

**Ambiguous Loss and its Effects on Children:
Implications and Interventions for School Counselors**

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Abstract

School counselors are regularly tasked with managing student's emotions and behaviors that impede school performance. This daunting assignment can be overwhelming for school professionals. With the many diagnoses that may provide an explanation for dysfunctional behavior amongst students, the possibility of grief is frequently overlooked. The purpose of this article is to define and describe the concept of grief and how it may explain challenging behaviors with students. Additionally, this definition will be expanded by introducing the definition of ambiguous grief. Examples of ambiguous grief scenarios will be provided, as well as implications for school counselors.

Key Terms: ambiguous loss, bereavement, grief, loss, school counseling

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“My older sister died before I was born. I miss her a lot, but my parents don’t believe me because they said I didn’t even know her,” as told to primary author by a 4th grade female (personal communication, 2006). “My dad is in jail. I know when he gets out in a few weeks, he’s gonna take me to Chuck E. Cheese for my birthday,” as told to primary author by a 1st grade male (personal communication, 2009). “I haven’t seen my dad in about 6 years. He lives in South Texas with his new family,” as told to primary author by a 5th grade male (personal communication, 2008).

The statements above are just a few examples of the many statements school counselors may hear from children about missing a person in their lives, due to death, divorce, incarceration, or other types of separation. This paper will define loss and children’s reactions to loss, as well as, examine, define and provide examples of ambiguous loss. Additionally, implications for counselors will be explored, as well as, interventions that can be utilized for children experiencing ambiguous loss.

Children and Loss

Children experience loss every day. Frequently, the term loss is equated with a death loss. However, children undergo many different types of loss that encourage the experience of grief. In fact, many significant losses have little to do with biological or physiological death (Corr, 2010). Examples of ambiguous loss may include, but not be limited to, separation or divorce, a pet loss, a friend’s move to a distant location, or the destruction of a favorite toy. Grief is a natural reaction to loss (Corr; The Dougy Center, 2004). In addition to a range of emotions, children experience physical responses to a

loss, such as exhaustion, insomnia, headaches, stomachaches, distractibility, and regressive behaviors, which may lead to academic and school difficulties (The Dougy Center; McCown & Davies, 2001; Opalewski, 2008).

Just like adults, children process grief in unique ways. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Many times adults will see a grieving child playing or having fun, and believe that the child has not been affected by the loss. For example, Opalewski (2008) shares an experience with a five year old child whose grandfather died. The child cried for a bit at the funeral home, then happily shared that he was going to McDonald's for a Happy Meal hours after the funeral visitation. Before the family left for McDonald's, the little boy cried again for his grandfather.

When a child or family experiences any loss, it can be even more difficult to work through. Many adults would misinterpret the reaction of the child as a lack of understanding or caring. This interpretation would be inaccurate. Bereaved children integrate grief with everyday tasks such as attending school, playing, and extra-curricular activities. Therefore, to an adult it may appear that the child has moved beyond the loss when in fact the child is still grieving (Corr, 2010).

When experiencing a death loss, "grief work is essential in order for individuals to become actively engaged in their own life once again" (Schwab, 1997, p. 259). Grief work includes four tasks for bereaved children to work through: acceptance of the loss; experiencing pain and emotion; adjustment to life without the loved one; and, finding ways to memorialize the person in daily life (Corr, 2010; Schwab; Thompson & Henderson, 2011). In order for these tasks to be accomplished, the bereaved child will need adequate information, reassurance, routine, validation, active listening, and adult

models to demonstrate grief and mourning behaviors constructively and appropriately (Corr).

Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss can be defined as a loss that may not be recognized. According to Betz and Thorngren (2006), ambiguous loss refers to the “physical or psychological experiences of families that are not as concrete or identifiable as traditional losses such as death” (p. 359). This loss can be tangible, such as a person or object; or intangible, such as a relationship, experience, or event. Ambiguous loss may cause physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional problems which include: sleep loss, headaches, fatigue, avoidance, anxiety, pre-occupation with the loss, depression, anger, over activity, crying, fear, and apathy (Betz & Thorngren).

