Association of Social Work with Groups, Inc.*
Significance

- Charles and Anita Clayborn (My Parents)
- Grief (My Story)
- Adult vs. Adolescent
- School Social Work (My Experience)

“Can I participate in this group again?”
“Can we make group 1 hour and more than 8 weeks?”
“Can we bring in a photo of our parent(s)?”
My Parents
Charles & Anita Clayborn
Significance

- Many adolescents who experience grief do not receive any form of counseling services to support them towards their grief recovery.

- In the United States, more than 2 million children and adolescents (3.4%) younger than 18 years have experienced the death of a parent.

(Christ, 2002).
At-Risk Behaviors

- Due to adolescents’ level of cognitive, psychological, and social development, they may express inner turmoil through self-harm, physical complaints, or aggressive behaviors because of their reduced ability to conceptualize and verbalize distress.

(Cooper, Hooper, & Thompson, 2005).
At-Risk Behaviors

- Substance Abuse
- Suicide
- Eating Disorders
- Gang Violence
- Delinquency
- Self-Destructive Behavior
- Academic Problems

At-Risk Behaviors

- Adolescents who experience grief may struggle with understanding “who they are” in the absence of a parent, due to death.

- Adolescents who experience the death of a parent may struggle with issues of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

(Thomas 2011)
Grief & Adolescents

- Grief is the normal psychological, social, and physical reaction to loss.

- Grief is also viewed as loss and bereavement.

- Grief is expressed through feelings, thoughts, and attitudes.

  (Rando, 1988)
  (Dune, 2004)
  (Worden, 2009)
Grief & Adolescents

Stages of Grief:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

*Grief is understood as a cyclical process*

(Kubler-Ross, 1969)
Theoretical Framework

John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory

- Attachment Theory describes the state and quality of an individual’s attachments, to feel safe and secure.

- Attachment initially occurs between a child and parent and later between adult and adult.

- This theory rests on the belief that a secure attachment contributes to a healthy development.

(Bowlby, 1973; Dunne, 2004)
Grief Counseling Groups

- Few resources are available for grieving adolescents.
- Grief counseling groups are positive interventions for adolescents.
- Grief counseling groups help adolescents process their grief in a positive way.
- Grief counseling groups can assist adolescents in developing healthier coping skills.

(Lee & Swenson, 2005)
(Slyter, 2012)
Grief Counseling Groups

- The preferred intervention for grieving students is a support group.

- Group counseling is an effective intervention when working in a school setting.

(Perusee & Goodnough, 2009)
(Whiston & Sexton, 1998)
Grief Counseling Groups in Public Schools

- Group counseling can increase the number of students served in school counseling programs.

- Group counseling is an efficient intervention compared to individual counseling in a school setting.

- Group counseling supports student growth and development.

  (Gladding, 2008; Greenberg, 2003)
  (Perusee, Goodnough, & Lee, 2009)
  (Sells & Hays, 1997).
Barriers to Grief Counseling Groups

- Academic Culture
- School Climate
- Scheduling Problems
- School Policies
- School Culture
- Administrative Support
- Student Caseload
- Time

(Dansby, 1996; Greenber, 2003; Ripley & Goodnough, 2011)
School Social Workers

- School social workers are excellent resources for grieving adolescents.

- 5% of social workers work in the public school setting.

- School social workers are responsible for providing clinical interventions at school when loss occurs.

(NASW, 2014) (Strobe et al., 2005) (Rowling, 2005)
Summary

- 95 percent of respondents agreed that grief impacts and interferes with teaching and learning.

- 97 percent of respondents agreed that grief counseling groups are effective interventions for adolescents.

- 96 percent of respondents agreed that a comfort level with the topic of grief is required in order to conduct grief counseling groups.
Summary

- Frequency data reveals that grief counseling groups are not being conducted at higher percentages by school social workers for adolescents.

- 56 percent of respondents have never conducted grief counseling groups.

