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Early Childhood Journal

Dealing with Trauma in Early Childhood

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In this issue:



“Bereavement in the first five years”

by Amy Moorhouse

Centre Director, Blackfriars Children’s Centre
Chippendale, New South Wales

Food For Thought

Provoking questions for your staff meetings on Trauma in the Early Childhood Setting.



“Time when responding to Trauma”

by Tamara Wall

Hope Early Learning Centre
Frankston, Victoria

Photo-Essay

Developed by Kate Chinner displaying ways students can stay engaged in their learning during the COVID-19 isolation.



Spotlight with an Educator

In each edition we will have a chat with a different EC educator on the topic. In this edition we are talking to Manik Gadre, an EC Educator from NSW.

TLN Early Childhood Course Guide

Each edition we will feature the upcoming live webinars that are offered directly to TLN EC Members





by Amy Moorhouse

Centre Director, Blackfriars Children's Centre - Chippendale, New South Wales

“Bereavement in the first five years”

“A bereaved child has knowledge beyond her years. She knows how fragile the world is and her childhood becomes partly coloured with the sadness of loss.”

(Hemmings, 1995)

Age Matters

Death is not an easy subject at any age. However, with research suggesting that between 4-7% of children have lost a parent by age eight, the issue cannot be avoided.

Below are some of the reactions noted in children at different stages of development, as well as suggestions for how to support bereaved children:

0-6 months

Infants come into the world with complex behaviour systems. One of these systems involves the development of mutual attachment. Bowlby (1953/1972) suggests that a child's development of a loving, intimate and continuous relationship with his or her mother impacts on his whole social and emotional development in later infancy. Infants engage caregivers in protecting them by using instinctive actions such as crying, smiling and vocalising. If the parent dies, the child's source of security disappears and their consistency of care is disrupted. They will often react by showing irritability and erratic eating, sleeping and crying patterns.

6 months-2 years

At this stage of development, children begin to understand object consistency. Infants will demonstrate signs of searching for a lost object, such as looking for a dummy that has fallen from their bed, and show indicators of separation anxiety. The same behaviour often occurs at bereavement. The child has little concept of death itself, but they experience a sense of loss and will often search for the missing person. Other effects noted in children this age include withdrawal, apathy and loss of interest in food, toys and outings.

3-5 years

The death of a parent at this age will cause the child's whole view of the world to alter – it will turn into an unreliable and insecure place, which in turn will leave the child with a decreased sense of self-esteem and confidence. They are likely to cry, cling and show anger at the loss through destructive behaviour, and will struggle to understand the permanence of death. At this age, a child can become easily confused, as their ability to retain information is still developing, so it is likely that they will need repeated explanations about the loss. "They will often believe that death remains reversible and so, for example, may wish to dig up the dead body to see if it is alive again" (Smith, 1999, p20).

Although these reactions are neither exhaustive nor definitive, children under five have a distinct need for support, at the time of death and for a long time afterwards.

How to support a child after bereavement

Adapting Worden's (1996) 'ten needs' of children after the death of a parent or sibling:

1. Adequate information

Provide children with clear explanations of what has happened using age-appropriate language. Using phrases such as 'He's lost' or 'Mummy's gone to sleep' are not helpful because at such a young age, children will become confused and will search for a 'lost' person, or may become scared of going to sleep at night because they fear they will never wake up.

2. Fears and anxieties addressed

Talk through fears and let the children know they are safe. A bereaved child knows that saying 'Of course I won't die' is not true, because they have already learnt that people they love do pass away. Terms such as, 'What happened to Mummy is very sad, but look at Granny – she's 88! I will probably be around for a long time.' will help to calm their fears.

3. Reassurance they are not to blame

Many children assume that they caused the death of their parent because they 'didn't behave well', or were angry with the parent. Developmentally they are still learning the difference between things caused by them, and things completely unrelated so they need repeated messages that the death had nothing to do with them and they are not at fault.



4. Careful listening and watching

The way children behave is as valuable to supporting adults as what they say especially if they are too young to communicate verbally. Children often play out scenarios that have happened in their lives to try and make sense of them – this can be a source of understanding for adults.

5. Validation of individual's feelings

Children need to know that it is ok to feel sad, angry, upset and any other emotion they may feel. They also need to know that they can talk about the death. Even years after the event, children may lash out or become quiet or upset. Keep a record of when the person died and when their birthday was, as these will be difficult anniversaries for the child and should be acknowledged.

6. Help with overwhelming feelings

Children need to be reassured that it is normal to sometimes feel overwhelmed. In a care setting, the child should be offered support and given leniency. Some children regress developmentally, so, for example, a toilet user may start wetting the bed or their clothes – this behaviour is normal and requires understanding and support.



7. Involvement and inclusion

Being involved in the family's grief allows a child to feel less alone. It may be appropriate for them to attend the funeral, or to be invited to contribute something, like choosing a song to be played, so they can feel involved.