When experiencing an ambiguous loss, uncertainty and unknown details may cause the family to feel confused, conflicted, or out of control. These are all typical and normal emotions that accompany grief. The ambiguous loss cycle is never ending; and there is rarely closure, making the process feel even longer (Betz & Thorngren, 2006).

There are two types of ambiguous loss; one is related to the physical absence of a person while that individual remains psychologically present. Examples may include a parent being incarcerated, adoption, a missing family member, an occurring separation, or divorce (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Boss, 2002). The second type of ambiguous loss refers to a physically present person who is psychologically absent. Examples of this type of loss may include a chronically ill or alcoholic parent, a parent who works long hours or travels for business, or a parent who is in the throes of grief (Betz & Thorngren; Schwab, 1997).

Ambiguous loss can also be a loss that is considered to be taboo or socially unacceptable, such as a death from suicide, a break-up of a gay or lesbian couple, or a miscarriage (Allen, 2007; Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Markell & Hoover, 2010). This type of loss is also identified as disenfranchised grief. Markell and Hoover (2010) provide depth to the definition by stating “the relationship is not recognized, the loss is not recognized, or the griever is not perceived as one with permission to grieve” (p. 406). Bereaved children experiencing ambiguous loss often fit into one of these categories. Since the grieving person may not receive social support or recognition, he or she may believe that grief is unjustified, and may attempt to move on without grieving (Betz & Thorngren).

Children frequently experience ambiguous loss that may not be actively recognized by adults. School counselors regularly witness examples of this: a kindergartener’s beloved dog runs away; a fourth grader’s best friend suddenly moves to a different school; a first grader’s dad is arrested and jailed; or, a second grader’s mom suffers a miscarriage over the weekend. Often, school counselors learn this information from the child, not from the parents or guardians. In many of these situations, the child is left confused, scared, worried, sad, or any combination of emotions with little or no recognition or support from family or teachers. Children experiencing an ambiguous loss may feel unsure of their future, may not be able to conceptualize the loss, or may feel isolated and alone (Abrams, 2001; Boss, 2002). These complex emotions may hinder or even block the child’s ability to move through the tasks of grief work previously discussed. Consequently, difficulties can occur later in life.

Experiences of Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss can occur in many situations in a child's life. A few experiences will be addressed in this section, such as experiences of sibling loss, missing or absentee parents, and incarcerated parents.

Sibling Loss

A child who loses a sibling grieves the loss of the systemic role in the family, a loss of a relationship, and the fear of a possible loss of a parent or parents (Schwab, 1997). According to Schwab, when a sibling dies, the surviving child must continue to deal with "their own grief and changes in their environment over which they have little control" (p. 259). When familial communication is lacking in a sibling loss, the remaining child will be left to his or her imagination. Depending on the developmental stage of the child, he or she may experience self-blame, confusion, or fear (Schwab).

Parents who experience a miscarriage, neonatal death, or stillbirth may believe that the "children do not know the death of an unborn child has occurred, or that they are not affected by the death of a child with whom they had little or no contact" (Schwab, 1997, p. 259). While families maintain this fantasy in hopes that the child may be spared pain or confusion, most children are aware of the loss. When children are left to draw their own conclusions, magical thinking may occur (Subbotsky, 2010). As a result, children may blame themselves for a sibling's death simply because he or she hoped the baby would not be born, or that it would simply "go away", or the child may blame the parents for murdering the baby, which can lead to anger, fear, and mistrust of their parents (Schwab, 2007).

Ambiguous Loss and the Missing

Another pertinent grief experience would be that of a missing or absent family member. In this type of loss, the family member is physically absent but psychologically present. Children frequently encounter temporary and permanent examples of such situations. This type of ambiguous loss is experienced by children whose family members are serving overseas, a sibling who runs away, or parents who separate or divorce and move away (Boss, 2002).

