Group Counseling Intervention and Curriculum
For Children Coping With Loss

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Students coping with grief and loss are topics that all school counselors face repeatedly throughout their professional career. It is an ongoing issue that will be present for counselors to struggle through every school year. Counselors who work with grief and loss issues must develop a specialized expertise in a body of knowledge that has grown exponentially over the last 5 years (Andrews & Marotta, 2005). The organization of an intervention group focused on children who are grieving the loss of someone or something is needed and should be an integral part of all school counseling programs. Students need a way to express their feelings, to say what is on their mind. A group format is a great way for students to acknowledge that they are not the only one who is feeling this way. This may help make them feel more “normal”.

Grief is a natural part of human experience, and individuals of all ages will experience the loss and pain associated with death. In the United States more than 200,000 children a year experience the death of a parent (Andrews & Marotta, 2005). Death is arguably one of the most difficult losses that a child will have to face. Given the number of children who experience the death of a primary caregiver, it is surprising how much of what is currently known about intervening with children is derived from the literature on adults (Andrews & Marotta, 2005). Obviously, children and adults have very different coping skills and ways of expressing their emotions in times of loss which needs to be taken into consideration when preparing the group curriculum.

There are, however, numerous other forms of loss that children have to cope with that can be equally as traumatic as the death of a close family member or friend. Some of these include: the loss of a pet, the breakup of a friendship, the separation that
occurs when a parent goes off to war, and the loss of oneself/identity are just a few of the difficult loss issues children are presented with.

For many young people, their first experience with death is that of a pet. It is hardly surprising, then, that pet death is the most frequently reported stressor among preadolescents (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). Specific curriculum focusing on loss would give these children a chance to express what they are feeling and give them a chance to relate to other students that have experienced the same event. As far as grieving is concerned, there is little difference between loss of human beings and that of pets. The loss of a pet can evoke the same sequence of psychological reactions as those observed by Kubler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). The development of a group loss curriculum could give children positive ways to bond with other students and maybe new friendships could be made in the process.

Another coping issue that many young children of military parents have to deal with is the probability of them going off to war. Many of these children need help coping with the fear and stress that surround having a loved one deployed on a dangerous mission (Paterson, 2007). Children may be particularly angry or sad and often, military families are very proud and not likely to seek the help of a counselor (Paterson, 2007). In this case, the counselor may want to approach the students and explain the possibilities and impact that a group intervention about loss could have on them. Explain the dynamics of the group and why it may be helpful to them. It will also be important to contact the family and explain the purpose of the group to them in order to get their support as well. This will let the family know that the school is concerned about
the emotional well-being of their child and is willing to provide a helpful group to support them in this difficult time.

Another important reason for developing curriculum for children coping with loss is that many children do not know how to deal with the emotional stress that comes with loss. So many children discover that when they have a problem, sometimes food, alcohol, or drugs may help them cope with the pain temporarily. Consuming food, alcohol, or drugs in response to the emotional energy caused by death or other loss does not help us discover the source of the energy or complete the relationship affected by the loss (Counseling Today, 2006).

Many students may want help developing ideas of other, more positive, methods of coping and controlling the pain associated with the loss. One of the problems associated with consuming food, drugs, or alcohol to manage emotional pain in that they only distract people from the underlying emotional issues that caused the energy build-up in the first place (Counseling Today, 2006). This intervention could be a positive place to start with helping grieving children live on a daily basis faced with their emotional pain. The group intervention will give children avenues of support that they may not have realized existed, and this realization could be life changing for these children.

