



HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE STRESS OF THE HOLIDAYS

For a child placed in kinship care the holidays can bring up feelings of loss, separation, and grief. As a culture we create a “hallmark” image of the holiday season, and this can lead to extra stress for a child dealing with the absence or loss of biological parents. To help alleviate some of this stress in children living in kinship care here are some helpful tips for the holiday season.

Recognize that what the child is feeling is normal for the situation. Let the child know that you understand and that it is okay to feel the way he/she does, and help them find appropriate expressions for their feelings.

Let the child talk about how they feel

on their own terms, be willing to listen and be supportive but do not push the child to talk.

Let go of the idea that the holidays have to be held in an unchanging traditional way. Maybe the entire family does not have to get together or maybe it’s best to break up seeing everyone into little gatherings. Figure out what works best for your situation and adapt your holiday experience to that. Make a new holiday tradition.

Talk about how holidays don’t have to be “perfect”. If financial times are hard talk openly with them about expectations for the holiday. We picture holidays as being filled with pre-

sents but that doesn’t need to be true for it to be a special time of year. And if you need financial or gift help for the holidays start now. Call your local “211” or Salvation Army to find out where to get assistance.

Identify with them, let them know if you feel similar to the way they do. Or discuss a holiday that wasn’t so happy for you as well, perhaps your first holiday after a loved one passed away. This allows the child to feel like they aren’t so isolated in their grief and may allow them to open up to you.

Keep them active, play dates, sports, holiday plays or activities, volunteering. Be careful

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to not overdo it, but within reason, activities can help keep sad thoughts at bay and help children through the season.

Lastly, reach out for help. If the child in your care has a case-worker, discuss how to handle the holidays with them. If the child is having a particularly hard time emotionally handling the extra stress of the season seek counseling for them.



HOLIDAY STRESS REDUCING TIPS CAREGIVERS

We touched on some stress reducing tips for children living in kinship care. Now we are going to share some tips to help caregivers relax and practice a little self-care. We have a tendency to overstress ourselves around the holiday season and this can especially be the case when you are unexpectedly raising a child. So it is important to remember to take a step back from time to time to ensure that you do not end up with holiday burnout. To help avoid the dreaded holiday overkill here are some stress reducing tips.

Do not be afraid to say no. There is a lot going on around the holidays, sometimes we feel obligated to try and make every little gathering and holiday invite. But it's important to re-

member that there is a point where it can be too much. Do not be afraid to politely turn down an invitation, people generally understand that it is a busy time of year.

Plan ahead, planning shopping trips, baking time, gatherings and activities ahead of time limits the added stress of spur of the moment activities. It allows you to look at everything that you have going on so you can plan accordingly and avoid that last minute crunch.

Take 15 minutes of "me time" every day. Whenever you get a chance just take a few moments for some peace and quiet. Find what calms you, whether it is music or going for a walk. Those couple of minutes of respite can give you the energy

and focus to make it through the rest of the day.

Stick to a budget. Holiday spending can sometimes get away from us leading to increased financial stress. To avoid this be sure to plan a holiday spending budget to ensure that you do not go overboard on those gift lists.

Avoid the holiday overindulgence. Make sure to continue healthy habits during the holiday season. The mixture of unhealthy food followed by the guilt of overdoing it can increase our internal stress levels. So make sure to be careful of that second plate of dessert.

If your child has a foster care or child protective services caseworker, talk to them about

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STRESS REDUCING TIPS CONTINUED

the child's interaction with their biological parent during the holidays. They may have certain restrictions or expectations that will have to be met.

If your child does not have a caseworker, plan ahead for what you think is best for your child regarding seeing their biological

parent. Set boundaries that are in the child's best interest. Also try to be prepared for surprises with biological parents and how you will handle those. Focus your efforts on what is best for the child and this will help reduce your stress and/or guilt

Lastly remember to keep everything in perspective. Try to think about that stressful holiday situation in the grand scheme of things and avoid letting little things get to you. Stay calm and take your time to enjoy the holiday season.



DEALING WITH LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS By Julie Farman, LMSW

As we approach the holiday season, the expectation is that it's a time to be with family and celebrate with our families. But many families are facing loss during this time which doesn't make it feel like a time to celebrate or enjoy the holidays. For kinship families the loss experienced may be an actual death of the biological parent or it may be what is called ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is felt when the person is still living but they are absent from the griever's life. These individuals are here but not really here.

