



**Supporting My School Aged Children  
Throughout the Grief Journey**

**Jon K. Reid, PhD, NCC  
TAPS Advisory Board Member**

October 8, 2019



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*Please note: The information provided on this program is intended for educational purposes only.*

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**Some Common Questions**

- Do children grieve?
- Do children grieve like adults?
- At what age are children capable of grieving?
- Is grief counseling the same for children as for adults?
  
- Do adolescents grieve?
- Do adolescents grieve like adults?
- Is grief counseling the same for adolescents as for adults?
- What do bereaved children look like?

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## John F. Kennedy, Jr. Saluting the Funeral Cortège of his Father



Photo by Stan Stearns, 1963



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## Maggie McCloud, son Hayden and daughter Meghan

Family mourning husband and father Marine Corps Major Joseph McCloud, who was killed in Iraq, at his grave at Arlington National Cemetery

(photo credit: REUTERS/Joshua Roberts)



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## Are There “Stages of Grief”?

Note: Other than this sentence, I won't be talking about “stages of grief,” the reason being that there aren't predictable stages of grief that are universal.

There are a variety of feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and maybe “symptoms,” that children experience when bereaved.

- *You're wearing that TAPS shirt; what does that mean?*
- *My spouse died while serving this country. TAPS has helped support me and my kids.*
- *Oh, what stage of grief are your kids in?*



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## Grief Healing Garden

Like this winding stream, grief does not follow a straight line

(National Taipei University of Nursing and Health Sciences, Taiwan)



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## Does it Matter How We Describe Children?

"These are traumatized children."

"These are children who have been traumatized (by an earthquake)."

*Do not mistake a child for his symptoms* (Erik Erikson)

(Six months post-earthquake, China, 2008)



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## Grieving Children are Helped by Spending Time With Other Children Who Have Experienced Loss



Fictional Conversation:

- *Where are you going?*
  - *To meet with some children whose father died while serving our country.*
- *Why are you taking ice cream and balloons? Is it okay to encourage bereaved kids to have fun?*
  - *Yes, you must remember that they are children first.*

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### What Do Bereaved Children Need? Comforting Each Other...



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### Friends Supporting Each Other (after 2008 earthquake)



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### Needs of Grieving Children and Adolescents

- Provide adequate information (Cause of death, circumstances of death)
- Address fears and anxieties: What do you worry about?
- Provide reassurance that they are not to blame



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### One year after earthquake in Sichuan Province (Great hesitancy to speak about emotional impacts)



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### Needs of Grieving Children and Adolescents

- Listen carefully to the child
- Validate the child's feelings (even difficult feelings, such as anger at a parent for dying)
- Offer "permission" to talk about it... "Making difficult matters mentionable is one of the best ways to make them manageable." (Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*)

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### Earthquake Survivors Eager to Meet "Experts" from Hong Kong and the US (6 months after the 2008 Sichuan, China earthquake)



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## Bereavement Needs of Grieving Children and Adolescents

- Help the child with overwhelming feelings
- Involve and include them in mourning rituals
  - *Look for ways to include them, so that they will know that they aren't overlooked. Their grief, their loss, and their role are still important.* (Worden)
- Continue routine activities, such as sports practice or dance and music lessons

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## Santa Fe High School Plays Baseball Game for Their Hometown

A day after the tragic shooting at Santa Fe High School, the school baseball team took the field for their hometown.  
(photo credit: Bryan Kirk, Patch Staff, May 20, 2018)



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Do all bereaved children need professional assistance?

