



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
A SAMHSA Supported Drug-Free Community Coalition
Led By Centre County Drug and Alcohol



ARTICLE 11 – MAY 28, 2008 – Impact of Loss on Children and Families

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When Zachery comes to spend the night, he always has a bath before bedtime. Sharing in bath time fun, “Blueman” – a one-inch, blue plastic figure resembling a bunch of grapes – usually dives in and out of the tub. One night while emptying the tub, Blueman went down the drain. Zachery began to sob and came downstairs with tears in his eyes to tell me what happened.

To Zachery, Blueman was a meaningful object, so imagine the potential feelings and impact of a divorce or the death of a parent on a child. It is estimated that one-third of American children will spend the first 18 years with only one parent, 1 in 20 will lose a parent by death before age 18, and since 1990, 1 in 3 children under age 18 have divorced parents. (Cantrell, 1986)

Children DO feel and experience loss. Both adults and children grieve. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D says, “If one is old enough to love, one is old enough to grieve.” However, children grieve in their own unique ways and time. Often, parents, teachers, and caregivers assume “all is well” as the children laugh and play and carry on with their lives. Then, out of nowhere, while engaging in an activity they used to do with Daddy, a six year old daughter says, “I miss Daddy. I wish we could play Legos together again.” Then, just as quickly, she wipes away her tears and runs outside to play. Children often grieve in small doses. Something or someone may trigger a memory which carries a feeling of anger or sadness. When an important person in their lives, leaves or dies, children, like adults, may feel stress. They may be confused about what’s happening. They may be afraid. Their once safe and secure world has been turned upside down. Roles change and children often take on grown-up roles to “fill Daddy’s shoes.”

When children experience loss, they need stability, safety and constancy within their environment. They find solace in routines. School and structure provide a sense of security. They are glad to experience “normal” somehow, somewhere in their lives. As caring adults, model for them that it’s okay to be mad or sad or scared. Children need to see adults openly express their grief. This not only encourages, but validates their feelings. Professional help is also available. “Tides” is a program for grieving children and their families following the death of a loved one. The program is offered at no cost to children ages 4 – 18 years and their families. If you are interested in participating or would like more information, call (814) 692-2233 or toll free at (866) 883-8608.

The night Blueman “died”, we were able to talk about the joy he brought into our lives and share how we would miss him. We were thankful for the time and fun we had shared. Give yourself and your children the opportunity to mourn your losses. Everyone will benefit from the open expressions of and conversations about loss.

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