Although usually not reasonable or realistic, guilt and shame are strong feelings that are felt by both the children and the kinship caregiver. These can occur because of thoughts related to what could have been done or should have been done. Usually these are thoughts regarding wishing something bad would happen to the individual or "if only" thoughts. If only I had done this differently. If only I had been there. These feelings of guilt and shame may certainly arise during the holidays as family situations are now different than what they were in the past. All reassurances to children and adults that



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they are not at fault is important, even if nobody has openly expressed these feelings.

For many who are experiencing loss during the holidays

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DEALING WITH LOSS CONTINUED

recognizing feelings and thoughts related to the loss is critical. For caregivers, recognizing what your own personal issues are related to the loss is crucial to help the children you are caring for deal with their feelings. Have you addressed all the feelings you are having – anger, sadness, fear or disappointments? Have you mourned the loss of hopes and dreams you had or the loss of what will never be?

Grief and mourning are such individual responses and reactions that it is difficult to know what to do or expect for the persons we love and care for. Many times the best thing to do is just be there for them. Our presence alone and the knowledge that we are there for them can be a tremendous help. Holding their hand or giving them a hug can provide more than we may think. Maybe we just need to listen to them share their thoughts and feelings, even those thoughts and feelings that may be difficult to express or for us to hear.

As we prepare for the holidays, it's important for all to be involved in planning how it will look. Past rituals may need to be changed, so what ideas do people in the family have about doing that? Caregivers may want to ask the child/children what they think the holiday(s) will look like for them this year. Depending on the nature of the loss

for the child, they may feel that the caregiver is able to provide a more stable holiday celebration for them than they have had in the past. That's why it is helpful to ask the child – our perceptions and expectations may be quite different than the child's.

Some families may want to plan a remembrance for the person who is absent. This could be a time to tell stories, laughing about a favorite memory or light a special candle. It may also be a time when photos of past holiday celebrations are looked at again. Children can also do a "before and after" drawing where they can express what the holiday looked like and what they think it will look like now. Children can draw two pictures – one of what it was like in their family when the parent was there and another of what it might be like without the parent. Children can also help make the absent parents favorite food for any holiday celebrations.

Writing letters to the individual is also helpful. Both children and caregivers can do this. The letters may include things they want to let them know about – accomplishments or events. Maybe they'll want to write questions they want to ask or wished they could have. Or maybe they just want to say how much they are missed. It's important to let everyone know that while it may not be possible to

actually give the person the letter, it can be helpful to just write the words down. All may share what they wrote or individuals may want their privacy and not wish to share which is to be respected.

Holiday celebrations may be difficult for many this year so it's important to be prepared for all the difficult feelings that may come along. Openly sharing with family members can help.

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INEXPENSIVE AND HANDMADE GIFT IDEAS FOR CHILDREN.

Money is tight but you still want to get a great gift for your child. Here are some helpful links to get ideas for handmade and inexpensive gifts for children and maybe someone else you know. Here are just a few examples: homemade book marks and play dough, a treasure hunt to find their gift, fun toys from dollar stores, a coloring book and crayons, decks of cards and other card games (uno), or a picture frame with a family picture or a picture of you and the child.

<http://www.craftynest.com/2010/09/inexpensive-handmade-holiday-gift-ideas-part-6/>

<http://www.craftynest.com/2010/12/stocking-stuffer-ideas-for-kids/>

<http://voices.yahoo.com/5-cheap-easy-holiday-gift-ideas-kids-2178044.html?cat=46>



HOLIDAY IDEAS TO KEEP KIDS ACTIVE

Keeping the child in your care active and entertained can be difficult any time of year. The holiday season brings the added challenge of more down time due to school breaks and holiday vacations. Here are some great ideas to help you keep your child active and engaged.

Arts and Crafts. Make snowflakes out of paper or coffee filters. Make holiday drawings, string popcorn together. Try searching online for free holiday coloring books or craft projects.

Volunteer. Volunteering can be a great experience for a kid; it will help them develop important life

skills such as empathy and work ethic. Some good areas to look for volunteer opportunities during the holidays are nursing homes, hospitals, shelters and churches.

