

Helping Children in Care Cope with Loss and Change - Nature's Way

Caroline Jay

Abstract

One of my closest friends is a foster carer who has just become the mother of a newly adopted child. I have watched her expertly bring up her own children and then spent many hours with her talking through the pros and cons of becoming a foster carer. It was a big decision.

Keywords

Children in care, coping with loss, change

Corresponding author:

Caroline Jay, Author of the *Seeds of Hope Bereavement and Loss Activity Book*

One of my closest friends is a foster carer who has just become the mother of a newly adopted child. I have watched her expertly bring up her own children and then spent many hours with her talking through the pros and cons of becoming a foster carer. It was a big decision. Her main concerns were managing all the emotional and psychological issues that children in residential care would inevitably bring with them and coping with the loss involved on both sides were they to be moved on for adoption or other reasons.

She decided to take the plunge. Since then I have witnessed at first hand just how high the level of loss can be for children who can no longer live with their family of origin and this, of course, includes those in residential care. Not only is there the initial, highly significant loss of their birth family but there may well be other adversities to be managed such as abuse or neglect, betrayals of trust or feelings of abandonment - losses of many different kinds. I have seen how, with the best will in the world, not all foster placements or adoptions work out. Every time a placement breaks down, the child will return to residential care carrying with them yet another loss and change of circumstance to be managed.

It occurs to me that it is not just the children who are affected. For every child, there will be residential care staff (or foster carers like my friend) who will repeatedly 'lose' a child in their care to a placement or adoption or a planned 'moving on'. Those working in residential care will then be the ones offering support when a child returns into their care for whatever reason.

The huge ranges of emotion we may feel when grieving for any loss are not easy to manage - for anyone. For adults, previous experiences of loss in our lives will inevitably

colour the support we are able to offer. For children, loss and change in their early years will affect them at every stage of their lives, particularly if these losses are not adequately addressed at the time. Children are very resilient and often seem to be coping remarkably well, with whatever situation they find themselves in. However, still waters can run deep and children do not always have the language to articulate their feelings. I believe this is where nature and the outside world can become a very effective tool in helping them cope with change and loss. Connection with nature and the outside world can provide stability and be immensely grounding and healing at times when the world feels out of balance. This can be true for adults too. It certainly was for me when, without warning, my first child, Laura, was stillborn. My hospital notes said I was a mother but I had no child. My world was turned upside down. I turned to nature not only to help me manage the dark place I found myself in but also later to help me explain what had happened to Laura to her younger brother and sister.

I realised that so much in nature echoes the changes that happen in life. None of us can live life without change. For children in residential care, however, change can come to mean catastrophic and therefore often unmanageable loss, thus making all forms of change a potential threat. Observation of the patterns in nature can offer an opportunity to reframe this notion of change into something that is not always threatening, reintroducing the idea of change implying not only loss but also new beginnings. How amazing to see a grub become a caterpillar that disappears into a chrysalis out of which bursts a butterfly! Or frogspawn turn into tadpoles that then turn into frogs. The tadpole undergoes a major change - he loses his tail but importantly he gains his legs!

Lifecycles in nature can help us understand that change and loss are part of a natural order. "Death is a part of life is a part of death is a part of life is ..." and so on as the circle turns. A seed becomes a plant that will have flowers that become fruits that contain the seeds from which new plants will grow. A baby becomes a child who becomes an adult who becomes an old person who will eventually die as new babies are born. The four stages of the life cycle in Nature reflect the four stages of a human life.

A young boy I worked with (and his family) were finding it hard to cope with the fact that his beloved Gran was seriously ill. His Mum was also pregnant. Everything was changing for him. He was sad that he could no longer play games with his Gran. We looked together at how plants grow and die all the time - just as people are born, grow old and die. We talked about life cycles - how an apple pip can become an apple tree that grows big enough and old enough to have apples of its own. Inside these apples are the pips from which more apple trees will grow. We talked about what a long life his Gran had lived. When she sadly died and his baby sister was born soon after, our explorations into the world of nature gave him a way of looking at life and death, both generally and specifically in relation to his immediate family. The process of working through some of the activities I had devised (like the Changes one illustrated below) also helped him to explore his feelings.



Changes

Life is full of changes; they happen all the time. Some changes are harder to cope with than others. Sometimes we know when change will happen; sometimes we don't. Sometimes we are ready for change; sometimes we're not. To change is to grow. This chapter helps us explore different types of changes and what happens before and after them...

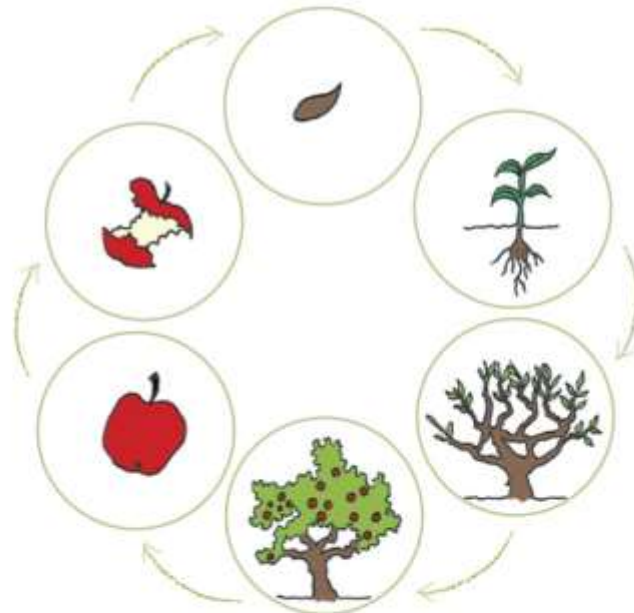
Where do you think you would be on the Apple Tree circle?

Where do you think your mum or dad would be?

Where do you think your grandma or grandpa would be?

Make up your own Changes Circle, like the Apple Tree one. It could be about:

- ⊗ you
- ⊗ an animal or insect you've seen
- ⊗ your family.



I realised that all these activities might help other children who were struggling with loss and change so I decided to share them. The idea for the *Seeds of Hope Bereavement & Loss Activity Book* was born. My hope is that the activities will not only provide structure for and clarification of the grieving process for any child undergoing loss or change but also enhance their lives by igniting their interest in nature and the outside world. The way in which a child's journey through grief is handled will fundamentally determine how they

manage all future losses in adulthood. I hope that these activities will empower children to explore their feelings in ways they can understand - by drawing, playing, exploring and above all having fun. They are relevant to any child or young person who is experiencing loss, including children and young people in residential care.

Endnotes

Caroline Jay

Author of the *Seeds of Hope Bereavement and Loss Activity Book*

Published in 2014 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers