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While sometimes words are inadequate in the face of grief, at other times language—in all its various forms—can be healing for bereaved children. One teenager said it this way:

Expressions
By Nicole Cruson

Talking,

Writing,

Listening,

Faces,

Are all ways to express feelings.

But what way works best for you?

Maybe it is not the same way your friend does.

But it is your way and you should feel good about that.

WHY?, you may ask do your ways of expressing your
Feelings differ from those of your friends?

Maybe it is because you are two totally different people in some ways.

But in others you are very much alike.

But nobody is exactly the same.

All four of these play a major part in your attitude toward life

And your view you have of other people.

There is though an important thing to remember.

When you are expressing your feelings,

This is whatever way you use as your way of expression,

Make sure you use the way that you enjoy the most.

The way I find most helpful to me is writing.

This is the easiest way I have found to show how I am feeling.

If I am sad, I will write something.

That is going to touch the hearts of those who read it.

If I am happy then I will write something that is less

Touchy and more humorous.

It is the way I feel the most comfortable expressing my feelings.

So realize that if it is your way,
You will always have something to say.

This article describes several forms of “word” therapy, including writing, reading, storytelling and talking.

Journals

A feeling journal is a tablet in which a child is encouraged to record her thoughts and feelings during her grief journey. The journal is just for her and is only shared with the counselor or others if the child chooses to. This is a particularly appropriate technique for use with a quiet, introspective child who may not be naturally verbal.

Letters

Letters to the person who died or to oneself can be invaluable in having the child teach you about thoughts and feelings. Writing the letter is a form of mourning, because the child takes what is on the inside and expresses it on the outside. Be prepared to be startled by some of the content in these letters.

I have found it particularly useful to invite children to write a letter to themselves. In this way they often help me understand needs, fears, and hopes that they might not otherwise express.

Poetry

Poetry often comes from deep in the hearts of the children. Poetry frees them to express what they really, truly feel. Even very brief poems reveal a lot about children’s innermost feelings.

An eight-year old boy whose father died in a car accident wrote the following and simply titled it, “Dads.”

*Dads are for laughing with.
Dads are for playing with.
Dads are for making you feel safe.
My dad is dead and I miss him.*

Thirteen-year-old Jessica wrote “Fathers,” a poignant poem of her own after her father’s death from cancer:

*My life has always been quite nice,
Until my father died.
But not my dreams are broken
And all I do is cry.*

*My mother says it will be all right,
As soon as it goes by.
But I am sure it will be with me
Until I go and die.*

*This poem should have some meaning,
A meaning tried and true,
You should always love your father,
Because he won't always be with you.*

No, the poems don't have to rhyme! You can often inspire the child to come up with a poem by modeling one of your own bad poems. You can then laugh together and learn together.

Essays

Essays are more for bereaved teens than for younger children. If the child has had a decent relationship with the person who died, I often suggest the following: "How about writing an essay, a story that you title, 'A Tribute to (Name of Person Who Died)'?" This is very open-ended and allows the teen to go wherever he wants with it.

Bibliotherapy

This formal sounding term, simply defined, means helping through books. Carefully selected books, specific to the unique needs of a particular child, can help children with a variety of life difficulties. Because loss is a part of all phases of life, it is natural that loss is a common theme in books for both children and adults. The twenty years has seen a plethora of books on death, dying, and grief. A number of death-related bibliographies have even become available.

In her text *Books to Help Children Cope with Separation and Loss*, Joanne Bernstein outlines some of the benefits of using bibliotherapy with children:

- Reading offers an opportunity to identify with others.
- Reading helps children realize they are not alone.
- Reading can expand horizons.
- Reading can help children express feelings, aiding the catharsis process.
- Reading can lead to insight.
- Reading can facilitate the sharing of problems.

A number of questions need to be asked when you are considering a particular book for use with bereaved kids. How does the book present the material, language, text, illusions, etc.? What kind of message would the child get from the book? How are feelings dealt with in the book? Are the content and language in the book appropriate for the developmental level of the child? How does the book define death? Does this book represent a general humanistic approach to death or a particular religious point

of view? You can probably think of additional questions to consider when choosing books for bereaved children you have the honor of companionship.

In my experience with thousands of bereaved children, written words are less intrusive and demanding than spoken words. As with play, art and music, children approach books with a minimum of defensive posturing. Obviously, I am an advocate of helping bereaved children through the use of books.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a familiar and well-liked technique for working with children. While the formal study of storytelling as a helping medium is in its infancy, making use of stories to learn from and help children has been with us for some time.

In an excellent resource entitled “*Therapeutic Metaphors for Children and the Child Within*,” authors Mills and Crowley explore how storytelling can have therapeutic benefits. They note that through identification with the story or elements in the story, the child’s sense of isolation about her situation dissolves when she hears that her experience is shared by others.