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## All Grieving Children Need to be Recognized

Tri-Services Hospital, Taipei Hospice Unit



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## Children At Risk of Serious Problems in Adjustment to the Death of a Parent

*A significant minority of children in the Child Bereavement Study (33%) was found to be at some degree of risk for high levels of emotional and behavioral problems (Worden, 1996)*



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## Children May Need Encouragement and “Companionship” (Wolfelt)



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## Identifying Children for Professional Evaluation

1. Persistent difficulties talking about the dead parent
2. Aggressive behavior toward people or objects
3. Persistent anxiety
4. Persistent bodily complaints
5. Persistent sleeping difficulties
6. Eating disturbance
7. Marked/significant social withdrawal
8. Serious academic reversal
9. Persistent self-blame or guilt
10. Self-destructive behaviors

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## Specific Treatment Methods

- Individual counseling/therapy
- Group counseling/therapy including "support groups" perhaps led by a lay-person
- Family counseling
- Camp/retreat experiences

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## Benefits of a Group Setting

As people share their stories with others, they name and shape the meanings of their experience"

John Harvey (as quoted by Neimeyer, 2006)

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## Benefits of Group Counseling

As people share their stories with others, they name and shape the meanings of their experience (John Harvey)



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## Specific Techniques or Activities

Drawing: Books with structured drawing activities



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Sometimes people put on a "mask" to hide feelings they don't want to show. Name and draw 3 feelings you sometimes hide from others!



Name and draw the "mask" you might hide the feelings with.



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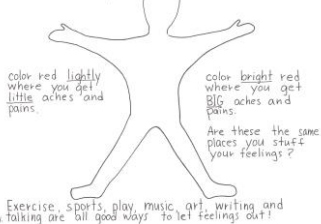
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If feelings are stuffed inside too long they may cause aches and pains.



Exercise, sports, play, music, art, writing and talking are all good ways to let feelings out!

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### Sand Tray Activity



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## Tasks of Mourning (Worden's 4<sup>th</sup> Task)

To relocate the deceased person within one's life and find ways to memorialize the person

- Life never gets back to normal. However, there exists the possibility for a new normal.

To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life and work toward developing new roles, identities, and relationships

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## Specific Techniques or Activities

Memory Book and Journaling



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## Memory Rock "In loving memory of my dad"



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### To Summarize So Far:

- Children grieve differently from adults in many ways
- Not all bereaved children need mental health care
- Supportive care programs, such as retreats or camps, aren't necessarily mental health care
- Some children need mental health care if their "reactions" have become "symptoms"
- If their caregiver is struggling, then both caregiver and child need help

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### Qualifications of the Counselor

- Does the counselor/therapist talk about "stages of grief?"
- If the counselor acknowledges a limited experience in dealing with grief but is open to gaining knowledge and skills, support may work, particularly if your options are limited.

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### Generally Speaking, What is Your Hope and Your Goal for Your Teenager?

- Independence, autonomy, and maturity
- Movement from childhood to adulthood doesn't proceed in a straight line
- Progress in some areas, while delay in other areas

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How is the period of adolescence different from the childhood years?

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### General Developmental Tasks for Adolescents

- Planning and preparing for either advanced education and/or career
  - "What will I do next?" "What contribution will I make to society?"
- Formation of a personal identity
  - "Who am I?"
- Emotional intimacy
  - "Who will I be emotionally close to?" (parents/friends/boyfriend/girlfriend)

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### General Developmental Tasks for Adolescents

- Increasing interest in sexuality
- More complicated thinking for some adolescents
- Adolescent egocentrism: "I am unique."
- Independence from parents and increasing dependence on peers/friends

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What are the specific issues relevant to bereaved adolescents?

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### Elements to Consider to Understand the Impact of the Death

- The adolescent's role in the family system or peer group
  - How has their role changed? Some changes may be positive; some may be a burden.
- The nature of the relationship lost
  - The losses represented among this audience today may include a spouse, partner, parent, sibling, son, daughter, friend. For the adolescent, the loss was most likely a parent or a caregiver.
- How involved was the parent in the adolescent's life?
- What specifically has the teenager lost?

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### The Varied Roles of a Parent

- Did they lose their primary identity figure?
- Their protector?
- Their coach?
- Their best friend?
- Their hunting and fishing partner?
- The person who was going to teach them how to be a man or a woman?
- The person who was going to teach them to drive?
- The person who would walk them down the aisle when they get married?

