How to Talk to Children about Grief and Loss after COVID-19 Lockdown.

As schools prepare to go back, certified child play therapist and author Amanda Seyderhelm argues many schools are not properly equipped to support children experiencing grief, loss and change.

The challenges are real and unprecedented. Figures published by Child Bereavement UK (CBUK) show that there is one bereaved child in every classroom:

• 92% of children will experience a ‘significant’ bereavement before the age of 16;
• Up to 70% of schools have a bereaved pupil on their roll;
• One in 29 school-age children will have been bereaved of a parent or sibling;
• One in 16 has been bereaved of a close friend.

Teachers need to be upskilled fast, so they can recognise and combat mental health and behavioural issues in children caused by the Covid-19 lockdown, according to Seyderhelm, a Great Ormond Street Hospital ambassador. Seyderhelm’s latest book, Helping Children Cope with Loss and Change, a guide for parents and professionals, provides a toolkit for teachers and parents, using examples of play therapy to do so.

She said: “Schools have become the unofficial gatekeepers of childhood mental health. Teachers are expected to provide pastoral care to support these children, yet are not trained to deliver the provision. This means that teachers need effective classroom management tools to support children who are grieving and going through loss and change.”

Seyderhelm explains that every child is different and every situation specific. She offers three child-centred techniques to use when speaking with children:

1/ Do not confront. There is an idea that encouraging children to face their feelings and share them directly is the best way to help them. While this may help adults, this does not work for children. This approach will feel confrontational to a child and could drive their feelings deeper within. They are likely to shut down, withdraw and feel isolated and alone.

2/ Play to connect. Children’s natural language is play. When they play, they feel safe; they relax and they naturally share their world with you. Whether that play is a sandpit, the painting, or the puppets.

3/ Use Story to Feel Safe. Children identify with story characters which gives them an indirect way to express their feelings without feeling shamed or embarrassed.

Amanda Seyderhelm is an experienced play therapist and enables affected children to make sense of their feelings and to find a comfortable way to express themselves and their worries through their natural language of play. She practices in the East Midlands where she offers virtual one-to-one sessions with families, and at Great Ormond Street Hospital for children where she is an
ambassador. She is also the resident play therapist at the Faculty of The Child and Family Practice, London, a centre of excellence for child and family mental health. Amanda has a BA degree in English Literature and Social Anthropology, a Postgraduate Diploma in Play Therapy and a post-graduate certificate in systemic approaches to treating individuals, families and organisations from The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. She is a member of Play Therapy UK, The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice.

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*Helping Children Cope with Loss and Change: A Guide for Professionals and Parents*, is published by Routledge and available from:

www.routledge.com/9781911186281