



The WCPA News

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Students Living with Loss

By Pam Weiss, M.A.

This past year our students have experienced a year of public losses, beginning with the terrorist attack September 11th and recently including the deaths of St. Louisans Jack Buck and Darryl Kile. Violent events such as the attack on the World Trade Centers teaches them harsh lessons about life and loss, while personal losses closer to home make those lessons even more real. Too often we associate loss only with death and forget that today's children experience many different types of losses that may cause grief, only some of which are publicly acknowledged and socially supported:

- Loss of relationships related to – divorce or separation, substance abuse, adolescent breakups, pet loss, dysfunctional families and relocating.
- Loss of skills and abilities related to - grade retention, learning disabilities, ADHD and other disabilities.
- Loss of self related to – a new physical disability or physical, sexual, emotional or deprivational abuse.
- Loss related to a suicide, homicide, illness, or act of violence.

Loss, grief and death are inevitable experiences of life. Students bring their lives with them into the classroom, including their losses whether from divorce, abuse, relocating, or death. Child and adolescent grief is expressed in countless ways that are consistent with their life experience, cultural and social context, individual personality and age. The psychological literature tells us that school aged children often develop phobias, sleeping disorders, academic problems and antisocial behavior. These losses affect the student's behavior and performance in school. A full range of grief responses evident in students at school include:

Behavioral Changes:

- Disrupts class or becomes class clown
- Rejects old friends/withdraws
- Seems tired all the time
- Becomes aggressive/destructive/fights
- Uses drugs or alcohol
- Drops out of after-school activities
- Phones home often during school
- Uses play to work through feelings (particularly age 6-12)
- Avoids their grief, not wanting to stand out from peers (particularly teens)
- Acts out sexually, in order to be comforted (particularly teens)

Academic Changes:

- Earns lower grades
- Can't concentrate/complete assignments
- Misses classes
- Regresses/loses academic skills

Emotional Changes:

- Overly sensitive or tearful
- Unsettled
- Worried and afraid
- Tense
- Depressed or sad
- Guilty/feels responsible (particularly age 6-12).

Continued, Page 2

SOCIAL SKILLS GROUPS ARE NOW AVAILABLE FOR STUDENTS OF ALL AGES!

We are excited to share that social skills groups are now beginning at the WCPA office. These groups focus on skills such as making friends, fitting in, managing anger and taking responsibility. Families may call our office, at (314) 275-8599 to learn more about the groups and how to get their student involved. WCPA can also run a group at your school.

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

New Addition to the WCPA Newsletter “For Parents Only”

At the suggestion of several readers, the WCPA News is adding a new section to our newsletter. “For Parents Only” will be a regular feature, sharing information of interest to parents and families. This feature is being printed on plain white paper for your ease in copying and distributing to your students’ families, if you so choose.

In addition, our newsletters and “For Parents Only” sections are always featured within our website. You can find us at WWW.WCPASTL.COM, and you will see a link to our newsletter archives there on the home page. You are always welcome to print extra copies of the newsletter for your faculty or parents directly from the website.

Students Living with Loss (Continued)

These outward signs of grief, as seen from the perspective of school professionals, include most of the overtly negative behaviors that can disrupt a class or set a child’s academic and social career on a downhill slide. Often, it is the teacher who first identifies how difficult a loss is for a child after a move, divorce or death. Whether the teacher helps the child directly or indirectly, by supporting the parents and guiding classmates, there are some key goals to remember:

- To validate students’ losses and explore their questions and concerns.
- To help the student accept their own feelings and that their feelings are normal.
- To share information that empowers students to make informed decisions.
- To develop students’ vocabulary of grief and mourning.
- To explore feelings through assigning activities that facilitate self-expression.
- To commemorate the loss, teaching the student that all lives have value.
- To reduce academic requirements, when appropriate.
- To help students establish healthy coping strategies, which enhance their ability to communicate, manage their emotions and direct their energy constructively.
- To share that going on means participating, loving again and enjoying life.

There are many students who have little access to grief support resources, who have experienced losses that put them at risk for delinquency, emotional problems, academic failure and low self-esteem. These students benefit from having their losses validated by their school, from the opportunity to constructively express their most painful emotions, from receiving support and from learning about the grief process itself. Teachers who are sensitive to children’s losses, informed about appropriate interventions, and willing to address the taboo subject of death can create a classroom that cultivates students’ social and emotional skills. These teachers increase students’ chances of establishing behaviors and relationships that will allow them to more fully realize their potential as human beings.

When extreme behaviors and intense feelings surface, a referral to a mental health professional is suggested. Grief therapy is available at West County Psychological Associates for these students and their families.

Pam Weiss, MA, received her Master’s degree in Counseling from Webster University, and has a variety of clinical experience with children, youth, and families. In addition, she is certified as an Advanced Bereavement Counselor and Facilitator working with children, adolescents, adults and families. Ms. Weiss currently provides training and consultation within the Comprehensive School Services program, and mental health therapy to individuals and families.