Overall, the need for specific curriculum for children coping with loss is constant and an ongoing issue that should be addressed continually. Today with the issue of accountability being at the forefront of professional dialogue, great lengths will be taken to prove the effectiveness of this specific curriculum designed. School counselors, working within the framework of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs,
increasingly are being asked to demonstrate that their work contributes to student success (Gysbers, 2004). Students will be continually monitored and observed for signs of growth and change, and documents will be routinely updated to depict these changes. Parents will be notified at the beginning of the program and will be assured that our group curriculum has their children’s best interests at hand.
REFERENCES


*Counseling Today, (2006), Have a cookie, you’ll feel better: Truth or dire consequences, May, 11.*


Loss Counseling Group for Middle School Students

Group Format:

The purpose of this group is to provide grieving students with a safe environment in which they can share and learn from each other. The students may be dealing with all different sorts of loss issues, each one being specific and unique to that individual. The group will be organized for middle school/jr. high students, with a range of between 6 and 8 students per group. No more than 8 in order to keep a more intimate feel to the group. The criteria for becoming a member of the loss group will be anyone struggling with a loss in their life. It can be any form of loss, from death to the end of a friendship. Everyone copes and deals differently.

Individual information sheets explaining the group and its purpose will be sent home with each student. The sheets will be written in terms that the students can easily understand and comprehend. If they are interested in participating, they are to see the counselor or put a note in the counselor’s box in the office. No other students have to know, it can be strictly confidential. Recruitment will also come from information received from teachers, parents, and staff who have expressed concern regarding specific students.

The group will run one day per week for six weeks. Each session will be approximately 45 minutes long, and will attempt to be held during study periods. If that is not possible, the sessions will alternate so the students do not have to miss the same class each week. It will be a closed group session, because we will be following a specific plan and keeping it open could alter the purpose and focus of our group which is to provide a safe and stable environment in which to share. Too much change could prevent this from happening.
Six Session Loss Group for Middle School Students

Session 1  (No materials needed)

Goals:
  o Explain to the students the process of group counseling
  o Introduce group members to each other
  o Establish group rules and norms

Opening Ice Breaker:
  - The group juggle. All participants stand in a circle facing each other. The
    leader begins with a ball (any size) and tosses the ball to another person. Before the
    leader tosses the ball they are to say their name and then throw to another person who
    will then state their name and so on. Once everyone has had a chance to share, the
    leader will start again and this time state another persons name and throw the ball to
    them and so on. This will be a fun way for group members to learn other member’s
    names.

Rules Activity:
  - Leader will go through the importance of confidentiality in counseling, especially
    in a group setting. Also making sure that all students know that it is okay to “pass” if
    they are not comfortable sharing. The leader will then take turns letting the students
    come up with their own rules to add to any of the leaders. At this point, the group leader
    will also discuss group goals and what the members hope to accomplish in this group
    experience.

Sharing Activity:
  - The leader will ask each member of the group to share the following
    information only if they feel comfortable doing so:
    1. The specific type of loss they are dealing with
    2. How this loss has affected them thus far
    3. What they hope to learn from the group, their goals

Processing the group session:
  1. What feelings did you have as you participated in this sharing activity?
  2. What was the most difficult part of these activities?
  3. Explain what you thought group would be like.
  4. What did you learn in this session?
  5. What are some, if any, concerns you may have?
  6. Are there any fears that you are experiencing?
  7. Was it difficult talking about your loss?
  8. Is there anything about today’s session that you would change?
  9. Do you feel comfortable with the group members?
 10. What would you like to work on for next session?

Closing Activity
  - To close the session, have everyone stand and face one another. Take turns letting
    each student share one word that describes their emotions at this very moment. Say
    thank you and dismiss the students.
Session 2  (Handout of Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief)

Goals:
  o Build group members' knowledge of the stages of loss
  o Encourage self-understanding and self-reflection
  o Continually build group support

Opening Ice Breaker:
  - Called the screamer. Have everyone sit in a circle facing each other. Tell the group members to put their heads down facing their laps. When the leader says “up”, everyone looks up and at another particular group member right in the eyes. If two members are looking at each other directly, they are to scream, and they are out. If no two members are looking at each other, then everyone remains in the group and you continue the game until everyone is out.

Activity Session:
  - Review the group member’s names. See if anyone can remember all of the group member’s names and a fact about each member.
  - Hand out the Kubler-Ross stages of grief sheet and discuss all of the stages.

