

Chapter Overview

Feelings and Reactions about the Death

Goals

- Describe feelings related to the death
- Tolerate (rather than avoid or deny) upsetting emotions
- Implement adaptive coping strategies

Materials

- Child's scrapbook
- Markers or colored pencils
- Two copies of "Feelings and Reactions about the Death" (one copy for the child's scrapbook, one copy for the caregiver)
- Letter for the caregiver

Guidelines and Process Issues

Children often feel overwhelmed by their grief and experience a mix of emotions and reactions. It is important to help children identify, describe, and express feeling states that are commonly associated with bereavement. Children will identify with many of the feelings expressed by Cory in this chapter. This can help reduce children's sense of isolation as they realize that other children have experienced similar feelings and reactions.

While the story normalizes feelings and reactions and facilitates open communication, some children remain guarded, especially about painful emotions. Strategies to encourage openness include asking children to say which of Cory's feelings and reactions they identify with the most or which feelings they think were the hardest for Cory to talk about.

This session encourages the use of a coping strategy called Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe! This technique will be most effective if taught to both the child and their caregiver, practiced daily at bedtime, and modeled by the caregiver. Once the child has mastered this technique in calm settings, they can be coached by their caregiver to use it when they need to self-regulate. This technique alone will not be enough to help children to manage strong emotions. It is beyond the scope of this book to detail a comprehensive emotional regulation protocol; therefore, additional interventions to support children and their caregivers should be explored.

The caregiver letter reviews common emotions experienced by grieving children. Emotional support skills are reviewed and tips for reassuring the child are provided.

Caregivers are taught a technique called the Brag Book. When used consistently, the Brag Book increases the child's desirable behavior, elevates their self-esteem, and improves the parent-child relationship.

Feelings and Reactions about the Death

Welcome back to the story! Today we're going to talk more about feelings. When someone dies, we have many different feelings about what happened. It is okay to feel however you feel about the death. Ana asked Cory, "What are some of the feelings you have had since (the deceased) died?" Cory said, "I don't want to talk about my feelings. I just want to pretend that everything is fine." Ana replied, "It can be hard to talk about feelings. Many children want to pretend that everything is fine. But talking about your feelings is a good way to help yourself feel better." Cory wanted to feel better, so Cory talked to Ana.

Cory told Ana, "Sometimes I feel happy like when I'm playing or doing something fun. Sometimes I feel sad because I miss (the deceased). Sometimes I cry. Sometimes (the caregiver) cries. I don't like it when (the caregiver) cries." Ana said, "Cory, it's okay to feel happy and it's okay to feel sad. When you feel sad, it's okay to cry. And it's okay for your (the caregiver) to cry. Sad feelings don't stay forever."

What makes Cory feel happy?

What makes you feel happy?

Show with your face and body what happy looks like.

Does Cory feel sad sometimes?

Is it okay to cry if you feel sad?

Show with your face and body what sad looks like.

What makes you feel sad?

Do sad feelings stay forever?

Ana said, “Cory, you did a good job showing with your face and body what happy and sad looks like! Tell me more about your feelings.” Cory said, “Sometimes I feel angry. It’s no fair I don’t have my (the deceased) anymore. It’s no fair I can’t do things with (the deceased) anymore. Everything’s different now and I don’t like it. I’m angry!”

What makes Cory feel angry?

What makes you feel angry?

When Cory feels angry, Cory’s face gets an angry look. When Cory feels very, very angry, Cory sometimes throws a tantrum. This is when Cory yells and hits and kicks! Ana explained, “Cory, it’s okay to feel angry, but it’s not okay to yell or hit or kick. When you feel angry, you can get calm by doing Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe!” Ana taught Cory how to do it.

Let’s learn Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe! and then do it together:

1. Say to yourself: “Stop!”
2. Freeze your body (don’t move your body) for three seconds.
3. Picture in your mind your favorite kind of cookie.
4. Do Cookie Breathing to calm your body. (To do Cookie Breathing, imagine your favorite kind of cookie freshly baked, hot out of the oven. Smell the yummy cookies and then blow on them to cool them down. When you smell the cookies, breathe in through your nose for three seconds, then blow out through your mouth for four seconds. Do this three times or until your body is calm.)

Cory said, “Hey, it worked—I got calm by doing Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe! I feel better!” Ana was proud of Cory for doing such a good job doing Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe! Ana asked Cory, “Tell me more about your feelings.” Cory got an upset look. Cory said, “I feel like I’m bad. Sometimes I don’t listen. Sometimes I do bad things. Then I get in trouble and I feel more bad.” Ana reassured Cory, “All kids misbehave sometimes. No child acts perfectly good all the time.” Cory interrupted Ana and said, “But I’m bad. I made my (the deceased) get dead because when we had a fight, I said I hated them and wished they were dead. So I made it happen ... I made them get dead!” Ana replied, “people’s words or thoughts never make someone die. Nothing you said or did made your (the deceased) die. It is very sad that your (the deceased) died. But you did not make your (the deceased) die.” Cory felt better hearing this.

Do children act perfectly all the time?