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## Elements to Consider to Understand the Impact of the Death

- Changes in the social and family support network
- How is their remaining parent or caregiver coping?
- Are there extended family nearby available for support?
- Relationship to religious community?
- Adolescent's psychological maturity and coping skills

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## Adolescent Grief Realities

- Reluctance to attend counseling and/or support groups
  - Research shows that individual counseling, family counseling, or a support group can be a helpful experience
- If they refuse all of the above, ask:
  - "What would help you feel better?" (Wolfelt)

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## Friends Gathered at the Site of a Roadside Fatality of Two Teenagers



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## Adolescent Grief Realities

- Male and female adolescents may mourn in different ways
- Anger and acting-out more likely for males, although not limited to males
- Females are at risk of sexually acting out following father loss

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## Both adolescents and children mourn in doses (one year after earthquake in Sichuan Province, China, 2009)



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## Adolescent Grief Realities

- Reluctance to openly express feelings if doing so sets them apart from their peers
  - "I am unique, but I don't want to be different"
- In times of ongoing stress, many teens report a need for some privacy or "alone time."



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## Adolescent Grief Realities

- Adolescents may fear losing emotional control and may even be frightened by normal feelings of grief
- May have a lack of familiarity with the intensity and duration of grief responses
- An unwillingness to express normal feelings may lead to complications in grieving
- Supportive adults can provide a safe place to express those feelings, especially when others may be telling them to “get over it” or “man-up” or “move on”

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## Grief Counselor James Ezell With his Grief Counseling Group at Camp



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## Adolescent Grief Realities

- Grief has its own timetable
  - We can't get over a loss like losing a lot of weight on a rapid weight loss program
  - TAPS Good Grief camp and others can help, but the grief isn't over when the camp ends
- Shy, quiet adolescents will naturally have a more difficult time expressing their grief in words
- There are numerous other ways to express grief through writing, artwork, athletics

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## Dak Prescott, 2016 rookie quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys

Before he goes to bed Saturday, the night before the first NFL start of his career for the Dallas Cowboys, Dak Prescott will text his mother, Peggy. He won't hit send, but he will keep the note, like he has so many other notes over the past three years. And he is sure she will read it. Peggy Prescott passed away on Nov. 3, 2013, after a year and a half battle with colon cancer.

[http://www.espn.com/blog/dallas-cowboys/post/\\_id/4753841/dak-prescott-carries-mothers-strength-with-him](http://www.espn.com/blog/dallas-cowboys/post/_id/4753841/dak-prescott-carries-mothers-strength-with-him)



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## Prince Harry & Prince William About the Death of Their Mother

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzUDnPDJdWQ>
- <https://graziadaily.co.uk/celebrity/news/prince-william-princess-diana-grief-2/>



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## All of this grief: Prince Harry Opens Up About His Mental Health

In his late 20s, Harry crumbled, the prince told The Daily Telegraph in a recent, revealing interview that lent "unprecedented insight into his past." "It wasn't until he began speaking with friends and family, then a therapist, that Harry realized it was the unattended, unresolved grief of losing his mother so young that was possibly crippling him."

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/04/17/i-just-didnt-know-what-was-wrong-prince-harry-opens-up-about-his-mental-health/>



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How do I distinguish between normal/typical grief reactions in adolescents and those reactions which require professional assistance?

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### Normal Behaviors for Adolescents

- Limit-testing and rebellion
- Increased reliance on peers (vs. parents) for support and problem solving
- Egocentrism (the world revolves around them)
- Increased moodiness
- Increased sexual awareness and interest
- Impulsiveness, lack of common sense

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### Invincibility Fable



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### Personal Identity, Desire to be Unique



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### Existential Dilemmas: "What is the Point of Life?"



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### Grief or Clinical Depression ?

