Lesson Two: Loss and the Adopted Child

Loss is a part of the adoption experience for everyone in the adoption circle but the losses experienced by the child are most often overlooked. Children must be allowed to grieve these losses throughout their lives.

There are many different theories about how people grieve. You may be most familiar with the five stages of grief as identified by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance. While children experience loss differently, especially adoption loss, it is useful to explore the stages of grief.

A loss, caused by the death or separation from a loved one, usually begins a process of grieving that begins with shock or denial. The individual finds he is unable to acknowledge the loss, and may show no outward signs of grief at all.

He then moves to the bargaining stage, where he begins to think about the “fairness” of the loss, and perhaps feels guilt for being the survivor. He tries to negotiate the loss away, and believes that by changing his behavior he can make things better.

Guilt is transformed into anger, both at the loved one for leaving, and at those who have survived (including himself.)

Anger is followed by depression, when the feelings turn inward, and the individual allows himself to feel sad over his loss.

In the end, there comes acceptance, when the individual can acknowledge the loss without being overly affected by it. He understands the pain of the loss, but can cope with it.

The stages of grief that Kubler-Ross defined show us that grief is not just a single emotion, but a series of emotions that affect behavior, and that individuals experience grief in different ways at different times. It is the concept of a series of emotions that make the stages of grief theory relevant to adoption.

But these stages were meant to define how an individual grieves for a death. Adoption loss is not like other types of loss, particularly loss due to death. Death involves a single, often sudden and unexpected triggering event, which begins a process of grieving. Adoption seldom involves a single, identifiable moment of loss, and therefore is less likely to result in clearly identifiable stages of grief.

In addition to adoption seldom being a single event, adoption loss and the grief that results are different from loss due to death for several other reasons. First, adoption loss may not be permanent. The birth parents may be absent, but often they are still alive. There is the possibility of reconnection. This is especially true in the case of a closed adoption that is opened, and in some kinship or foster care adoptions.

Next, adoption loss is also often realized after-the-fact. The adopted child may become aware of the losses related to adoption long after the adoption itself is finalized. That awareness grows and changes over time, so that at each developmental stage the adopted child reconsiders what has been lost.
Finally, adoption loss is unrecognized. Society often does not acknowledge that there is a relationship between an adopted child and a birth parent, so there is a limited understanding of the child’s need to grieve the loss of that relationship. With no recognized relationship, there are no formal “grieving rituals”, no “memorial services” and no “condolence cards”.

Adoption seldom involves a single, identifiable moment of loss. Instead, an adopted child experiences many losses. Take a moment to again consider the losses your child has experienced, or may experience. Enter them in your Notebook now by clicking the “Edit Child’s Losses” icon. In the next section of this lesson, we will begin to consider how children respond to their losses.

There are many factors that affect a child’s response to adoption loss. Parents need to be aware of these various factors when considering how their child is coping with loss.

One of the most important factors to consider is the child’s stage of development as this affects his ability to understand the loss. As the child grows older, his ability to understand the nature and cause of loss changes. We will explain these stages in more detail in the next section of the course.

The next thing to consider is the age of the child at the time the loss occurred and the nature of the loss. A child adopted at birth with no conscious memory of his birth parents will grieve differently from a child who enters placement with memories of his birth family and is subsequently adopted at the age of eight. Consider also the degree of attachment your child may have had with previous caregivers and the numbers of separations and losses that he may have experienced. Children who have experienced many previous losses may show few signs of obvious distress when moved to a new home. They have learned to cope with repeated losses by not allowing themselves to feel sadness. This is especially true for children in the child welfare system who have many foster placements. It may also be true for children adopted internationally who have experienced repeated losses of devoted caregivers at their orphanage.

Your child’s temperament is another important factor in how your child responds to loss, and the most important indicator of how you will respond to his grief. You may already have some idea of how he deals with difficult and challenging situations, and how you respond. Your best strategy for helping your child deal with adoption losses is to be sensitive to the cues he is sending, and intervene when you feel it is appropriate.

Take a moment to think about your child’s loss history and think about how your child has responded, or may respond, to her adoption-related losses. Consider factors such as your child’s age, history, and temperament. Enter them into your Notebook now by clicking the “Edit Child’s Responses” icon.

Adoption loss will be felt differently by different children. Parents should not be overly concerned if their children are not showing any signs of grief, and should not feel the need to push them to confront issues before they are ready. As you have seen, there are many factors that may affect how and when a child grieves. You need to be sensitive to your child and aware of the losses in his past, so that you can help him grieve these losses over time. In the next section we will examine how grief manifests itself at different stages in a child’s life, and what interventions are appropriate at each stage.

Before going on to Lesson Three, take a moment to enter your thoughts and ideas in your Notebook.