From the Director

Welcome back to another school year! For many of us it was a very short summer. One of the great joys of my life, no matter what season, is going to the movies. It would not be unusual for me, after a full work week, to see two or three new movies a week. Because of the frequency, I see some very good movies and some very poor ones (unintentionally). I'm sharing this because I saw a movie recently, entitled TADPOLE, that most distressed me. The movie received great reviews from many different critics. The basic story line is that a 15 year old boy briefly becomes sexually involved with a 40 year old female friend of his parents. The story is hailed as a comedy, witty, a bonbon of a treat. It is billed as a "rare find in a summer of blockbusters and overblown budgets." In one review it asks, "...what if the roles were reversed (older man and young girl)? Would we find this charmer quite as funny? Oddly, TADPOLE nearly completely ignores the taboo that 40 year olds shouldn't be seducing 15 year-olds - precocious or not. But playing with that provocative line is part of the film's allure, and it seems to work..." (filmcritic.com)

Both the critics' reviews, including one in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the movie condone behavior that the law would identify as child abuse or statutory rape. How easy is it to delude ourselves that this behavior is nothing more than a young boy coming of age? How distorted does our thinking become when these scenes are packaged as charming and brilliant? I wonder how our children are to protect themselves when the media itself exploits them. How do we teach children appropriate boundaries when we, the adults, have no sense of them ourselves? After reading at least a dozen reviews of the movie, not one commented on the wrongness of the movie's premise. This is just one instance in a sea of examples where the lack of awareness or caring leads us down a path that can eventually be harmful to our children.

It seems that now more than ever it is so important that we, the adults, are consistent with our children in regard to our words, behaviors and values. Perhaps the first order of business is to become consistent with ourselves, and then give a consistent message to our children. How else can we expect them to internalize the values that we uphold?

- *Mary Fitzgibbons*

Grant Specialist Now at WCPA ~

All too often, we at WCPA meet with school administrators who see the need for the types of services we provide, but are unsure of how to financially afford high-quality, comprehensive services for their school. Over the past several years, more of the schools with whom we work have decided to look outside their school system for these funds, often applying for grant monies. Several schools whom we serve fund comprehensive school services through grant money, year after year. They often tell us that grantwriting has been easier than they ever imagined and extremely beneficial to their schools.

Understanding the time and effort it may take to write some grants, WCPA has recently hired a part-time grant specialist to work on this issue for our schools. Carrie Ackerman, MSW, comes to the position with a variety of experiences with children, families, schools, and organizational leadership. She has already completed a comprehensive list of Missouri foundations which fund school services such as ours. She now plans to focus on providing direct service to schools who receive WCPA services, learning about each school's individual needs and desire for grant-funded services. She will lead individual schools and WCPA consultants through the grant application process.

We are so excited to begin offering this type of assistance to our schools. If your school is interested in certain WCPA services but has questioned your ability to afford them, please contact Carrie Ackerman at our office. She will meet with you in person to discuss the services in which you're interested and to get started assisting you in finding grant funding.

Charles Pap, Ph.D., Now Providing Psychological Testing

We at WCPA are delighted to announce the addition of Charles Pap, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist who is providing psychological testing services at WCPA for adolescents and adults. Research has shown that a combination of psychological testing data with a clinical interview leads to a more reliable diagnosis than testing or interview alone. Psychological testing is useful in assessing intellectual functioning, learning disorders, attentional disorders, depression, anxiety, personality disorders and thought disorders. A variety of tests are available at WCPA, including the Wechsler tests of intelligence, Woodcock-Johnson tests of Achievement, Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory, Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Adolescent version and Second Revision), Test of Variables of Attention, Rorschach Inkblot Test, and Thematic Apperception Test, among others. Clients may expect a thorough evaluation with individually administered tests, an explanation of the results, and a comprehensive written report. At the client's request, the psychological testing results may be shared with psychiatrists, therapists, and/or schools to help in treatment and education planning. For further information, you may contact Dr. Pap.

Avoiding the Misdiagnosis of Students' Attention Problems

By Cathy Hasler, Ph.D.

Johnny fidgets in his chair, talks to his neighbors, and just does not seem to be able to focus on his work. Janie stares off into space frequently and does not seem to be listening when you speak to her. Bobby gets out of his chair to do anything other than the work you give him. Do we suggest that their parents talk with their pediatricians about medication? Not yet.

Children display symptoms related to attention for lots of reasons, only one of which is Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). When children are depressed they may have difficulty concentrating or be agitated. Children who are anxious may have difficulty with remaining seated, staying focused, and fidgeting. If a child is having problems with learning, he or she may avoid the work, turn in incomplete assignments, or not follow through on instructions. All of the above symptoms are true of ADHD, but are also true of other disorders, so a referral to a pediatrician or psychiatrist is premature until these psychological and educational issues can be evaluated.

