

Ambiguous Loss

The death of a family member or friend requires children to understand certain important concepts about death. They need to know that death is irreversible. That all life functions cease. That everything that is alive eventually dies. That there are physical reasons someone dies.

Each death is unique, and every child grieves in his or her own way, yet these four concepts remain constant. However, children also experience a wide range of other losses in their life that do not result in death. Often, the boundaries of these losses are more ambiguous. This may make these situations more difficult to understand and provide unique challenges to coping.

PHYSICAL ABSENSE

Think about parents separated because of divorce. For children, understanding the nature of this separation is an essential task in coping with the ambiguous quality of the loss. After a divorce, for example, children may wonder if the separation is irreversible (“Is it possible my parents will resolve their conflict and get back together so we can be a family again?”). They will work to understand the extent of the separation (“Will both of my parents be with me for the holidays? My graduation? My wedding?” “Can I still call my dad for help with my homework on the days I’m at my mom’s?”). They may struggle to comprehend the cause of the separation—it is often easier to understand how a heart stops beating than why a heart stops loving.

Similar processes may occur for children experiencing absence of a parent because of military deployment, incarceration, or a parent working for extended periods in a remote location.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSENSE

Children also experience ambiguous loss when a parent or guardian is physically present but psychologically absent. This might include a parent with serious mental illness, substance abuse, dementia or serious physical illness.

Children in these situations often struggle to understand the nature of their connection with the loved one (“Does she still love me?” “Did I do something to make him so distant?”).

After a death, children frequently receive support from other family members, and hopefully from friends and school personnel as well. They are far less likely to receive support for the ambiguous loss of psychological absence. Friends and neighbors may not know what to say. The family may choose to keep the parent’s condition confidential, and others—including school personnel—may not know about the situation. Family life may be confusing for children as roles and responsibilities are re-organized and new challenges arise.

THREATENED LOSS

Threatened loss also creates ambiguous situations for children. This is often an issue for immigrant families or children with undocumented parents. The family may arrive in this country unfamiliar with customs and language. They may have few close relationships here. They are often concerned about the safety of family and friends in their country of origin. Many live with the constant threat that they, their family members or friends may be deported. Discrimination and victimization add additional levels of stress to this uncertainty.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN

While the information at www.grievingstudents.org is focused on grief related to death, much of the advice is also relevant in situations of ambiguous loss. Children in both circumstances need acknowledgment. They benefit from the interest of empathetic and authentic adults who are available to talk, provide support, arrange accommodations to support a child’s education, and take other steps that allow children to cope with these ambiguous losses and the uncertainty they cause in their lives.