If Cory misbehaves, does this mean Cory is bad?

If you misbehave, does this mean you are bad?

Can people's words or thoughts make someone die?

Did Cory do anything wrong or bad to make (the deceased) die?

Did you do anything wrong or bad to make (the deceased) die?

Ana said, "Cory, you are doing a good job talking about difficult feelings. What other feelings do you sometimes have?" Cory said, "Sometimes I feel worried more bad things will happen. I feel worried (the caregiver) will go away and never come back. I hold on tight to (the caregiver) so they won't go away. All these worried feelings make my tummy hurt. And sometimes I have scary dreams."

Is Cory worried more bad things will happen?

What else makes Cory feel worried?

What makes you feel worried?

Ana explained to Cory, "It's normal to feel worried sometimes. It's normal to have scary dreams. You can turn your scary dreams into happy dreams. Draw a picture of a scary dream. Then draw a happy ending to the dream."

Does Cory have scary dreams?

Draw a picture of a scary dream. Then draw a happy ending to the dream.

Dear Caregiver,

This chapter focuses on emotional reactions typically experienced by grieving children. The purpose is to help children understand that their feelings and reactions to the death are normal and to provide them with appropriate coping strategies. Here are some issues we covered:

Sadness

Cory's Story normalizes feelings of sadness and conveys the message that it is okay to cry. **You can help** your child by normalizing sad feelings and giving permission to cry and to talk openly about sadness. For example, "This is a sad time for our family. It's okay to cry when we feel sad. Let's talk about your feelings—what do you feel most sad about?" Although it is difficult to see your child in pain, and you might think it's best to try to take away their sadness, it's more helpful to listen, validate feelings, and provide physical comfort. This approach helps children openly express themselves and learn that they can handle difficult emotions.

Some children act as if nothing has happened. There can be many reasons for this. The child may not fully understand that the person is dead and not coming back; children grieve in small doses and their sadness might pass unnoticed; and children may express grief in other ways such as clinginess, aggression, or regression (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, or toileting accidents).

Don't be afraid to cry in front of your child or to openly express your sadness, as this will help your child's grief process. However, since some children feel anxious when they see their caregiver looking very sad or crying, it's important to reassure your child by saying "Even though I am sad, I am okay and I can still take care of you."

Guilt

It is common for children to blame themselves for the death. Children need to know that nothing they did or said caused the death. **You can help** your child by reiterating "nothing you said or did made (the deceased) die."

Worry

Bereaved children tend to have more worries. They may worry their caregiver will leave and never come back, or they may be concerned about who will take care of them. They may worry that other bad things are going to happen. Their worry might be expressed through behaviors such as separation anxiety or clinginess. Your child might have new fears (e.g., of the dark, monsters) or complain of stomach aches. You can help by repeatedly reassuring your child. For example, "I am going out for a little while but I will be back soon," "I am healthy and expect to be here to take care of you for a very long time," "There will always be a grown-up to take care of you," and "I will do my best to keep you safe."

Anger

Everyone gets angry at times, but some children have difficulty expressing their anger in appropriate ways. They may express their anger through temper outbursts or aggression. Children need to know that it is okay to be angry but it is not okay to let out anger in hurtful ways.

In today's session, your child learned a calming strategy called Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe! If you and your child practice this daily (ideally at bedtime, when calm), you will both be more prepared to use it to manage angry feelings.

Once your child has mastered Robot-Ragdoll (learned in a previous session) and Stop! Freeze! Cookie Breathe! they can choose the relaxation strategy they like best. Giving your child choices will empower them and will increase their motivation to use a healthy coping strategy.

Grieving children often feel overwhelmed by a mix of feelings. This can lead them to act out in different ways. **You can help** your child by praising them often. This will help to counter any bad feelings that your child may have. If your child is misbehaving a lot, you may feel like it's hard to praise them. However, when you regularly praise your child's desirable behavior, their behavior improves. The Brag Book is a simple technique that will help you praise your child more consistently. Here's how to do it:

- Get a notebook and keep it beside your child's bed.
- Praise your child's desirable behavior by using labeled praise. Labeled praise means telling your child exactly what they're doing that you like. For example: *I like the way you asked nicely for a treat; I'm proud of the way you shared your toy with your friend; It looks like you put a lot of effort into cleaning your room; You calmed yourself when you felt angry, I am so proud of you!*
- Each night at bedtime, write in the Brag Book one positive thing that your child did that day, then read the brag statement to your child. Keep the brag statement brief and praise one behavior.

Since praise is most effective when given right after the positive behavior occurs, use labeled praise in that moment, and then reinforce the praise statement at night when you write in the Brag Book. For example, "Thanks for listening when I asked you to put your toys away. Tonight, I'm going to write in your Brag Book about your good listening!"

If you feel like you don't have the time or energy to do the Brag Book, or your child's behavior has been especially challenging and you're too frustrated to praise them, then remind yourself that spending about five minutes a day doing the Brag Book will eventually lead to better behavior, enhanced self-esteem, improved relationship with your child, and a more peaceful home!

Attached is a copy of the chapter from today's session so you can better understand what was covered.