Processing Stage:
  1. Does anyone feel that these stages are relevant to what they are feeling or have felt?
  2. Does everyone have to go through every stage?
  3. Do all of the stages have to happen in the same order?
  4. Could or have any of you experienced the same stage happening more than once?
  5. Identify what stage each member is in at the present time.
  6. How does this feel to share such personal information with the group?
  7. What have you learned from this session today?
  8. Were there any moments that were uncomfortable today?
  9. Are there any rules that we need to work on so everyone can feel comfortable sharing?
 10. What would you like to see happen at the next session?

Closing Activity:
  - Everyone stand and hold hands. The leader starts and squeezes the person’s hand on either side of them and they pass the squeeze around the group. This helps the group show a little sign of support for each other.
What Are The Stages of Grief?

Many people have tried to explain what grief is; some have even identified certain stages of grief.

Probably the most well-known of these might be from Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' book, "On Death and Dying." In it, she identified five stages that a dying patient experiences when informed of their terminal prognosis.

The stages Kubler-Ross identified are:

- Denial (this isn't happening to me!)
- Anger (why is this happening to me?)
- Bargaining (I promise I'll be a better person if...)
- Depression (I don't care anymore)
- Acceptance (I'm ready for whatever comes)
Session 3 (post-it notes, pens, and a hat of some sort)

Goals:
- To continue to become part of the group, fostering group support
- Pinpoint specific fears that each group member has
- Introducing the topic of fear and how it is a normal and natural feeling to have
- Discuss ways of dealing with our fears

Opening Ice Breaker:
- 10 jumping jacks to get everyone energized and ready to share in the days group session.

Fear in a Hat Activity: Show the bulletin board that was made and explain the significance of it.
- Explain the importance of talking about and acknowledging the fears they have. Explain to the group that having one’s fears expressed and heard almost immediately cuts them in half.
- Ask everyone, including the group leader, to complete this sentence on a post-it note (anonymously):
  “In this group, I am most afraid that”, or “In this group, the worst thing that could happen to me would be….”
- Collect the pieces of paper, mix them around in the hat, then invite each person to take a piece of paper from the hat and read about someone’s fear.
- One by one each group member reads out the fear of another group member and elaborates on what he/she feels that person is most afraid of in the group. No one is to comment on what the person says, just listen and move on to the next person.
- If the reader does not elaborate much on the fear, then ask them one or two questions. Avoid implying or showing your opinion as to the fear being expressed, unless the person is disrespecting or completely misunderstanding someone’s fear. If the person chooses not to elaborate, just move on to the next person.
- Once everyone has gone, discuss what people felt and noticed.

Processing Questions:
1. How did this exercise feel?
2. What was the most difficult part?
3. Was it hard to read someone’s fear?
4. Was it hard to hear someone else read your particular fear?
5. Did this exercise help reduce your fears?
6. What do you wish would have been different?
7. Do you have new fears with each session, or are they always the same?
8. How do you normally deal with your fears?
9. Who do you feel most comfortable talking with about fear?
10. What would you like to see happen at our next session?

Closing Activity:
- Have each group member give one word to describe how they will handle their fears within the group from now on. Dismiss the group.
FEAR IN A HAT
WHAT IS YOUR FEAR?

Session 4 (Journal Books for each member, pens)

Goals:
- Assist members in acknowledging and accepting the loss by finding time to grieve and share feelings with others.
- Continued group bonding and accepting

Opening Ice Breaker:
- Everyone gather in a circle and sit down. Every group member thinks of one word that describes their feelings at this point in group counseling. Once they have thought of it, they are to shout it out. This is to symbolize getting it off their chest and releasing it so the session can start on an upbeat note.

Writing Activity:
- The writing activity uses a journal to let the group express their emotions in a non-threatening environment. Keeping a journal can facilitate the expression of feelings more easily than actively sharing them to the group.
- The group will take 5-8 minutes to have the group write a short story or poem about his/her loss and the feelings they are experiencing due to this loss.
- After everyone has completed their writings, ask if anyone would like to share what they have written.
- Share 2 or 3 writings each session for the remainder of the group.