Bake and cook, share family recipes. Spending time baking together can be a fun and active experience. It can also help grow the personal relationship you may have with the child in your care. Who knows you might discover they have a great culinary touch.

Spend time outdoors. Build a snow fort or a snowman; make leaf piles to play in. Depending on Mother Nature's temperament

at the time there can many kinds of fun filled outdoors activities to burn up some of that childish energy.

Look into holiday break or after school programs and activities at local YMCA's or other youth organizations in your area. They may run holiday programing that can keep kids active and allow you a moment or two for yourself. Ask at your child's school if they know of anything.

HOLIDAY SAFETY TIPS

It is important to remember that the holidays can bring added dangers and hazards to a child's environment. Be sure to keep a keen eye for these potential dangers.

Be on the lookout for choke hazards. Hard candy, ornaments, decorations and toy parts could all be potential choke hazards for small children.

Be sure to look out for poisons in the home. Several common holiday plants such as mistletoe and poinsettias can be hazardous if ingested. Be sure to keep these out of the reach of small children. Another potential safety issue around the holidays can be food safety. In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season it can be easy to leave food sitting out too long during holiday dinner times. Ensure that all

foods are kept at proper temperatures once cooked, either chilled at 40 degrees or lower or warmed to 140 degrees or higher, this helps prevent the growth of harmful bacteria.

Also remember to monitor a child with food allergies closely, with all the parties and snacks you will want to make sure they are not eating anything that will put them at risk.

Christmas trees can be the beautiful center piece to a holiday environment but be sure not to overload the tree with lights. Ensure to follow outlet limitation instructions to ensure your beautiful tree does not become a fire hazard. Menorahs can also be the center piece of your holiday activities but make sure to keep them out of the reach of small

children and away from flammables.

The holiday season is also the season for dropping temperatures. Make sure that kids are properly bundled up when outside. Hats, gloves, and winter jackets help prevent hypothermia and frostbite. If your family is in need of winter supplies call "2-1-1" to be connected to local service providers that can help, or call our offices and we will try to locate appropriate local resources.



CHILDRENS RESPONSE TO GRIEF

Grief can manifest in different ways for every age group. Young children will respond to a loss of a loved one very differently than an adolescent. Understanding these responses will help caregivers figure out ways to help the child cope with the loss. Even though these responses are talking specifically about death of a loved one, ambiguous loss may have these responses as well.

Birth to Two years:

Losing an important caregiver at this age can impact the infant's well-being and sense of security. At this age routine is very important and they are very sensitive to any disruption or change in their environment. The child may exhibit behaviors such as; excessive crying, writhing, rocking, biting and other anxiety related behaviors. Establishing a routine as soon as possible will help limit these behaviors.

Two years to Five years:

Children in this age group believe that death is a temporary state. They believe it is something like sleeping or being away on a trip. The child may also have a belief that it is their fault the loved one is no longer around. The child may experience sadness, anxiety, insecurity, irritability and/or anger. Some behaviors that may be expressed are regressive behaviors, such as bedwetting or excessive clinging. Some children may even act as if nothing has happened.

Six years to Nine years:

Children in this age group can understand what death is and the finality of it. They may develop fears of their own death or death of another loved one. They may experience feelings of insecurity and a reluctance to be separated from caregivers. Some behaviors that may be exhibited are; hyperactivity, aggression, disruptive behaviors, withdrawal, sadness and regressive behaviors. Some children may have nightmares and/or difficulty sleeping through the night.

Nine years to Twelve years:

At this age children understand that death is final and happens to everyone. This may cause a fear of death happening to them. They also have a great need to control their emotions; however, they do not control them very well. Also, because friends are very important at this age they may have feelings such as; feeling socially isolated, lonely, confused, scared, guilty and self-conscious.

Adolescents (Thirteen years to Nineteen years):

Teenagers may feel the need to be "strong" and in control of their emotions. Or they may be unable to express their emotions with others. They may numb their emotions by engaging in risky behaviors, such as; reckless driving, alcohol and drug use, sexual promiscuity and defiance of authority. Like adults, adolescents will ex-

perience strong feelings of sadness, loneliness, confusion, fear, guilt and anxiety over the loss of the loved one. Teenagers may become more easily distracted, experience sleeping and eating disturbances, perform better or worse in school, and display strong emotional mood changes.

