

Article 3

The Storyteller's Companion: Counselors as Creative Advocates for Bereaved Children

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Counselors and well-intended adults often perpetuate misconceptions about recovery after death of a loved one, especially misunderstanding the experiences and manifestations of grief in children. This article addresses the conceptual models and best practices for responding to bereaved children at the elementary and middle school levels. Models of *companioning* (Wolfelt, 2006), *continuing bonds* (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), and *constructivism* (Neimeyer, 2002) are contemporary and alternative ways of framing the grief of children. Contemporary best practice uses a variety of expressive arts counseling techniques with individuals, groups, and families (Thompson, 2003). Counselors in both school and community agency settings may utilize and adapt the examples of these activities given here.

Transformation of the Narrative

The current thinking in grief theory views grief reconciliation not as a separation task, as attachment theory had proposed, but as a transformation of the previous relationship bond (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). These *continuing bonds* reconstruct the personal narrative, or life story, of the affected individual. A child's grief may

be viewed as an ongoing process of *narrative reconstruction* or making meaning of what has happened (Neimeyer, 2002). Grief recovery may be viewed as creative reconstruction of a life story that occurs within an individual child's social system of belonging (Nadeau, 2001). Counselors might view a child's meaning-making system as a life story created within the context of age, gender, racial and cultural belonging, familial structure, developmental functioning, and other diverse variables (Doka, 1998). The spirit is to forward the creation and reconstruction of unique stories of meaning in bereaved children.

Storytelling in grief can transform affected grievers. Thompson (2003) stated, "we are transformed through our telling of the story, whether that telling is in word, visual image, bodily gesture, musical rhythm, dramatic enactment, or ritual" (p. 1). Children can experience healing through narrative practices that elicit empowering stories for the future. The specific stories have particulars of expression, unique to each child. Counselors are asked to honor the differences, to legitimize each child's experience, and to assist in narrative reconstruction as the basis of reconciliation of grief experiences (Whiting & James, 2005).

Gardening the Needs of Bereaved Children

The Harvard Child Bereavement Study is a longitudinal study that provides counselors with research-based knowledge of the needs of bereaved children especially when a parent dies (Worden, 1996). Worden outlines the mourning process for children describing the four tasks as being to: accept the reality of the loss; experience the pain or emotional aspects of the loss; adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing; and relocate the deceased person within one's life, finding ways to memorialize the individual (p. 13-16). Worden states these tasks are highly impacted by the changing developmental world of the developing child. The level of maturity of functioning and sophistication of developmental resources available for the child to use in making meaning of the grief event provide the context for a child's grief response at a given time (Doka,

2000; Oltjenbruns 2007). The grief tasks, however, remain consistent throughout the period of childhood.

Interventions target specific tasks of bereavement for the affected child, each stressing the interaction with a significant adult who facilitates meeting the child's needs and assists with creating a safe place for children to express their grief. Worden (1996) found that bereaved children participating in the Child Bereavement Study were observed to need the following: clear, comprehensible information; soothing of the fear and anxiety elicited by death; reassurance they are not responsible for the death; empathic listening so as not to minimize their concerns; validation of the myriad thoughts and feelings about the deceased; perspective with overwhelming emotions; involvement and inclusion before, during and after the death occurs; continued age appropriate interests and activities; modeled grief behaviors as sources of social learning; and opportunities to remember and memorialize the loss (p. 140-147).

Counselors who conceptualize a child's bereavement experience as an opportunity for reconciliation know this process to be about writing a change into one's life story while living fully in the present. The reconstruction of the story occurs in relationship with a committed listener who expects grief to show itself in emotions, thought, behaviors, meanings, and physical symptoms. Counselors model the life skills necessary for coping with change and bolstering resilience. Counselors also teach messages about loss through our responses. Wolfelt (1996) offers his parable of the child's bereavement caregiver as gardener. Compassionate counselors working with bereaved children know with certainty that grief is natural, necessary, and complex; an opening for mourning conditions is to be created so that healing might result. The counselor as grief gardener nurtures the child's inner propensity to heal without rescuing the bereaved child from the pain of grief. The grief gardener companions a bereaved child and witnesses the transformation. If vulnerabilities arise, the counselor takes action to assist in steering the process toward a pathway of development.

Companioning vs. Treating Bereaved Children

In many Western cultures today, the experience of grief is spoken of as something to overcome, get over, and resolve so that one can move on and be finished with it. With that end in mind, the medical model of care-giving prescribes “treating” the bereaved “patient” as quickly as possible to promote a swift return to the previous level of functioning. Grievers, especially children, need and yearn for something else. They need a compassionate person to walk beside them in their wilderness, someone to be present and bear witness to the story, someone who can provide a safe space for the exploration of what is deepest and most sacred. Wolfelt (2006) proposes an alternative to the prevalent method of working with young grievers: *companioning* the mourning child rather than treating her/him.