Mills and Crowley have created a series of stories that a counselor can tell the bereaved child. They also suggest that while the child listens to the story, he may want to relax and visualize some of the characters. Their stories are short and some are applicable to death losses. If you are interested in learning to use this technique, I would highly recommend this book.

The way in which I have more commonly used storytelling with children is through the tell-a-story technique. This is where you invite the child to create a story with you. I have found this method invaluable in having the child teach me about what might be going on inside him. Obviously, the story becomes a metaphor for aspects of the child’s real life experiences.

The Jimmy Green Technique

I have had success in drawing bereaved children out with the Jimmy Green technique. This is when you as counselor describe the child’s fears as being similar to the fears of a hypothetical child, whom I call Jimmy Green. In doing this you indirectly give the child permission to feel feelings and to recognize the naturalness of these feelings. I find that children are much more receptive to this type of approach than when they are confronted directly about their fears.

For example, I might say to the child, “You know, Gary, I knew a boy not very long ago who had a fear a lot like yours. His name was Jimmy Green. His dad died too, and he really got scared about going to school. Sometimes he would get a stomach ache or a headache and would tell his mom, and she really didn’t know what to do. Well, after Jimmy and I talked for a while, we got an idea about what was

bothering him. He was afraid that if he went to school and left his mom alone that something might happen to her. He was so scared that he thought he better just stay at home with his mom because he loved her very much and didn't want anything to happen to her. You know, Gary, it sounds like you might have some feelings like Jimmy Green did. Jimmy and I talked about his feelings, when we met together, and after a while it wasn't so scary for him to go to school. Do you think maybe you and I could talk like Jimmy and I did? I think we probably can."

In approaching the child in this way, you as a counselor can gain the child's attention and often encourage the child to share fears with you. This kind of technique can be used to test for a wide range of thoughts and feelings that you are aware the child is experiencing but is having difficulty expressing.

Sentence completion inventories

One of the most valuable techniques I have ever used with bereaved children is sentence completion inventories. This is simply where you provide the beginning of sentences and then invite the child to complete them. This can be done out loud with the child or she can (if willing and able) write down her responses.

Pick and choose appropriate lead-ins for the sentences, given the unique situation. An example of a sentence completion inventory follows:

1. Sometimes I wish that I could _____

2. If I could only _____

3. Sometimes I pretend that _____

4. I can't understand _____

5. My friends are _____

6. I get mad when _____

7. Since my (dad) died, I _____

8. I worry that _____

9. I'm happy when _____

10. At home things are _____

Wishes and fears inventory

This technique simply involves asking the child to teach you about some wishes and fears. I often say, "If you could have two or three wishes, what would they be? If you have two or three fears, what might those be?" Again, the hope is that the child will share some of his experiences through the use of this tool. Sometimes you can learn a lot, other times little if anything.

Five feelings techniques

While children will often teach you more through their behaviors than through their words, the five feelings technique is sometimes very useful. This is where you attempt to make talking about feelings easier for the bereaved child by asking, "Did you know there are five common feelings that both adults and children have: sad, glad, mad, scared, and lonely? Let's see if you ever have any of these feelings. Since you dad died, have you had some sad feelings?" Some children like to respond nonverbally by spreading their hands apart, relating how much, if any, they have experienced or are experiencing these particular feelings.

The Mirror
By Len Szyborski
Gold Bar, Washington

For years we stood side by side in front of the Mirror.

Looking into each other's faces in The Mirror, we could see our future—all the things we were planning for, hoping for, working for.

When we looked into The Mirror around us, we could see our past, all the hard times, all the struggles. We could see the kids, raising them and getting them off on their own. We could see the distance that we had traveled together and all the things that drew us closer together and made us love each other more every day.

Then one day, without warning, The Mirror fell from the wall and the glass shattered on the floor.

I knelt down and started putting The Mirror back together. First the bigger pieces, then the smaller ones. When I could see a reflection again, I realized I was alone. I looked all over The Mirror but couldn't find her. I hurried back into The Mirror, knowing she had to be there, somewhere.

After working for several months with the help of family and friends, I have all but the smallest pieces back in place. But she's still not there.

When I look at The Mirror now, there's only one fact to look into—only one face to see the future in. With the jagged cracks and missing pieces, the future isn't as clear or bright as it once was. The future is still there, but it's only my future.

When I look at the area around my face in The Mirror now, I see so much past, so much more to remember, so much more of the love I miss. Why is the past so vivid?

The Mirror is getting better everyday. The future is looking clearer and clearer. Although there are still those days, when, with tear filled eyes, I search The Mirror hoping to find her again.

I love you, Beth.