

Family Influence on the Child's Behavior in the Face of Loss

The child's response to loss must be viewed in the family context. The family system governs much of what the child knows and learns about sickness, death, and loss.

Family Styles of Dealing With Loss

1. **The family who rejects the loss.** Death and loss are never discussed in some families. The child, however, senses a dread but knows it is taboo to ask about what is happening in the family. Parents rationalize their behavior by stating that the child is too young to understand or what the child doesn't know won't hurt him or her.
2. **The family who blames someone for their situation.** The ethos of some families is that of finding fault. All behaviors are viewed in cause and effects terms. The key themes of family interaction is "Who did this?" or "It's your fault." Guilt is the force used to socialize the child. In reality, the guilty power is usually associated with unresolved guilt in the parents. Common to such families is rigidity, control, and inflexibility.
3. **The family who avoids deep, meaningful relationships.** In this type of family, the parents want family life, but are fearful of intimate relationships. This behavior is based on their need to avoid the pain of loss when a member leaves the family nest. The emotional tone of this family is "cool." Children are seldom if ever kissed and hugged and they are not encouraged to kiss or hug parents or siblings.
4. **The family who must carry on in the face of loss.** The family tends to deny or delay expression of feelings because loss is not acknowledged in the family system. The value of the individual members is not in who they are as persons, but in the role they play in the family constellation.
5. **The family who sees loss as chaotic.** This type of family generally exists in a borderline condition. They have few, if any personal or financial resources, and they depend on social agencies to care for them. The child in this family is usually stressed by parental discord.
6. **The family who attempts to handle crisis.** This family may be unable to handle the crisis at hand, but they recognize their limitations and attempt to find help, especially for the children. This family is very aware of the children's needs and searches for their responses. This family tries to provide opportunities for the children to grieve and express their feelings.
7. **The family who maintains open relationships.** Children from this type of family have learned to tolerate both the negative and positive aspects of human relationship.

Intimacy is held in high priority. When difficulties are a part of family life, the parents and children can make progress toward adaptation. Children may hurt at times, but they are not scarred by the experience.

(adapted from *Anatomy of Bereavement* by Beverly Raphael)