Georgia public school social workers who are members of the School Social Workers Association of Georgia recognize the importance of grief counseling as an effective intervention for adolescents, however grief counseling groups continue to be underutilized.
Additional Resources

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

Talking With Children

Take-Home Message
Making contact and talking with grieving students helps them cope with their loss. But some teachers aren’t sure what to say. They’re afraid they’ll cause the child more pain. It’s important to remember that a student’s grief and pain are caused by the death or loss, not by talking about it.

This handout provides practical suggestions to school professionals on how to initiate a conversation with a student who has recently experienced the death of a close family member or friend.

Why It’s Vital to Speak Up
School personnel are often concerned about the possibility that they will upset children by raising the topic of death. They may worry that they will make matters worse. They may choose to say nothing.

Saying nothing actually communicates a great deal to children. It tells them that you may be:
- Inattentive. You don’t realize they are confused and struggling.
- Uncautious. You don’t care about this important event in their lives.
- Insensitive. You don’t believe you are capable of providing the support they need.
- Uncertain. You feel the child is unable to adjust and cope even with your assistance.
- Unsupporting. You believe it is wrong to talk about death.

No one wants to communicate these messages to grieving children.

Speaking up helps grieving children know you recognize their situation and want to be supportive.

What Children Are Often Thinking
Children learn from an early age that conversations about death make people uncomfortable. If they ask questions, people may look away or not continue the conversation. If they speak to grieving family members after a death, adults may cry or show distress. Children sometimes conclude they have done something wrong and avoid raising the subject again. They may hold in their feelings as a way to support their family. They may try to look fine and reassure family they are okay when they really need support.

School professionals can play a powerful role in reaching out to students, acknowledging their loss, and offering to speak with them and answer their questions. Staff who already have a trusting and genuine relationship with the grieving student are in the best position to offer this support.

Initiating the Conversation
These steps can help get the conversation started.

1. Express concern. Let students know you’ve heard about their loss and are available to listen and offer support.
2. Be genuine. Children can tell when adults are authentic in their communications. For example, don’t tell a child you will miss her uncle if you didn’t know the man. Do tell the child you care and she has experienced this loss.
3. Invite the conversation. Use simple, direct, open-ended questions. For example, ask, “How are you and your family doing?”
4. Listen and share. Listen more and talk less. Share observations about student behavior or responses in a nonjudgmental manner.
5. Limit personal sharing. You can draw on personal experiences to help you better understand students, but do not need to share this with them. Keep the focus on the student.
6. Offer practical advice. For example, discuss ways to respond to questions from peers or adults about the death.
7. Offer reassurance. Without minimizing their concerns, let students know that over time they will be better able to cope with their stress and that you will be there to help them.
8. Maintain contact. As first, children may not accept your invitation to talk or seek support. Their questions will evolve over time. Remain accessible, concerned, and connected.

(Continued)
Additional Resources

Coalition to Support Grieving Students
Additional Resources

- The Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation  [www.ekrfoundation.org](http://www.ekrfoundation.org)
- The Doughy Center  [www.doughy.org](http://www.doughy.org)
- Hello Grief  [www.hellogrief.org](http://www.hellogrief.org)
- Center for Grieving Children  [www.grievingchildren.org](http://www.grievingchildren.org)
- National Association of Social Workers  [www.helpstartshere.org](http://www.helpstartshere.org)
- The Renew Center (Dr. Judy Keith)  [www.renew.net](http://www.renew.net)
Group Pictures
“Free Association Paper”

Relieved.❤
Group Pictures
“Free Association Paper”

Okay

Mixed Emotions.
Group Pictures
“Free Association Paper”
Encouraged!

10/7/11
Group Pictures
“Support Chain”
Will Your Name Be Listed????
“Support System Activity”
Will Your Name Be Listed????
“Support System Activity”
Thank You

Remember, all youth and young adults can be successful. The key is helping them to find success their own way and in their own time!

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“Success is to be measured not so much by the position one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed”.

Booker T. Washington