

On Early Childhood Mental Health

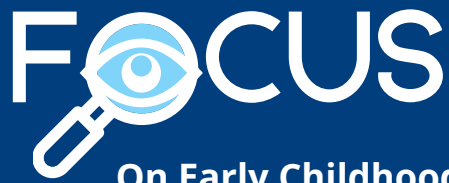
Dealing with Loss and Change

When Ali was three years old, her family moved to a new town. She lost the babysitter who had taken care of her while her parents worked, but they never explained why the babysitter didn't come with them. All of a sudden she wasn't there and Ali didn't know why. Ali reacted the only way she knew how – she refused to speak to her dad for nine months because she blamed him for the move. How might Ali's parents have helped her cope with the loss of a beloved babysitter?

Kinds of loss and change: a teacher leaving in the middle of the year, a friend moving away, divorce, move to another town and school, death

Ways young children express grief:

- Emotional shock, often expressed by withdrawal and not showing any feelings
- Immature behavior, like needing to be held, difficulty separating from parents
- Acting-out behavior, demonstrating the child's internal feelings of anger, fear and helplessness
- Asking the same questions repeatedly, like why did this happen, where is so-and-so?



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How to help children handle the inevitable losses and changes that are part of life

- Recognize that children will notice the loss/change and don't ignore it.
- If you can, explain ahead of time what will happen. This helps children begin to prepare and develop confidence that they can successfully manage grief and loss.
- If you can, give children the opportunity to say goodbye—for example, to a teacher who is leaving.
- Reassure children that you will continue to love and care for them even while things are changing.
- Encourage children to talk about how they feel. This normalizes feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness.
- Talk about how change is a normal part of everyday life: for example, children outgrow their clothes, learn to write their names, tie their shoes, ride a bicycle.
- Assure children that they are not to blame for what happened and do not lie to them.
- Use the opportunity to help children learn new skills, like being flexible and working with others.
- Acknowledge and treat children as though you understand that what affects them is their business

Resources

- *Grief and Loss*. PA Department of Education. <http://bit.ly/2m2Dknk>
- *Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss* by Claudia Jewett Jarrati
- *Dealing with Change and Loss*, Partnership for Children <http://bit.ly/2kpvDY2>

