Section 6: EMASS Toolkit

Separation and Loss

A guide for schools

Produced by Family Action’s East Midlands Adoption Support Service (EMASS)



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How are children and young people affected by separation and loss?

Many children in school will experience some kind of significant separation or loss in their lives: separation from a parent, bereavement of a relative or friend, moving school or house or simply losing a beloved family pet.

While grief impacts on us all, the grief cycle in children is affected by different factors. Each one of us grieves in our own way so we should not make assumptions about how another person (child or adult) should be feeling or acting or what they may need to help them.

Grief in children may take a lot longer to resolve and may manifest itself quite differently to grief in adults. Factors that may affect children’s grief are:

* level of comprehension and emotional maturity
* egocentric views and ‘magical thinking’ – ‘It must be my fault’
* lack of information or knowledge
* inability to handle stress
* lack of language to express feelings
* loss of control or choice over what happens to them.

Children may react in many different ways:

* appear unaffected, numb, in denial
* withdrawn
* hyperactive
* clingy
* pre-occupied, lacking concentration
* forgetful
* worried anxious, fearful
* self-harming
* guilty
* angry
* confused
* relieved
* physically affected – appetite, sleep, bowel or bladder control, sweating, ‘butterflies’, pain or constriction in throat/head/neck/chest.

While we are often very sensitive to children who lose a parent through death, we may not realise the ongoing complexities for children whose parent is still alive but ‘lost’ to them through separation.

There are many reasons why children ‘lose’ parents who are still living:

* prolonged parental ill health or loss of capacity
* parents/carers working away from home or abroad
* parents in prison
* parents separated or divorced
* children in foster care or subject to SGOs
* children living with other family members
* adopted children.

In these situations, there is no real closure for children in completing the grieving process. They may long and yearn for the lost parent(s) or brothers and sisters living elsewhere, worry about them and fantasise about what life would be like if they were with them.

Their perception and understanding of separation and loss will change as their cognitive capacity develops. In a sense, this leads to a renewed sense of loss at different times in a child or young person’s life. (This is discussed further below.)

Why is this so relevant for children who are adopted or subject to a Special Guardianship Order?

Children and young people who are adopted or who are living with their Special Guardians will all have experienced losses and, because of this, may need extra understanding, help and support from school staff and teachers at various times in their lives.

As well as separation from parents, these children are more likely to have experienced multiple losses and moves both before coming into care and also while in foster care. Some children are separated from their brothers and sisters when they enter the care system; some may also experience a loss of their own sense of identity – who they are and where they belong.

While children who are adopted may have been given a ‘Life Story Book’ explaining their early history, many children have not had the opportunity to explore and understand their own life stories through therapeutic life story work before they are placed with their adoptive parents or Special Guardians.

For children who are adopted or living with Special Guardians, there may also be ongoing contact with members of their birth family. In adoption, it is common for an annual exchange of letters to be arranged between the adoptive family and birth parents or other relatives via a ‘letterbox’ system operated by the Adoption Agency.

This may be a very emotive time for children – it reminds them of their adoptive status, makes them aware of what is happening in their birth family or, if the expected letter doesn’t arrive, it can feel like a further rejection or loss.

Children living with their Special Guardians may have more direct contact with their birth parents and other family members. This in itself can sometimes lead to tensions and divided loyalty for the child as they try to negotiate their position within complex adult relationships.

Children have also been seen to have ‘anniversary’ reactions. These are times linked to traumatic separations which trigger grief in the child but may not be consciously recognised. For example, a child removed from their birth parent or separated from brothers and sisters in the autumn may appear very unsettled and unhappy at the beginning of each school year. Without understanding the history, this could easily be attributed to starting in a new class with a new teacher.

As mentioned above, children and young people will grow in terms of their level of understanding as they mature cognitively and emotionally. This has led to the identification of a period of ‘adaptive grieving’ (Brodzinsky) when some children who have seemingly accepted their adoptive status may suddenly ‘act out’.