In the case of a child who loses a parent due to divorce or absenteeism, though knowing the parent is out there somewhere, he or she may conclude that the parent no longer cares. Undoubtedly, this may affect self-esteem and future relationships (Neuman, 1998). This type of loss leads to confusion, guilt, blame and other difficult emotions, as well as self-destructive behaviors (Allen, 2007; Neuman, 1998; Schwab, 1997). When children are expected to adjust to the remaining parent's new way of life, they may feel as if they are not justified in grieving the loss of the parent, or the change in family dynamics (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). Though feelings of loyalty may exist for both parents, the child may experience feelings of guilt when compelled to choose one parent over the other, particularly in cases of partner abuse. Regardless of the trauma caused to the child and family, the child may grieve the loss of the relationship, the loss of the person in the home, or the loss of the emotional connection with the person (Aymer, 2010).

The reality of a missing family member can complicate the process of grieving. If there is no physical presence of a body, then there is no confirmation that brings the reality of the loss to the forefront (Boss, 2002). This was exemplified in the bombings of

the World Trade Center in 2001. So many families were unable to receive confirmation of the death of their respective loved ones. This is a confounding variable for any individual experiencing a loss including children.

The first task for grieving children is acceptance of the reality of the loss. Lack of evidence or proof can cause the child or family to need more time for resolution (Boss, 2002). This type of loss can have lingering effects over generations. Families and children expected to keep silent about the circumstances of the missing person, for example, those who have soldiers missing in action from the Vietnam War era, continue to be affected even today (Boss; Tubbs & Boss, 2000). Children who live in a world of secrecy and silence about their missing loved ones can become confused and overwhelmed, and later may experience anxiety and depression (Boss).

Ambiguous Loss Due to Incarceration

Bockneck, Sanderson and Britner (2009) have suggested that children with incarcerated parents exhibit a variety of troubling behaviors, feelings of guilt and rage, and alienation from peers due to social stigma. Many of these children exhibit symptoms consistent with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Bockneck et al. concluded that children with incarcerated parents demonstrate behaviors akin to those children who have been affected by divorce, death, and removal by child welfare agencies. Children with imprisoned parents can experience this loss as an ambiguous one due to familial secrecy. Additionally, an imprisoned parent may encourage feelings of disconnection for children. This can limit the desire or ability to build social relationships. This can often result in feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Implications for School Counselors

Counselors responsible for intervention and support must be aware of the different forms of ambiguous loss. When children exhibit difficulties at school, whether socially or academically, there may be reasons which stem from an ambiguous loss. Incidentally, ambiguous loss may not be reported to school counselors due to the fact that the family of origin is unaware, does not recognize the signs of grief, or due to familial secrecy and loyalty (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Bockneck et al., 2009; Boss, 2002). It is the task of the school counselor to gain insight about the child's exhibited behaviors, as well as, to educate parents about the fact that behaviors can stem from losses that may not appear relevant or important (Schwab, 1997).

A case example involves a student who is struggling behaviorally and emotionally at school after a holiday break. In meeting with the school counselor, the mother disclosed that the child's behavior started to change after his older brother moved out of the house. The child's mother failed to recognize that to her child, the older brother moving out was an ambiguous loss. Once his feelings were validated, his behavior improved. This is a reasonably common example. Parents may be unaware of the impact of change in a child's life. Parents may underestimate the impact of the loss when a pet runs away, mistakenly believe that their child is not affected by a divorce because the child was a toddler when the divorce occurred, or an older sibling may leave for college or join the military. Such examples provide rich opportunity to educate parents on their respective child's ambiguous loss. When observing troubling behavior, school counselors may gain valuable insight by addressing questions about recent or past losses with students or family. Consequently, if a loss is present, the impact of the

loss may be accurately assessed. At the very least, if no loss is present, one more possibility for the behavior may be dismissed (Schwab, 1997).