Children and adolescents cope better with loss when family members:

- Communicate their emotions and their needs concerning the death
- Understand and respect the individuality of each member's grieving experience
- Recognize and cope with their own grief while assisting their children
- Reassure their children that despite the sadness of losing a family member, they will continue to be cared for and they will remain a family unit.

Understanding the stages of grief a child goes through is beneficial in helping that child cope with their current situation and any future situation that involves loss. There are five stages of grief and everyone goes through them at their own pace and order. These include; *Shock/Denial*

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CHILDRENS RESPONSE TO GRIEF CONTINUED

(believing the lost loved one will return), *Anger* (at the lost loved one or anyone else that may be involved; social worker, family members, etc...), *Bargaining* (promising or praying that they will do everything they are told if the lost loved one will return), *Despair/Depression* (thinking they are alone, “why did this happen to me?”, “who will take care of me now?”, etc...), *Acceptance/Understanding/Resolution* (thinking “this is not my fault, I will be okay”). It is a difficult thing to know how to parent a child who is going through the stages of grief, here are seven tips that might be helpful;

-*Offer healthy distractions*- getting involved in sports, dance, or clubs

-*Work on journals*- For older children have them write down any thoughts or feelings they may be having. For younger children have them draw their

thoughts or feelings.

-*Listen when the child does talk*- help the child understand what has happened by listening carefully to what they are saying. Don't pass judgment on what the child has shared with you.

-*Create a place for special memories*- create a box or quilt that has memories of the lost loved one so the child has something to look at and remember them by.

-*Find a Grief Group*- find a support group that may offer grief counseling or other support for children.

-*Offer Lots of Support*- be there for the child and offer as much support as you can so the child knows that you are a safe person to turn to.

-*Find a Good Therapist*- a child may be in need of therapy, especially if behaviors the child is exhibiting may be close to de-

pression.

Below are a few links that may be helpful in managing your child's grief. Helpstarthere.org is a very helpful website with lots of information about many different topics.

Understanding adolescents' and childrens' responses to loss and other helpful tips

<http://www.helpstarthere.org/mind-spirit/grief-and-loss/understanding-adolescents-and-childrens-responses-to-the-loss.html>

The stages of grief and loss described.

<http://adoption.about.com/od/parenting/a/griefandchild.htm>

Ways to help a Foster or Adopted child's grieving

<http://adoption.about.com/od/parenting/a/helpgrieve.htm>





AMBIGUOUS LOSS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Ambiguous loss is very similar to the feeling of grief that comes from the death of a loved one. However, with ambiguous loss, the loss of the loved one is not as final and there is more confusion and frustration that is involved. Children and caregivers feelings of ambiguous loss may be heightened during the holidays. Being able to recognize and understand these feelings will help you and your child cope, when you are unable to see or speak to the missing loved one(s). Research has found that ambiguous loss looks very similar for many people and can include such things as;

- Anger or an inability to move on
- Confusion and uncertainty about the situation
- An inability to cope

- Helplessness that may lead to anxiety, depression, and relationship conflicts
- Denial of the situation
- Belief that the missing person will return and it will be as it was
- Anger that the missing person is being excluded
- Confusion about who the real parental figure is.
- Guilt
- Refusal to talk about the situation or the missing person.

Children and caregivers may be experiencing any number of the above “symptoms.” Discussing emotions with the child, in an age appropriate manner, may help the child to understand their own emotions. Feelings of ambiguous loss are very normal to

have, especially during the holidays when family comes together and certain members may be missing. Understanding that these feelings are normal will help with the coping process and may make the holidays a little easier.

For more information please ask your local libraries for assistance in finding the full article:

Robert E. Lee & Jason B. Whiting (2007) Foster Children's Expressions of Ambiguous Loss, *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 35:5, 417-428, DOI:

10.1080/01926180601057499



Kinship Care Resource Center

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The Kinship Care Resource Center is a non-profit statewide organization through the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. The mission of the Kinship Care Resource Center is to support Michigan's kinship families by utilizing research to provide education and outreach to communities and agencies supporting kinship families and offer information, referral case advocacy services to relatives raising relative children.

If you would like additional information about the MSU Kinship Care Resource Center, call (800) 535-1218 or e-mail us at kinship@msu.edu

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