

Story Writing: A Technique
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Writing stories is an effective technique in helping children work through the process of grieving. It can be adapted in many ways and used with individual children, groups, or family members.

In my "Grief and Loss" groups, initially I give the children some brief background information about a fictitious family. After they have thought about the situation, they begin dictating while I write exactly the words they deliver. Then we go around the group and allow each person to add a sentence or two until everyone has included all that he/she wishes to add. Before the next group session, I type the story so they can read, discuss, delete, add, or change as they wish. They always make changes!!

The material each group member adds to the story tends to be something from personal experience with death of a loved one. The children take this activity very seriously and put a lot of thought and time into the actual writing of the story. When it is finally completed to their satisfaction, reading it seems to be a cathartic experience for them.

The following two examples were written by children in my groups. The first one was written by a group of fourth-grade students. Some of them had experienced the death of a parent, while others had close family members who had terminal illnesses.

Prior to writing the story, the children were told that the Smith family consisted of the dad who was 36 years old and the mom who was 35 years old. The Smith family had just learned that Mr. Smith was ill and was going to die. The groups were asked to determine who the remaining members of the Smith family were and to write a story about what happened after the family received the news of Mr. Smith's illness and impending death.

A Story About the Smith Family

"The Smith family has just found out that Mr. Smith is sick and is going to die. They did not expect for a man so young to die.

"Eric, who's nine years old and in the fourth grade, is very sad and is not doing well in school because of his dad's illness. The Smith family was shocked. Eric and Kelly did not watch their favorite show because of the bad news. Mrs. Smith was so sad that she couldn't even tell her kids what was going to happen to their father. The kids were both so shocked they wanted to cry. The Smith family was so scared they couldn't get to sleep for about a week. They were very sad. Kelly was so shocked she couldn't put on her make-up in the morning. Mrs. Smith was so scared that she made Mr. Smith's favorite meal the next night.

“The doctor found out that the kids had to stay away from their dad because he was contagious. Mr. Smith ended up in the hospital. Mrs. Smith gave the kids a picture of their dad to remind them of him when he was in the hospital. The mom and two kids sent Mr. Smith a card. The Smith family was really, really scared, and all three of them decided to write a journal about their father.

“After about a week, or two, Mr. Smith went into a very, very deep coma. A couple of weeks later, Mr. Smith woke up for about two days, and then, he passed away.”

The next story was written by fifth and sixth grade students who were members of my group that was held within three months after each of them had experienced the loss of a very significant person in their lives. These children were in the beginning stages of the grief process.

In this particular group, the members specifically requested that the words, *passed away* be substituted for the words, *death, dead, or died*. While this story is quite long, I am including it in its entirety because it shows a multitude of feelings as well as the children’s attempts to recognize and address those feelings in healthy ways. These group members spent two entire sessions writing and rewriting this story until they reached the point where it said what they wanted it to say:

The Johnson Family

“Once upon a time in Port Huron, Michigan, lived the Johnson family. In the family were Mr. Johnson who was 36 years old and worked in a grocery store, Mrs. Johnson who was 34 years old and worked part-time as a secretary in a bank, Steve Johnson who was 11 years old and was in the 6th grade, Sarah Johnson who was eight years old and was in the 3rd grade, and Emily Johnson who was six years old and in the 1st grade.

“The Johnsons were a happy family and did a lot of fun things together. That is until one day when Mrs. Johnson began to feel sick. Gradually, she felt worse, so she made an appointment to see Dr. Moore. He examined her and ordered a lot of tests. Then, he called both Mr. and Mrs. Johnson into his office to tell them about the test results. Dr. Moore looked quite sad when he said that Mrs. Johnson had liver cancer which was inoperable, and she did not have long to live. He suggested that the family do as much as they could with the time that Mrs. Johnson had to live.

“When Mr. and Mrs. Johnson told the three children about Mrs. Johnson’s illness, they all cried and said that they didn’t want her to pass away. Then, they made a list of all the things that they wanted to do while she was still well enough to do things.

“In less than a month, Mrs. Johnson became so ill that she needed to be hospitalized. Even though the doctors tried all kinds of medications and treatments, Mrs.

Johnson soon became so weak that she could not eat or talk and lapsed into a coma. Two days later, she passed away with her entire family by her side.

“After Mrs. Johnson passed away, they went back to their house. They sat down and all wrote what they were feeling and then talked about their feelings. They felt real sad. They thought that this would never happen. It caught them all by surprise. If they knew it was going to happen, they could have prepared themselves for the incident. Mr. Johnson and the children began to cry and hug each other.

“Sarah thought that she would never stop crying. Sarah was so sad that she couldn’t do her hair for school. The next day at school, she told the counselor, Mrs. Loughrin, that her mother had passed away and she was surprised.

“For the next day or two, Mr. Johnson wasn’t able to go to work because he was too sad and too mad at himself. He as mad at himself because he felt it was his fault that Mrs. Johnson passed away and that he hadn’t done enough for her. Mr. Johnson hopes that one of his daughters grows up to be just like Mrs. Johnson.

“Emily was asking tons of questions because she was confused and sad and didn’t know what was going on. Since Emily didn’t know a lot about it, she kept saying, ‘Mom. Where are you?’ and was looking all over for her mother. She thought that her family was breaking apart because her mother wasn’t there. Emily kept waiting for her mother to come back home. One day, Emily called her older sister, ‘Mom.’

“Steve was angry so he left the house and went to a friend’s house, and he didn’t want to go home. He felt that it was his fault that his mother passed away too. Steve asked his friend if he would like to go to a movie or something to get his mind off the subject that his mother had passed away. So, Steve and his friend went to see The Muppets, Live. After the movie, they discussed the parts that they liked best. Steve’s friend kept Steve busy so that he wouldn’t get upset and start to cry. The next morning, Steve went home.

“Sarah was still having trouble coping with her mother’s passing away. Sarah was right in her thinking because she did cry a lot. She asked herself, ‘Am I ever going to stop being sad about my mother?’

“When Steve came home, the whole family sat down and discussed what they were going to do about their deceased family member. They had the body cremated. They decided that they would have a memorial service at a church. They put some of the ashes in a plastic bag and put them in their family photo album. Then, they gave some of the ashes to other family members.

“The funeral home suggested counseling and a good counselor. Now, they thought it would be much easier, but they were wrong. Every time the counselor brought up the incident, the Johnsons cried. Now, it was just that they had to live in the present and plan for the future.”

The stories of the Smith and Johnson families are just two of many that individuals and members of my groups have written. The process of writing generally leads to interesting discussion as the members explain why they are adding particular material to the story. They seem to appreciate the opportunity to answer any questions the others may have.

Children often find story writing helpful in working through their grief processes. Children experience the safety of being able to “step outside of their own lives” and project some of their own feelings, fears and concerns onto fictional people who live in fictional settings. Listening to the stories read aloud seems to provide validation for the children that it is okay to feel, think and act as they do.

If I were working with very young children, I would create a situation with an animal family that must deal with the serious illness and/or the death of a loved one. Often, very young children feel safer and respond more freely and openly if they are able to project their feelings onto animals rather than onto people, even though the people may be fictitious.

Not only do I find story writing to be a valuable therapeutic technique, but I have observed that the children who are “repeat” members of my “Grief and Loss” groups continually ask if they can write another story during that group. Story writing tends to be one of their favorite group activities.