It is important for school counselors to be aware that children will experience losses that we are not privy to knowing. The child will not disclose a loss without a significant relationship with a caring adult. In the school setting, this can be a counselor, a teacher, a mentor, or another staff member. Counselors are responsible for educating fellow school personnel to recognize a loss. Furthermore, school personnel must be encouraged to build meaningful relationships with students, as well as validate a loss when a child feels comfortable enough to share. A child who shares with a teacher about a parent in jail, an upcoming divorce, or sadness over a missing a pet, is sharing a little bit of their life, their confidence, and their trust. School counselors, as well as other school personnel, can be integral in understanding, listening, normalizing and validating children's stories of loss (Schwab, 1997).

Counselors must become comfortable in addressing loss. They must recognize their own feelings and issues related to loss. They must also have the ability to separate their feelings and experiences from those of the student. If a counselor has experienced a loss and has not processed the grief, the counselor will be ineffective and unable to help the child heal. Counselors also must be aware of feelings and thoughts toward students who experience a loss that carries social stigma. For example, if a school counselor maintains personal objections to a gay or lesbian lifestyle, and a high school student shares the loss of a parent who was in a gay or lesbian relationship, the counselor must be able to separate personal feelings from the scenario and recognize it as a loss for the child (Allen, 2007).

For children and families to cope with ambiguous loss, it is essential that they learn to accept and confront their respective situation (Abrams, 2001). Labeling ambiguous loss lowers the possibility of individual self-blame and guilt. This permits the family to move in a direction of healing, meaning making, and memorializing the missing person, all of which are important tasks of grief (Boss, 2002). School counselors may provide a safe place for a child or family to share stories, reminisce about a lost loved one, help each family member understand others' perceptions, and support the restructuring amidst the change in the family system. By demonstrating patience, respect, and active, careful listening with grieving families and children, the family is more likely to work through the tasks of grief. Conversely, if counselors attempt to pressure the family or child for an accelerated closure, they will likely be met with resistance (Boss).

All losses are difficult and challenging for children. School counselors must recognize that in many cases of ambiguous loss, there may never be closure. As with all loss, one that is ambiguous is undoubtedly difficult to endure. It is the role of school counselors and mental health professionals to meet children and families where they are, support them with patience, compassion, acceptance, and warmth, and be with them as they make their journey through grief (Boss, 2002; The Dougy Center, 2004).

Interventions

Once ambiguous loss has been identified, school counselors assist families in the process of change by facilitating a safe and accepting environment. Within this environment, a variety of intervention approaches may be utilized. As with all therapeutic approaches, counselors select from a variety of methods best meeting the

needs of the student. Possible interventions dealing with ambiguous loss include play therapy, topic specific support groups, expressive arts, grief camps, narrative therapy, psycho-education, and mentoring programs (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Bockneck et al., 2009; Carey, 1990; Carter, 1987; Schuurman & DeCristofaro, 2010; Schwab, 1997; Tait & Depta, 1994; Tubbs & Boss, 2000; Wood & Near, 2010).

Play therapy has been concluded to be beneficial for children experiencing grief. As children are developmentally limited in their abilities to communicate emotions, play therapy allows children to convey their grief and loss through activity. The use of puppets, sandplay and miniatures, and the toys in the playroom provide children a projective outlet to work through the loss in a safe, accepting environment, and allow them to gain a feeling of control over the loss, as well as express emotions that may be deemed scary or unsafe (Carey, 1990; Carter, 1987; Tait & Depta, 1994).

Group counseling, which has been shown to be a successful modality with bereaved children, allows students the opportunity to gain confidence and empowerment in their lives. Additionally, this approach provides a place where their emotions and feelings are normalized and supported by peers who have experienced similar loss (Tait & Depta, 1994). Group work in general can provide children with a way to feel less alone in their grief experience, and often a group of children with a similar loss will provide the support and empathy necessary to help each other through the grieving process (Schwab, 1997; The Dougy Center, 2004). Within a group setting, students may also benefit by forms of narrative techniques where kids are able to “tell their stories again in new ways that capture different nuances of their experiences” (Betz & Thorngren, 2006, p. 363).

