

Dealing with Issues of Grief and Mourning

Most agencies today are simply not prepared to help a child attend a funeral, visit a grave or speak openly about their sadness. Several years ago, Los Angeles County introduced a program that has allowed several hundred children to experience some of the grief and mourning rituals associated with the loss of a loved one. The Los Angeles County program has had an impact on multiple agencies and professions. For example, an increasing number of attorneys who represent children in LA County Civil Court now attend funerals with the children for whom they advocate. This has resulted in courts being more responsive by making orders to allow children the opportunity to be involved in some of these rituals.

It is probably true that almost all children in foster care do not attend funerals. When a child who has suffered the loss of a sibling enters the child welfare system, it takes a few weeks to get services going. By this time, the funeral is already over. Professionals working with the child avoid the child's necessary questions about funerals, caskets, and memorabilia. Often children in foster care find themselves in a system of agencies where no one even tells them if someone close to them has died.

Some child protective services, education and health professionals understand the need to listen to a child talk about such things as a death, but more commonly professionals working with children patronize them or reassure them that everything is okay when it's not. These attitudes disallow the rage and despair that children feel with such a loss. The situation is particularly problematic with preschool children, when foster parents or services professionals attempt to protect children by distracting them from the awful truth. This only makes matters worse, rather than making a child's pain disappear.

It is often difficult to find someone to work with the child who is sensitive to grief and mourning issues and who understands how to deal with a child who is experiencing a loss. Trained therapists have their limitations, as most of their work is around natural deaths. Programs designed to serve children, such as Hospice, deal with natural deaths, not with sudden violent deaths.

The following two papers deal with Grief and Mourning. One is for those who have lost a loved one, and one is for the child death review team member who must come in contact with the death of a child. These may help to shed some light on this important and difficult subject.