- In grief, the predominant affect is feelings of emptiness and loss
- In clinical depression, it is persistent depressed mood and the inability to anticipate happiness or pleasure
- In grief, the sadness will subside, then typically come back in waves
- In a disorder, the depression is persistent

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### "Red Flag" Behaviors (Danger Signs) in Adolescents

- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, and low self-esteem
- Isolation from family and friends
- Academic failure or overachievement

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### "Red Flag" Behaviors (Danger Signs) in Adolescents

- Dramatic change in personality or attitude
- Eating disorders
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Fighting or legal troubles
- Inappropriate sexual behaviors

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### Out-of-Control Arguments and Conflicts

- Some adolescents provoke conflicts and arguments as a release of emotion and/or a distraction from the pain
- Can be difficult for a grieving parent to step back and recognize this for what it is
- A counselor or family therapist may be needed if these arguments are seriously disrupting family life

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### Why Individuals Have Different Reactions to a Death: Mediators of the Bereavement Experience

- Who the person(s) were who died (parent/gender)
- How necessary was the deceased to the sense of well-being of the survivor?
- The cause of death: suicide, homicide, combat, cancer
- Location of the death: home, school, hospital, foreign battlefield
- Fulfillment of funeral or burial practices of the culture and faith
- Quality of the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased prior to the death

(Worden, 1996 & 2009)

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### Why Individuals Have Different Reactions to a Death: Mediators of the Bereavement Experience

- Availability of social support and helpfulness of the social support (timeliness; was it available when they needed it?)
- Other stressors on the family (the more stressors, the higher the depression; functioning level of the children was lower)
- Economic/financial well-being of the family

(Worden, 1996 & 2009)

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### A Simple Format for Grief Counseling

In summer and weekend retreats at Fernside Center for Grieving Children, they focus on four topics:

1. Telling their story
2. Acknowledging and sharing feelings
3. Changes in life (how it has changed)
4. Memories and saying goodbye

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## Signs of Progress

- Has anything good come out of this painful loss?
- How have you changed or grown?
- What new strengths have been discovered?

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## Important Life Lessons

*Life is short, but love is long*

Epitaph for 11-year old boy, Mells churchyard, Somerset, 1960  
(quoted by Dennis Klass & Tony Walter, 2001)

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## Parents and Caregivers

- Are you doing your own grief work?
- Are you taking care of your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs?
- Do not underestimate the importance of eating healthy, appropriate sleep, physical activity, spiritual life, and also have some fun when you can.
- When your child asks if you are okay: Be honest. But not too honest.

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## Having Fun and Being “In the Moment” at Camp Strong Heart



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## Little Things Matter

*Do not slight a drop of water for its small size, and do not regard a small act of kindness as being negligible.* (Buddhist Master Hsing Yun)

*Nothing is ever lost. All of our works remain.* (Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*)

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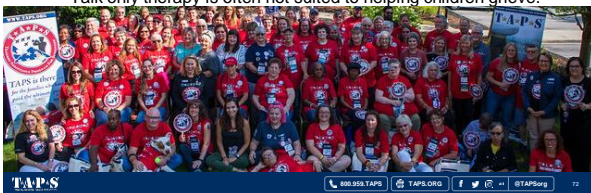
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## Summary

- Children and adolescents also grieve, yet often grieve in different ways than adults. Non-traditional settings may help them open up about their loss.
- Talk only therapy is often not suited to helping children grieve.



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## Questions?



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Please note: The information provided on this program is intended for educational purposes only.

If you or a loved one needs professional support, please contact TAPS 24/7 at 800-959-TAPS (8277).



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## About the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®

Launched in March 2018 through an alliance with HFA, the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® serves as a resource and training center, providing programs for both professionals working in the field of grief and loss and the public.



Presented by Boeing

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## Upcoming TAPS Institute Programs

**October 29** **Providing Hope and Healing to Those Coping with Trauma and Loss**

*Live Webinar, Noon-1:30 pm ET; 1.5 CE hours available*  
With **James S. Gordon, MD**, Founder and Executive Director, The Center for Mind-Body Medicine

**November 12** **Rebuilding Faith and Hope After Loss**

*Live Webinar, Noon-1:30 pm ET*  
With **Kevin Quiles, MDiv, MA, LPC, RYT**, Counselor, Body Mind Metaphor

**November 14** **Collage Therapy: Grief, Loss, and the Expressive Arts**

*10:00 am-4:00 pm ET; 3033 Wilson Blvd, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor; 5 CE hours available*  
With **Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT**, Art Therapist, Kristen Rita Strouse Foundation/Artful Grief

Visit [taps.org/institute](https://taps.org/institute) to learn more and RSVP!



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