

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



*Pennsylvania Key
Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation
Project
717-213-2063
micwal@berksiu.org*

Factsheet #33, 12/11

Dealing with Loss and Change

When Alice was three years old, her family moved to a new town. She lost the babysitter who had taken care of her while her parents worked, but they never explained why the babysitter didn't come with them. All of a sudden she wasn't there and Alice didn't know why. Alice reacted the only way she knew how – she refused to speak to her dad for nine months because she blamed him for the move. (This is a true story.) How might Alice's parents have helped her cope with the loss of a beloved babysitter?

Kinds of loss and change: a teacher leaving in the middle of the year, a friend moving away, divorce, move to another town and school, death

Ways young children express grief:

- Emotional shock, often expressed by withdrawal and not showing any feelings
- Immature behavior, like needing to be held, difficulty separating from parents
- Acting-out behavior, demonstrating the child's internal feelings of anger, fear and helplessness
- Asking the same questions repeatedly, like why did this happen, where is so-and-so?

How to help children handle the inevitable losses and changes that are part of life:

- Recognize that children will notice the loss/change and don't ignore it.
- If you can, explain ahead of time what will happen. This helps children begin to prepare and develop confidence that they can successfully manage grief and loss.
- Again, if you can, give children the opportunity to say goodbye—for example, to a teacher who is leaving.
- Reassure children that you will continue to love and care for them even while things are changing.
- Encourage children to talk about how they feel. This normalizes feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness.
- Talk about how change is a normal part of everyday life: for example, children outgrow their clothes, learn to write their names, tie their shoes, ride a bicycle.
- Assure children that they are not to blame for what happened and do not lie to them.
- Use the opportunity to help children learn new skills, like being flexible and working with others.
- Acknowledge and treat children as though you understand that what affects them *is* their business.

Resources

- "Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death, and Grief: Tips for Teachers and Parents," National Association of School Psychologists; <http://tinyurl.com/7lvige2>
- "Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss," by Claudia Jewett Jarrati; <http://tinyurl.com/5bsfp2>
- "Dealing with Change and Loss," Partnership for Children; <http://tinyurl.com/7yltyyk>