Procession Questions:
1. How did writing your feelings down feel?
2. Has anyone every tried this activity before?
3. Were you able to explore your feelings more deeply?
4. Is it uncomfortable to share what you have written? Explain.
5. What insight have you gained into yourself?
6. What did you learn today?
7. For those of you who could not share today, did the process of writing help for you?
8. Was this activity helpful to you?
9. What would you have changed about this activity?
10. What would you like to see happen with out remaining sessions?

Closing Activity:
- Stand in a circle and everyone hold hands. Start walking backwards, still holding hands, until the circle is as tight as it can be. This is to symbolize the strength of the group and how together much can be accomplished. Hold the circle for a count of 10 and release. Dismiss the group.

Session 5 (Bubble Gum, drawing paper and drawing materials)

Goals:
- Encourage the fullest expression of thoughts and feelings regarding the loss.
- More self-disclosing among members of the group.
- Continued group support.

Opening Ice Breaker:
- Bubble gum challenge. Give each member of the group a piece of bubble gum. Say go and they are to start chewing the gum. The first person to blow a bubble wins.

Drawing Activity:
- Art helps reflect one's feelings as well as expressing experiences associated with their loss.
- Group members are to do an emotional drawing. Each person is to draw a picture on how they are feeling right now about their loss.
- Give the students about 5-8 minutes to draw.
- Ask any student to share their drawing. Linking and relating the drawing to their feelings.
- Ask if any member would like to share their journal writing from last session and discuss what they wrote.

Processing Questions:
1. What did you learn from this drawing?
2. How did it make you feel to see your drawing?
3. What are some of the most important things that you have learned about yourself?
4. Are feelings constantly changing, and if so, is this good or bad?
5. What is the most helpful way that you have learned to deal with your emotions and feelings?
6. What do you hope to gain from this experience?
7. Are you noticing a change in your comfort levels when it comes to sharing with the group?
8. Have you made a change in your stage of loss on the Kubler-Ross chart?
9. What do you hope to gain out of the last session?
10. Has group been a helpful experience so far?
Closing Activity:
- Go around the group and have each member tell the group one thing that they are thankful for and why they are thankful for this. Remind the group that there is only one more session left in their group. Dismiss the group.

Session 6 (Balloons)

Goals:
- Lots of discussion of feeling they have noticed throughout group
- Encourage the group to continue friendships they have created
- Discuss ways that the group members can continue their grief management
- End the group

Opening Ice Breaker:
- Blow up 10 balloons and give everyone a balloon, some people may have 2. Have the group stand in a close circle. At the count of 3 all students are to throw their balloon into the center of the group circle. The object is to not let any of the balloons to hit the ground. The game is over when a balloon hits the ground. Depending on the amount of time, it can be played more than once.

Activity and Processing Combined: The processing may take longer than usual with this being the last session.

1. This is the last group meeting, how do you feel about group ending?
2. Have you all developed positive ways to help cope with your lose?
3. Has it been helpful being in a group setting rather than one-on-one?
4. How has group been helpful, or not so helpful, for you?
5. What have you learned about each other?
6. If you need support, where or to whom can you go to for help?
7. Did the group meet your intended goals? Explain.
8. How can we continue to show support to our group members outside of group?
9. Would another group experience be enticing to you in the future?
10. Explain your overall reaction to the 6 session group.

Closing Activity:
- Go around the group and have each member share something important that they have learned in group. How has this changed or helped them? Ask the group members to please fill out the evaluation form to help get ideas for future group sessions. Thank the group for their openness and support. Dismiss the group.
Group Evaluation Form

1. What is your overall feeling related to your group experience?

   1  2  3  4  5
   It helped - major some not sure little waste of time

2. What activity did you like the most? The least? Explain

3. What activity did you learn the most about yourself? The least? Explain

4. Would you be interested in participating in another session? Explain

5. Did any activity make you feel uncomfortable? Explain
6. How is your understanding of your loss now, compared to our 1st session?

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