## Child Reactions to Loss: Common Behavior Patterns of the Grieving Process

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<th>Stage</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Behavioral Expressions in Separated Children</th>
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| Shock or Denial     | • Person appears compliant and disconnected from the event, as if the loss were of little significance.  
• Person may be stunned, robot-like, or "shell shocked."  
• Person may deny the event and/or the feelings accompanying the event.  
• There is minimal emotional expression. | • Often seems indifferent in affect in behavior.  
• May not show an emotional reaction to the move.  
• May appear to adjust well for a period of time, often referred to as the "honeymoon period."  
• May go through the motions of normal activity but shows little commitment or conviction.  
• May be unusually quiet, compliant, or eager to please. In retrospect, behavior may appear passive and emotionally detached or numbed.  
• May deny the loss, and may make statements such as, "I'm not staying here. Mommy will get me soon."  
• Workers, foster parents, and parents may misinterpret compliant and unemotional behavior. When child is thought to have handled a move without distress, later behavioral signs are often not recognized as separation trauma and part of the grieving process.  
• Children who have not developed strong, healthy attachments to parents or caregivers may not display any emotional reaction to the move.  
• Absence of emotional responses to placement beyond the short time period of the "shock" phase should be concerning and may indicate underlying emotional disturbance. | |
| Anger or Protest    | • Loss can’t be denied. The first emotional response is anger.  
• Anger may be non-directional or directed at a person or object thought to be responsible for the loss.  
• Guilt, blaming others, and recriminations are common. | • Oppositional and hypersensitive.  
• Tantrums and emotional outbursts.  
• Withdraw, sulk or pout; may refuse to participate in activities.  
• Crabby and grouchy; hard to satisfy.  
• Aggressive behavior with other children.  
• Break toys or objects, lie, steal, exhibit other antisocial behaviors.  
• Oppositional behavior may be disruptive to the caregivers.  
• Confrontations between caregivers and child may lead to power struggles.  
• Risk of misdiagnosis: "severely behaviorally handicapped," or "emotionally disturbed;" may be | |

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<td>● Refuse to comply with requests.</td>
<td>punished for misbehavior.</td>
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<td>● Make comparisons between own home and foster home; prefers own home.</td>
<td>Be supportive and helpful in redirecting feelings if behavior can be properly identified as part of grief process.</td>
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<td>● Sleeping or eating disturbances; may be non-communicative.</td>
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<td>BARGAINING</td>
<td>● Behavior is often an attempt to regain control and prevent the finality of the loss.</td>
<td>● May be eager to please and will make promises to be good.</td>
<td>Behaviors represent a desperate attempt to control the environment and defend against feelings of emotional turmoil.</td>
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<td>● Person may resolve to do better from now on.</td>
<td>● May try to undo what he/she believes he/she has done to cause placement.</td>
<td>In reality, there is little chance of the behaviors producing the desired results or reunification.</td>
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<td>● Person may try to &quot;bargain&quot; with whoever is thought to have the power to change the situation.</td>
<td>● May believe that behaving or thinking in a certain way will bring reconciliation. Behaviors may become ritualized, which may be an attempt to formalize &quot;good behavior&quot; and assure its consistency.</td>
<td>The worker who understands this stage can provide support when the child realizes the ineffectiveness of bargaining and begins to experience the full emotional impact of the loss.</td>
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<td>● Child may believe that a certain way of behaving or thinking will prevent the finality of the loss.</td>
<td>● May try to negotiate agreements with foster parent or worker; may offer to do certain things in exchange for a promise to be allowed to return home.</td>
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<td>● May appear moralistic in beliefs and behavior; behaviors are often a defense against failure in upholding his/her end of the &quot;bargain.&quot;</td>
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<td>DEPRESSION</td>
<td>● This stage is characterized by expressions of despair and futility, listlessness, with or without extraordinary episodes of fear and panic, withdrawal, and a generalized lack of interest in people, surroundings, or activities.</td>
<td>● Appears to have lost hope and is experiencing the full impact of the loss.</td>
<td>This is a critical period in the parent – child relationship. Once the child has completed the grieving process, it is very difficult to re-establish the relationship. There may be a lapse of time between separation and the onset of depression.</td>
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<td>● Social and emotional withdrawal, and failure to respond to other people is common.</td>
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<td>● May be touchy, &quot;out of sorts,&quot; cry with little provocation.</td>
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| The individual often cannot be comforted. | • May be easily frustrated and overwhelmed by minor events and stresses.  
• May be listless and without energy.  
• Activities are mechanical, without direction, investment, or apparent interest.  
• May be distractible, have a short attention span and be unable to concentrate.  
• Regressive behaviors are common, such as thumb sucking, toilet accidents, baby talk.  
• Generalized emotional distress may be exhibited in both emotional and physical symptoms (i.e. whimpering, crying, rocking, head banging, refusal to eat, excessive sleeping, digestive disorders, illness). | • Foster parents may feel frustrated and helpless by their inability to comfort or help the child.  
• The worker who recognizes depression as part of the grief process is better able to provide support or increase visitation to prevent the child from emotionally detaching. | |
| RESOLUTION OR ACCEPTANCE       | • Symptoms of depression and distress abate. Person begins to respond to others in a more normal manner.  
• Person begins to invest emotional energy in the present or in planning the future, and less in thinking about the past.  
• The final stage of grieving ends when the person returns to an | • Child begins to develop stronger attachments in the new home and tries to establish a place in the family.  
• Child may begin to identify as part of the new family and demonstrates stronger emotional attachments to family members.  
• Intensity of emotional distress decreases and child once again experiences pleasure in childhood | • Behaviors suggesting resolution are generally positive signs, if the case plan includes permanent separation of the child from his family.  
• It is inappropriate and harmful for the child to resolve the loss of his family if the plan includes reunification. |
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|       | active life in the present. | activities.  
  - Goal-directed activities reoccur; play and other activities become more focused and planned. Child is better able to concentrate.  
  - Emotional reactions to stressful situations diminish as security in the new environment increases. | |

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