

Introduction

Early years practitioners promote the learning and development of young children by planning rich and stimulating activities, being inclusive and responding to children with additional needs. All of which takes place in 'enabling environments' where children are supported to take risks and explore. As the first friendly face that parents and children see on arrival at the setting, practitioners can also be a tremendous source of support when families are experiencing difficulties. Children especially, form secure and trusting attachments with practitioners, particularly their Key Person.

Maintaining a strong link between the home and the setting is a particularly important role for the Key Person when families may be experiencing losses; for example, from struggling with job losses, financial difficulties and other stresses that impact on their well-being, family dynamics and children, to bereavement, separation or divorce, or a family member who is in prison or who is absent due to service in the armed forces. However, many early years practitioners struggle to get the guidance and information they need in order to support children and families, all with individual backgrounds and needs, who are facing such difficulties on a daily basis. This publication acknowledges the wide range of expert advice and support that is currently available.

It is clear from the work of John Bowlby (1980) that secure attachment to a caregiver provides a base for a child to safely explore the world and find their place in it. When a child experiences separation from a primary

caregiver through parental relationship breakdown or by death, there may be long-lasting behavioural, emotional and psychological health problems. It is known that early childhood experiences are very important in influencing a child's ***“emotional health, resilience and social competence”*** (David, et al. 2003, pp11-12) so it is important to consider the issue of bereavement for young children and to think how we can best support them and reduce the risk of long-term difficulties.

As adults we need to gain an insight as to how young children feel and react to the range of losses that they may experience and, in order to be able to give appropriate support, we should seek to understand what is meant by loss and also how children grieve. Loss can be defined as:

“The feeling of grief after losing someone or something of value.”

(Oxford Dictionary)

It is inevitable that we all experience losses throughout life - from simple, seemingly minor losses, such as losing a pen or a purse, to more serious and life-changing personal losses. None of us go through life escaping the bewildering feelings that loss brings about, and we can experience many losses in a lifetime, some of which we never truly recover from.

How we deal with these losses and how our loved ones, peers and colleagues react and support us, can be critical in how successfully we carry on with our daily lives. We need to acknowledge that these losses

are vitally important in a young child's life and how we react to the child during their experience of loss can have lasting implications.

"Grief is love that has become homeless."

(Anonymous)

We are taught that there are several stages of grief to work through over time. However, it is not helpful to define what is normal or abnormal, as this can lead to friends, family or others having unrealistic expectations of the person who is grieving. In times of stress or grief, it is natural to revert to behaviour that is focussed on simply existing, rather than actually doing anything productive. Even the simplest task becomes hard work and exhausting - we simply want to just 'be' and not function.

At such times, people around us may attempt to offer support by saying things like, "*life goes on*", "*be strong*", "*it's time to get back to normal*" or even, "*snap out of it*"; all of which can put the grieving person under pressure. These clichés are also disrespectful to the very real feelings of loss. Often adults feel embarrassed and awkward at showing feelings of sadness, and can internalise their true emotional feelings, putting on a brave face for the outside world in an attempt to meet the expectations of others.

This publication aims to explore how children react to different types of loss; not only those mentioned above, but other losses that may seem less important to adults as well. It also explores how loss manifests itself in the child's behaviour and the impact on that child's development.

We will provide a perspective on the losses that children experience, with discussions and suggestions that will support early years practitioners in dealing with children and families sensitively and safely. The use of thought-provoking case studies give us an insight into what the child might be thinking and feeling, and what support they need from the adult carer.

More importantly it aims to give practitioners an insight into what a child may be experiencing and how practitioners can respond and provide support, whilst keeping themselves safe and not overburdened emotionally. It can be challenging to support a child who is experiencing loss and parents will often turn to the early years practitioner for advice and guidance. This publication provides practitioners with tools that will be helpful in enabling them to work in partnership with parents. It is related throughout to the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department for Education 2012) in order to create a useful, practical and informative publication.