8. Continued routine activities

Children need to continue their normal activities. It may be difficult to see children playing and laughing so soon after a loss but it is a normal part of the grieving process and shouldn't be prevented. The child needs familiar activities and people to help them realise that, though life will never be the same, there are still many things that remain constant (Griffiths & Richardson, 1996, p24)

9. Modelled grief behaviours

Like many other behaviours, one way for children to learn about grieving is by seeing it in others. Adults will often feel it is better for a child to be shielded from other people's grieving, but in fact it can help them to make sense of and share their own emotions.

10. Opportunities to remember

One way of helping a child feel close to a deceased parent is to make a memory box. This could be decorated by the child, containing important keepsakes that were special to the parent – photographs, cards, lipstick, aftershave, pieces of clothing. It is a special place to keep memories, and the child can access it whenever they want to and think about their parent. It helps them to feel less alone and gives them knowledge about their parent as they grow.

“When a young child is bereaved of a parent, they can almost be grieving for the rest of their life as they pass through all of their developmental phases. Whilst this will not always be active grief, and will not be as acute as years go on, a parent holds a special place in a child’s life which cannot easily be filled.” (Smith, 1999, p40)

Grief can continue forever. How the child is supported in the wake of their parent's death and for the many years afterwards has an enormous effect on their emotional state and future relationships.

References

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Free Image: [Click here for source](#)

Food For Thought

Thought provoking questions for you to have with your colleagues around trauma in the early childhood setting.



1. What are some reactions that the children may have after experiencing a traumatic event?
2. What behaviours are we seeing in our classrooms?
3. What may be the triggers behind these behaviours?
4. What can we do to ensure these students feel safe in their learning environment?
5. How can I/we help with the children to deal with their reactions to traumatic events?
6. When should we worry about the children's reactions to traumatic events?
7. What are some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in children?
8. Do young people remember traumatic events?
9. How can I get support or help dealing with a child who has experienced trauma?
10. What do we do if we suspect a student is or has experienced trauma?





by Tamara Wall

Hope Early Learning Centre - Frankston, Victoria

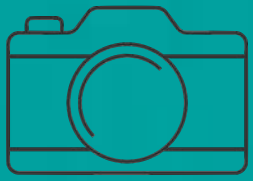
“Time when responding to Trauma”

Caring for children who have been through, or are currently going through a traumatic time, can be difficult not only the child, but the family, workers and other children in the care environment. Like most educators, I have spent time with children who have experienced difficult and distressing events. I wanted to share the simple things that I do to help a child feel safe, secure and supported in their environment.

1. Give the children time, whether they are explaining a story or having an emotional episode. Children need time to process their thoughts and emotions, especially when expressing them to people they trust.
2. We need to find a way to support the children in the actions they make as they need extra reassurance that they are safe and belong. This is complex when children engage in undesirable actions.
3. It is often heart breaking for educators to hear the trauma a child has experienced, but it is essential that the educator keep in good spirits when engaging with the child, as it helps heal their wounds.
4. It is important that educators have systems in place that allow us to debrief after such a conversation.

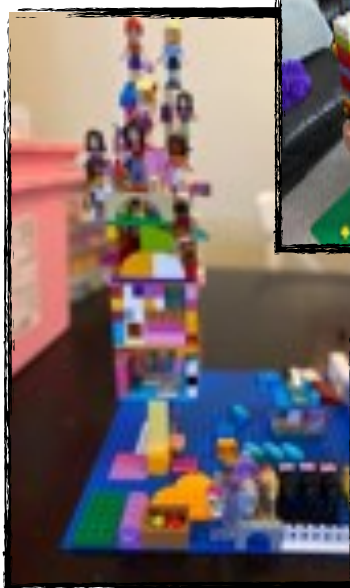
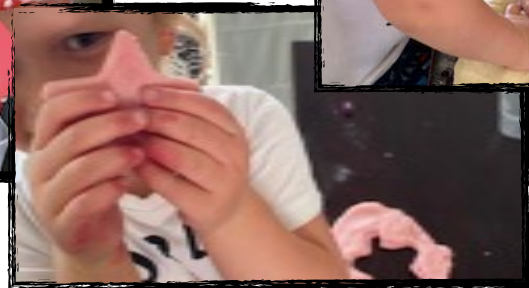
Educators can be one of the biggest supporters in children's lives, and it is a privilege to be part of the journey of a child.





by Kate Chinner

With Corvid-19 forcing many students to stay at home, which can create issues for students fine motor skill development as well as their ability to focus on tasks. Explore some of the ideas Kate is using with her kids and sharing through “Stay home” on Facebook





Spotlight on an Educator



Edition 1:

In this edition we speak to Manik Gadre, a EC Educator from NSW who works with children from low SES and refugee families, specifically assisting students in dealing with challenges and traumas they have faced in their lives.



[Click here for a transcript of this podcast.](#)

This podcast is also available for streaming on the following platforms:



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ETLN2004: Maths: seeing the maths built into preschool equipment

6.30pm Wednesday 29th April 2020

ETLN2021: Risky Play in ECEC

8.00pm Wednesday 29th April 2020

ETLN2005: Embedding Aboriginal perspectives - drawing on NAIDOC 2020 themes

5.00pm Wednesday 13th May 2020

ETLN2035: Intentionality in interactions with children

6.30pm Wednesday 13th May 2020

ETLN2035: Intentionality in interactions with children

8.00pm Wednesday 13th May 2020



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