In order to accurately diagnose ADHD, a thorough psychological evaluation is needed. First, it is important to determine a child's level of intellectual functioning to make sure that we have appropriate expectations for him or her. This can be done through the administration of an individually administered intelligence test (an IQ test). Second, we need to know if the child is having problems with learning; in other words, does he or she have a learning disability? To determine whether or not a child has a learning disability, he or she needs to be administered an achievement test, the results of which are compared with the results of his or her IQ test. Third, we need to know if the symptoms are unusual for a child of their age. This can be done through the completion of behavioral rating scales that are completed by parents and teachers. Fourth, it is important to determine if a child's attentional skills are significantly lower than would be expected given their level of intelligence. This can be done by administering a continuous performance test, the results of which are compared with the results of his or her IQ test. Finally, we need to know if the child is experiencing emotional problems, such as depression, anxiety or family problems, that might account for the symptoms we are seeing in the classroom. A variety of tests and interviews can address these possible causes of inattention. The kind of testing described above can only be conducted by a psychologist. Pediatricians who are cautious about their prescription of stimulant medications frequently require their patients to have an evaluation of this kind.

West County Psychological Associates is proud to be able to provide this kind of thorough evaluation for children who are displaying problems with attention, to ensure that they receive appropriate diagnosis and treatment for the causes of their difficulties. In addition, we provide psychological assessments for the full spectrum of childhood and adolescent psychological issues.

Dr. Hasler is a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in the evaluation and treatment of attentional difficulties in children. Her other areas of interest include the treatment of depression, anxiety, perfectionism and conduct disorders in children and parenting issues for adults.

When Should a Child Be Referred for a Speech-Language Evaluation?

By Rebecca Goldman, Speech-Language Pathologist

Deciding if a child has speech or language problems can be a challenging issue. Identifying these issues could determine the success of a child in school as well as in social situations. If you see a child exhibiting difficulty with any of the following, a speech-language evaluation should be considered: expressing themselves (verbally or in writing), telling information or stories, organizing their thoughts, comprehending information (listening or reading), following directions (verbal or written), listening in general, performing school work, doing math word problems, managing their own behavior, recalling facts or events, memory problems or forgetfulness, persistent hoarse or scratchy voice, eating or swallowing, speech issues (substituting or omitting sounds, difficulty saying a certain sound, lisping, getting stuck on sounds or stuttering), or if their jaw, tongue, and/or lips do not seem to work correctly.

Complete speech-language evaluations are now available at WCPA. Anyone desiring more information may contact Ms. Goldman at our office.

Rebecca Goldman has a Master's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders and is a licensed speech-language pathologist certified by the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. Ms. Goldman has worked at Saint Louis Children's Hospital and Central Institute for the Deaf.



Dr. Mary Fitzgibbons, Director

FOR PARENTS ONLY:

Improving Your Child's Social Skills

Written by Jennifer Gauvain, MSW, LCSW

Today's children and teens face a variety of social challenges in their daily lives. From home to school, every day involves interaction with others. Relationships with peers contribute substantially to both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which children grow to function as adults. Interestingly, the single best childhood predictor of adult functioning is not academic success or classroom behavior, but rather the skill with which a child gets along with other children! Children who are not liked by their peers and who often engage in inappropriate behaviors with authority figures are at risk of developing problematic social behaviors later in life. While some children are naturally talented socially, many children need to be taught these skills.

The most effective social skills training techniques empower children to attend to the needs of others while also embracing their own self-worth. These techniques combine modeling, coaching, and reinforcement. "Modeling" simply means to exemplify those qualities that you would like your child to possess. Our children watch us and do as we do. Teaching patience to a child, for example, is no easy task if the child's parents and teachers do not themselves demonstrate patience in everyday life. "Coaching" is a way to impart social skills to kids and teens directly, through concrete advice and realistic instructions. When we see our child engage in an immature or ineffective socialization, we can point it out and offer tangible suggestions on how to do better in the future. Similarly, "reinforcement" means that when we see our child using mature, age-appropriate social skills, we let him/her know the good job they're doing. Unfortunately, it's very easy to forget to reinforce our kids for the good social skills they use.

Important techniques for fostering social skills that you can try include:

- Helping your children label and verbalize their feelings
- Teaching problem-solving skills
- Teaching developmentally-appropriate anger management skills
- Providing guidance on reading non-verbal social cues (body language)
- Discussing interpersonal conflict and appropriate solutions
- Promoting cooperative rather than competitive behavior
- Promoting good communication skills

It is clear that more and more parents are concerned about the day to day issues children are facing, such as making new friends, maintaining relationships, and ultimately becoming responsible adults. Success is not just measured on a student's academic or athletic abilities but on his or her ability to be a decent and empathetic person. Through the use of modeling, coaching, and reinforcement, parents and other adults can help children to learn and use social skills that will benefit them for a lifetime.

For students who have difficulties in the social arena, there is room to grow. We offer social skills training groups for students of all ages. For more information, please call Jennifer Gauvain at our office.