Working with children in grief from a companioning perspective requires acceptance of the fact that the child is the expert on her/his grief, not the counselor, caregiver, or other family members. The counselor assumes a humble curiosity about the child’s experience and walks beside the child as s/he navigates the wilderness of grief. The qualities of empathy, compassion, patience, an open heart, and a willingness to acknowledge one’s own pain in order to better understand the child’s are essential to companioning. Additionally, a companion’s role is to honor the child’s story of loss. “Honoring stories requires that we slow down, turn inward and really listen as people acknowledge the reality of loss, embrace pain, review memories, and search for meaning” (Wolfelt, 2006, p.18).

Companioning a grieving child also means accepting where s/he is on the journey and how s/he goes about the process of mourning, without attempting to “fix” her/him. This component of the companioning philosophy is more difficult to practice than it first appears. Adults, especially those in the helping professions, tend to be prescriptive or didactic in their interactions with children, causing obstacles to the true hearing and understanding of children’s grief stories. Companions strive to be different than many other adults in a child’s life by creating a sanctuary and radiating unconditional acceptance of the child’s experience.

Just as in the “caregiver as gardener” parable (Wolfelt, 1996), the most important aspect of companionship a grieving child is the sense of empowerment encouraged in the child when the companion chooses not to lead the child through grief, but instead accompanies her/him and offers support and safety along the way. The child is not being treated for an illness, but is respected and helped on the grief journey.

Goldman (2004), in concert with the intent of the companionship philosophy, believes “a major purpose [of work with grieving children] is allowing children freedom to express emotion. This expression of emotion is an integral component of counseling and includes interventions with writing, drawing, poetry, projective techniques, and dream work” (p.175). Expressive arts modalities can aid the companion counselor in helping the child express and understand the emotions of her/his grief, for “healing is promoted when children put their feelings outside of themselves” (Goldman, 1998a, as cited in Goldman, 2004, p.176).

Expressive Arts Activities for Grieving Children

Example 1: Sharing Circle

Intended for Use in Group Counseling

Ideal for Ages 8 and up

Materials: butcher paper, markers, crayons, colored pencils, paints

On a large piece of butcher paper, draw a circle large enough to leave room on the inside, while also leaving room on the outside. Group members sit around the paper. Instruct members to draw a dot on the inside of the circle near where they sit, and then to draw a line from their dot to the outside of the circle. On the outside of the circle, have group members write the names and/or draw pictures representing their loved ones who have died. When they have finished, ask members to write about, or draw pictures of, ways they have been coping with their loss on the inside of the circle.

When the group has finished, begin processing by asking for a volunteer to tell about the words and pictures s/he has drawn, beginning with her/his story of the person who died and moving to the ways s/he has learned to cope. After the group member has shared

what s/he can, have her/him draw a line on the inside of the circle connecting her/his dot to the dot of the person sitting next to her/him. This action signifies that it is the next person's turn to tell her/his story. Members proceed, continuing to connect their dots, until the inner circle is complete (if a particular group member does not wish to share, or cannot, s/he may simply draw the line connecting her/his dot to the next person's, signifying a "pass"). When the circle is complete, have members speculate about the reason for connecting the dots. There may be many creative and insightful answers to this question, such as, "We are all connected because we have all experienced loss."

This activity allows for creative verbal and nonverbal expressions of each group member's loss experience, including the ability to represent methods of coping (which could be both healthy and unhealthy). It gives members permission to "tell the story" and also to hear the stories of others. Group members come away with a greater understanding of the ambiguity of loss: each experience is unique, but there are common threads among the stories. Group cohesion is enhanced as members begin to understand how they can support each other, and be supported in return.

Example 2: CD Covers

Intended for Use in Individual Counseling

Ideal for Ages 11-13

Materials: a blank CD case; various expressive tools such as markers, glitter, magazines, pieces of foam, bric-a-brac, paper of several textures, charcoal, pastels, ribbon, sponges, paint, etc.

Have the child decorate the CD case, using any tools s/he wishes, so that it reminds her/him of the loved one s/he lost. As s/he tells about what the CD case represents for her/him and relates her/his subjective experience of this loss, listen for themes of unfinished business, guilt about ambiguous feelings toward the loved one, spiritual questions, and other underlying thoughts and feelings that the child may find difficult to talk about. Use these themes to continue the conversation and help the child begin to find meaning in her/his story.

