



Promoting Secure(r) Attachment After Losing a Caregiver in Early Childhood

Mary Wise-Kriplani, MSW, LCSW, PhD
Center for Child & Family Health, Durham, NC



Definitions of Attachment

- “An in-born system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence and organize motivational, emotional and memory processes with respect to significant caregiving figures.”

(Bowlby, 1969)

- “A bio-behavioral system whose goal is to **coordinate the balance** between the need for **safety in proximity** to a caregiver or set of caregivers with the tendency for **exploration and autonomy** in infancy and early childhood.”

(Zeanah and Boris, 1994)

Four Infant Attachment Behaviors

Proximity seeking--

Infants insist on maintaining close proximity to their caregivers.

Secure base--

Infants use their caregivers as a secure base for exploration.

Safe haven--

Infants flee to their caregiver as a safe haven when frightened or alarmed.

Separation protest--

Infants protest caregiver leaving.

(Bowlby, 1969)



Four Caregiver Attachment Behaviors

Sensitivity to signals--
Detecting the infant's signal correctly, interpreting the signal, appropriately responding, and timely response

Cooperation vs. interference with on-going behavior

Physical and psychological availability

Acceptance vs. rejection of the infant's needs

(Ainsworth, 1969)





On Knowing What You're Not Supposed to Know

“Children not infrequently observe scenes their parents would prefer they did not observe; they form impressions their parents would prefer they did not form; and they have experiences their parents would like to believe they have not had.”

Bowlby, 1979

Early Childhood Cognitive Development

Ego-centrism & parental omnipotence

Developmentally salient anxieties of early childhood

Lack of abstract thinking

Can't discern between subjective experience and external reality

Learning cause and effect



Grief-Specific Cognitive Development

Working to develop concept of permanency

Lack awareness of death's inevitability

“Short sadness span^a”

Need co-regulation to learn regulation





KEY POINTS:

1- Even very young children experience intense grief at the loss of someone they love, though they often express their feelings in ways that may not “look like” grief to the adults around them.

2- Without adult support, young children often draw conclusions about illness, death, and loss that are untrue and unhelpful, though developmentally typical. They need adults to help them understand the experience in ways that promote their healthy development.

3- Adults can help.

WAYS ANY ADULT CAN HELP

Provide short, simple, honest **answers** to questions they ask.

Allow them to **play** and talk about their experience.

Acknowledge the death, the loss, the changes, and the feelings the child is expressing.



Essential Messages:

The **parent** cannot be with child anymore

The **parent** did not want to die and leave child

The **parent** will never come back

If the child indicates the issue: The child did not cause the **parent's** death





Additional Ideas

- Transitional Objects
- Repetition of questions and answers
- Photos
- Books
- Emotion Coaching
 - Reflecting, naming child's
 - Acknowledging, naming adult's

Books for kids about death



When Dinosaurs Die (Brown & Brown)

Where's Jess? (Centering Corporation [sibling death])

Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death (Zucker)

I Miss You (Thomas)

The Scar (Moundlic [parental death])

The Goodbye Book (Parr)

Books for kids about death



When Families Grieve kit (Sesame Street)

Samantha Jane's Missing Smile (Kaplow & Pincus [parental death])

The Brightest Star (Hemery [parental death])

The Invisible String (Karst)

Books for kids about separation & loss



Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care (Wilgocki & Kahn Wright)

You Weren't With Me (Ghosh Ippen)

Zachary's New Home: A Story for Foster and Adopted Children (Blomquist & Blomquist)

Murphy's Three Homes: A Story for Children in Foster Care (Levinson Gilman & O'Malley)

Kids Need to Be Safe: A Book for Children in Foster Care (Nelson)

Books for kids about separation & loss



Families Change: A Book for Children Experiencing Termination of Parental Right (Nelson)

Mama's Waves (Ghosh Ippen) [parental substance abuse, parental SPMI, visitations]

The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to Expect When Someone You Loves Goes to Jail (Higgins)

For the adults



The Rabbit Listened (Doerrfeld)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) website: resources for caregivers, teachers, etc.

Losing a Parent to Death in the Early Years (Lieberman, Compton, VanHorn, & Ghosh Ippen)

Sesame Street in Communities website: topic-specific resources (grief, incarceration, etc.)

Thank you!

mary.wise@duke.edu

marywiselcsw@gmail.com

