

CHAPTER 4

HOW DO WE HEAL? IS IT OK TO CRY?

OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize differences in styles of processing loss as learned in families of origin.
2. Recognize commonalities and differences in the way parents experience the intense feelings that accompany a loss.
3. Identify special difficulties encountered in the chronic grieving process.
4. Identify impact of the grieving process on parenting tasks.

MATERIALS

DVD or videotape and player (*optional*)

Drawing paper and art supplies

INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome parents back to the group.
2. Check in on parents' experiences with the interactive family activities. Ask them to share what they learned from watching their child. Were they able to identify their child's feelings based upon the behavior they observed?

Note: This activity will continue to prepare parents for Session 5.

SESSION PLAN

1. If possible, show parents part of a DVD or video of a film depicting how parents respond very differently to a loss associated with their child. For example:

- ▶ In *Lorenzo's Oil*, Lorenzo's parents argue about whether to continue treatment.
- ▶ In *Parenthood*, the mother and father disagree about the seriousness of their son's social ineptitude.
- ▶ In *Angie*, Angie and her family experience the birth of a child with an incompletely formed arm.

Note: If you are unable to show a film clip, parents are likely to have seen films that illustrate this point and can identify and describe scenes in which parents' responses are at odds. Not all parents need to have seen a particular film for this retelling to be effective.

2. Focus on understanding where we learned about the intense feelings that accompany loss and how we express these feelings.
 - ▶ Have group members draw a picture that depicts an early loss in their lives. (The loss might not have been a death. It could have been your parents' divorce, a move, a friend moving, etc.). Ask them to think about how others around them treated their loss and how they did or didn't express their feelings.
 - ▶ When they have finished, have group members share their drawings. Have the group identify and discuss their families' rules for grieving. Emphasize the differences in how different families and cultures grieve.
3. Refer parents to their guidebooks to review the material on anger. Discuss the relationship between anger and loss and encourage the group to give examples of ways that adults can express anger appropriately.

Note: The discussion on anger is a good time for you to identify families in which the expression of anger is out of control and to refer them for individual or family therapy. By now, enough trust may have been established in the group that such suggestions can be offered with sensitivity.

4. Help group members recognize how chronic grieving may be different from grieving for a specific loss:
 - ▶ Invite group members to share their experiences with chronic grieving.
 - ▶ Ask members to brainstorm what a person in a state of chronic grief needs to do in order to soothe herself or himself.
 - ▶ How does the state of chronic grieving alter parenting tasks? Ask parents to be specific in identifying the effect of grieving on optimal parenting.

Note: Draw the group's attention to the fact that all of the feelings associated with the grieving process might also be described in general as feeling "out of control." Ask the group to think about how a parent's personal emotional experience might impact parenting: What do parents generally do when they feel out of control? Answers should include the idea that they try to control what they feel is the source of their pain—the child. In other words, parents typically attempt to control external events related to their feelings, rather than searching for ways to manage those feelings internally. Generally, this response leads to an escalation in the child's challenging behavior since children mirror their parents' emotional state.

CLOSING

1. Refer to the interactive family activities in the guidebook. Help parents begin to think about the first activity, in which they design an experiment in handling their child's behavior in a different way. Let parents know you will be following up on this activity during the next session.
2. Ask parents to create a family activity of their own before the next session.
3. Allow time for questions, comments, and wrap-up.

CHAPTER 7

CELEBRATING OUR CHILDREN

OBJECTIVES

1. Identify optimal growth potential in the child with special needs.
2. Problem-solve parents' applications of the specific skills necessary to reduce dependency and foster growth in the child.
3. Identify and share areas of joy and hope that parents are experiencing in relating to their child with special needs.

MATERIALS

None

INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome parents back to the group.
2. Invite group members to share their experience with the family activities they tried after the last session.
3. Ask group members to share their continuing observations of interactions in the home:
 - ▶ What behaviors did they observe in their child with special needs since the last session, and what feelings do they believe the child was acting out through these behaviors?
 - ▶ Ask the group to help one another explore how they might handle these situations better, if they did not go well.

SESSION PLAN

1. Focus discussion on understanding what arriving in Holland instead of Italy means and how the pain of certain experiences can be transforming. Work with the group to generate examples and help them express the idea that "I didn't think I could stand the pain, but I did, and I now value the experience." Help them see the possibility that as we let go and admit our losses, we open

to new and often inspiring gains. Refer parents to page 85 in the guidebook.

- ▶ Conduct a round: Have each participant complete the following sentence as applied to his or her child with special needs:

"I appreciate my child's _____."

- ▶ Conduct another round: Have each participant complete the following sentence as applied to being the parent of a child with special needs:

"I appreciate myself for _____."

2. Discuss the ways parents responded to the questions that follow in the guidebook about how having a child with special needs has affected family priorities, the experience of love, the demands of advocacy, spirituality, and siblings.
3. Apply the "optimal child" concept to the specific children with special needs represented in this group by having a parent describe a situation involving the child in which the parent encounters frustration. Have the parent explain in some detail what the child does or says so the group has a clear idea of the problem. If appropriate to the group, role-play the scene by having parents play different members of the family.
4. Complete as many role plays as time allows. After each one, encourage the group to provide helpful feedback to the parents who suggested the situations.

CLOSING

1. Look at the interactive family activities for the session. Think with parents about how to create an "Appreciation Day" for their children and for themselves.
2. Invite comments, questions, and discussion of unfinished business.
3. Remind participants that the next meeting will be the last one.