*As a homework assignment, ask the child to compile a track listing or make a mix CD of songs that could go in this CD case about her/his loved one. Play the songs (if possible) and talk with the child about why s/he chose each one.

Example 3: T-Shirt Memories

Intended for Use in Individual or Group Counseling

Ideal for All Ages

Materials: a plain white T-shirt and expressive tools such as acrylics, puffy paint, markers, etc.

In African-American culture, it is common for a bereaved family to make T-shirts to commemorate the death of their loved one. Usually these shirts feature a picture of the deceased screen-printed on the front with their birth and death dates listed. Sometimes a favorite quote or Bible verse is also printed on the shirt. In a similar fashion, ask the child to draw and/or paint the loved one's picture on the shirt, including birth (if known) and death dates. Expression can be expanded to include representation of activities the two of them did together, things about the person that were special to the child, or ways the loved one has influenced the child.

After discussion about the shirt and the person it represents, give the child a clothes hanger. The hanger sends a symbolic message that sometimes it is okay for the child to "hang up" the memories, but the shirt will always be there for her/him to put on whenever s/he needs or wants to remember.

Example 4: Bug Funeral

Intended for Use in Individual Counseling, but may be adapted for Group Counseling

Ideal for Ages 8 and under

Materials: a small box (preferably with a lid), a bug (real or plastic)

This activity is helpful for small children who may have been left out of the memorial rituals surrounding the aftermath of the loved one's death. Consequently, these children may be frightened and have many questions about death and funerals, on top of their grief. They may have been given confusing answers to their questions by well-

meaning adults around them. The purpose of the bug funeral is to go through an entire funeral ceremony, helping answer children's questions about what happened and alleviating some of the fears and anxieties about death.

Whenever possible, include the child's preferences and allow her/his input into the process. For instance, solicit her/his choice of which music to play during the ceremony, how many pallbearers there should be, etc. Before the ceremony begins, explain that the bug is dead and what that means in language the child can understand. Begin the ceremony by placing the bug in the "coffin" (box). Explain that the bug does not feel anything. Tell the child that sometimes people prefer to have the lid closed on the coffin during the funeral, but sometimes they would rather have it open in order to see the dead person when they say goodbye; ask the child whether s/he would like for the lid to be open or closed, and discuss any aspect of this detail that seems confusing or scary for the child. Continue in this way throughout the ceremony, concluding with the "burial" either outside in the ground or in a plastic tub filled with dirt.

*Alternative suggestion: If the child comes from a culturally different background, talk with her/him about family customs and traditions that s/he may have observed surrounding the death and incorporate these details into the funeral ceremony.

Example 5: Journaling

Intended for Use in Individual or Group Counseling

Ideal for older children, but can be adapted for use with younger children

Materials: a book with blank pages, a notebook, or any kind of paper that can be bound later; pens/pencils of different colors; other kinds of expressive tools, depending on the specific activity

Guided journaling is a continuous process of therapeutic exploration and expression of grief. It is a flexible activity, lending itself well both as a way to facilitate the conversation about the child's individual experience of grief, and as "homework" for the child to do on her/his own.

Examples of journaling activities include:

- Unsent Letters – Write a letter (or series of letters) to the loved one, telling them things that are difficult to say, such as, “What I wish I had said to you,” “What I wish I *hadn’t* said,” or “What it’s like without you.” This is a very rich activity that can easily be tailored to the needs of the individual child.
- Make a collage out of magazine clippings to represent “What My Life Looks Like Since _____ Died.”
- Reflect on the “volcano” of grief – what makes you explode? How can you find “vents” to let off some “steam?”
- The Colors of My Heart – At the bottom of the page, list all the emotions you are feeling and assign them each a color. Then draw a heart that fills the page, and color the heart with each color in proportion to the space it takes up inside you.

Conclusion

Counselors working with bereaved children have the privilege of bearing witness to stories of vulnerability and of possibility. Expressive arts techniques tap into the world of play and creativity so natural to a child. These multimodal activities are methods of externalizing the internal conversation within a grieving child. Counselors embracing the concept of *companioning* partner with a child in re-authoring a grief story in hopes of eliciting empowering narratives for the future through the methodologies of expressive arts. This approach is different from more traditional treatment models in that narrative reconstruction is not a simple recounting of what happened or an identification of a problem or goal. This approach is not moving toward action, solution, or treatment goals but is a witnessing of another’s experience of meaning as it is transformed in the oscillation between loss and restoration. Counselors and bereaved children are partners in the grief reconciliation journey, the counselor acting as the grief gardener and guide along the way.

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