Another adaptation would be the use of group activities. An example of such a group finds five females in grades second through fourth each experiencing loss through the death of their mothers. In one of the group meetings, a fourth grader read from a book she was creating about her mother. A few days after she shared the book with the group, a second grader brought a letter she had written at home about her mother. She wrote the letter because it seemed to have helped the fourth grader to feel better. Within this setting, children are supported, helped, and inspired by each other through the process.

Expressive art therapy is another intervention approach beneficial for children who are experiencing grief from ambiguous loss. Techniques used in expressive arts may include “art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, drama therapy, poetry therapy, psychodrama, and expressive arts therapy” (Wood & Near, 2010, p. 375). These differing forms of therapy help grieving children communicate grief at their own pace, in a way that appears less threatening than words, while allowing children to gain a sense of control in the midst of chaos (Wood & Near). Memory boxes, drawings, collage, mandalas, writing, and other activities can provide children the freedom of expression necessary to help them through the grieving process. One case example describes the expressive art activity of painting memory rocks. The school counselor had students use acrylic paint to draw messages and/or pictures on large river rocks and encouraged each to place them in an important place. This activity gave them a chance to create something in memory of their loss and allowed them to process the experiences at the same time.

Psycho-education is another effective intervention for children used by school counselors. Explaining and normalizing the grief experience for children, in a developmentally appropriate way, can help them understand their emotions, behaviors, and feelings as they go through the grief process. Additionally, sharing information with parents and families can help them best support the child through the process (The Dougy Center, 2004; Tubbs & Boss, 2000). Through regular guidance, school counselors are often presented with opportunities to establish relationships with students where pro-active discussions on grief and support can occur. Psycho-educational groups may focus attention on events including loss of familiarity when moving to a new town, loss of a teacher due to maternity leave, separation or divorce, transitioning to middle school, or a friend moving away.

School counselors may welcome the help of community mentors at their local campuses, or refer families to agencies providing mentorship programs. Mentors provide support and encouragement to students who are going through the grief process. Some children may prefer a mentor of the same gender or characteristics of the missing parent, and some may prefer different types of mentors (Bockneck et al., 2009). Mentors may be enlisted from a variety of community resources including grief centers, high school civic organizations, boys and girls clubs, churches, and countless other environments. It is essential to assign mentors who will be able to assist in the process of helping kids with a commitment which embraces longevity and consistency (Bockneck et al.). The importance of this relationship is demonstrated in the case example of a third grade student whose father was deployed overseas. A high school leadership mentor worked with her through his deployment, and maintained this

relationship even when her father returned home. The relationship established between mentor and mentee can help students even during the most difficult of times.

Grief camps are another form of intervention that can be utilized. These are camps in which bereaved children can get “out of their normal daily environments and invite them to...express their grief in new and different ways” (Schuurman & DeCristofaro, 2010, p. 369). A camp environment is particularly healing for the grieving child in that they are surrounded by other children who are experiencing and enjoying life as they move through the process of grief. Children can learn, especially from their peers that one can grieve and maintain a prosperous existence simultaneously (Simpson & Armstrong, 2007). Grief camps allow children to realize they are not alone in their grief, and foster acceptance and understanding through community. Additionally, they provide a safe and fun setting to memorialize and share about their loved one (Schuurman & DeCristofaro).

Conclusion

Although research on ambiguous loss exists, there is a shortage of information, particularly regarding ambiguous loss and its effects on children. There is a great need for further study in this area. It is the charge of school counselors, parents, teachers, and all those who work with children to attend to children as they navigate this difficult life event (Opalewski, 2008). Ambiguous loss occurs every day, to children of all ages, in many different ways. Every child affected by loss grieves in his or her own unique way, and experiences the process in the only way he or she knows. By assisting families in identifying ambiguous loss, school counselors may provide options and support.

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