The age at which this happens will vary from child to child but commonly is between the ages of 8 – 11, when children may start wondering about their adoptive status and why they do not live with their family of origin. This is also true of children who have been placed in infancy.

They may begin by understanding that their family situation is different to that of their peers, realising that gaining a ‘new’ family has entailed losing or even feeling rejected by another.

Children may also fear that: their adoptive family, like their birth family, may not be permanent; that they might be rejected again; that they might be taken away by their birth family. This does not always lead to difficult behaviour, but some children may experience feelings of sadness, uncertainty, confusion or helplessness.

How to help and support these children and young people in school settings

Schools can help children with loss and separation in many ways. If children are adopted or living with Special Guardians, it is important to have discussions with their parent and carers in the first instance and then with the child, if all parties agree.

Depending on the age, understanding and current situation of the child or young person it may be useful to talk to them as well, though some children and families prefer to separate school life from personal or emotional issues and it is their decision if they wish to do this.

Parents and/or carers can provide information which can be very helpful for staff:

* the child’s current situation and any contact arrangements that may affect the them
* relevant history regarding previous separations/losses
* any significant dates/festivals/celebrations that may be triggers for the child or young person (See also the EMASS Toolkit section ‘Presenting a sensitive curriculum’.)
* a trusted adult who the child knows they can talk to about any issues connected with adoption or special guardianship.

Teaching and support staff can also generally help all children and young people deal with separation and loss by allowing them time to just ‘be normal’ and to enjoy the opportunities that school offers in terms of a predictable routine and a space where they can be themselves.

Teachers or staff who are supporting children who have experienced loss, separation or bereavement also need to take care of themselves. Everyone has their own frame of reference and adults too will have experienced losses and bereavements. Helping children may reawaken our own losses in ways that we do not expect and can be emotionally challenging, so it is important to ensure that you have someone to share your own feelings with who can support you.

Where to go for further information and support

Information pack on bereavement and loss for schools   
<https://childbereavementuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Schools-Information-Pack-Web-Complete-Download.pdf>

Cruse  
A safe and moderated website run by CRUSE Bereavement Care. Has a message board, fun zone, ask a question, lads only, and interactive section.  
[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

Winston’s Wish   
A safe and well moderated section on the Winston’s Wish website; it includes a graffiti wall, ask a question, leave a message, and fun activities.  
[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Grief Encounter   
A dedicated section for young people with videos.  
[www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)

An article on loss and grief in adoption   
<http://docs.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/fulltext/71207.pdf>

Article on adaptive grieving first published in *Adoption Today*  
<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/media/120142/adaptive-grieving.pdf>

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| About us  Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families and brighter lives by delivering innovative and effective services and support that reaches out to many of the UK’s most vulnerable people. We seek to empower people and communities to address their issues and challenges through practical, financial and emotional help.  Our East Midlands Adoption Support Service (EMASS) was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) until March 2018. This document forms part of the EMASS Toolkit, a set of resources produced to support schools that have taken part in the project.  DfE 2955 - Funded by**Training and consultancy**  Family Action’s Training and Consultancy Service can offer a wide range of training workshops for schools and educational establishments, including all the issues covered in the EMASS Toolkit. To book a workshop or inset training day contact:  Family Action, Training and Consultancy  55 Stevens Avenue Bartley Green Birmingham B32 3SD  Email: [TandC@family-action.org.uk](mailto:TandC@family-action.org.uk) or [Joy.broadhurst@family-action.org.uk](mailto:Joy.broadhurst@family-action.org.uk)  Tel: 020 3640 2303  Visit: [www.family-action.org.uk/training](http://www.family-action.org.uk/training)  *Disclaimer: This document includes links to websites and resources used by those involved in the EMASS project. External links were reviewed in February 2018 when this document was produced; however, we are not responsible for the changing content of external websites over time.*  *Last updated 1.3.18* |