

**John Duggan:** Welcome. This is a special podcast from the American Counseling Association. I am John Duggan.

ACA realizes our communities today face unique challenges, challenges unknown to past generations. Kids, for example, in school, face aggression and pressures to succeed. At home, relationships break apart, and there may be violence in neighborhoods and local communities. Picking up the pieces after a death in the family can be tough. I know it's hard for an adult to do this. And making sense of life after a divorce in the family can feel overwhelming, especially for children and adolescents. In this podcast, we'll explore issues of grief and loss and the ways that kids cope. We know that focusing on strengths, resiliency and good healthy relationships makes a difference in the lives of our youth.

Joining me today is Dr. David Kaplan. Dr. Kaplan is the American Counseling Association's Chief Professional Officer. David has worked in private practice in college counseling settings. He's also served as a counselor educator. Dr. Kaplan is well-published on family counseling issues, and he's a past President of the American Counseling Association. David, welcome to the program.

Let's start with exploring issues related to the death of a parent and divorce in a family. How can volunteers and staff members of community centers help children and youth?

**David Kaplan:** One of the things to understand is that children are amazingly resilient. And we tend to think when anybody goes through a major loss or a child goes through a major loss that they're going to be damaged, and they're going to show visible signs, and they're going to be extremely upset. And in fact, that may not be the case at all. While the death of a parent or going through divorce can be extremely painful, and I don't want to minimize that, kids are amazingly resilient so they may be just be fine.

And they may be handling things okay. Volunteer or staff may find out about this from the parents, or the kid may say it themselves. And, I suspect that most people working in an agency or setting with youth are going to find out about it, because someone tells them that "Hey, you know, my mom and dad-- my dad left the house, my mom left the house" or "I wanted you to know that my son's father died."

**John:** How can a volunteer or staff person help this kid?

**David:** Well, you don't want to avoid it, but you want to do it in the right way. And so, if you're in a setting-- when you're in a setting that you're working with youth, there are things to think about that you do want to do and things that you don't want to do. So, you do want to spend time with the kids. You want to give them the message that you care. They're going through a lot of pain, they're going through a loss in their life, and they're looking for people to give them the message that they care.

Ask them how they are. Talk to them. "How are you doing? What's up?" Now with kids, you generally want to do this during an activity. Talk to kids while you're doing something. Go play basketball with them. Go shoot hoops. Play a game with them. Do some kind of an activity. And while you're doing an activity, watch a game together. Do PlayStation together. Whatever you're doing, while you're doing this activity together, you can talk about - how are things going, what's up, and how are you feeling?

**John:** It sounds like engaging kids during an activity makes it easier for them to open up and disclose and talk about things that are on their mind.

**David:** Right. Build it into something else, instead of, "Sit down with me and look at me and tell me how you're feeling." Kids don't do that very well.

**John:** What does it look like when a child or an adolescent comes to a program and they are experiencing a grief reaction to a significant loss? Does it always look like the world is falling apart?

**David:** Many kids will handle a loss, death of a parent, a divorce just fine, and, in fact, not have many reactions at all. And that's okay. You don't want to insist that a kid be upset if they're not.

**John:** So, there's no one particular way, a one specific way that kids grieve.

**David:** That's right. We know from research that kids aren't necessarily damaged by the death of a parent or going through a divorce. In fact, we know that their reaction in large part depends on how the adults around them are acting.

**John:** That makes sense. Now, I've also worked with several kids and adolescents that have had strong grief reactions. Could you help our volunteers and staff members that are listening understand what are some of the red flags? What are some of the really significant behaviors that would help them identify a child that needs more immediate support?

**David:** You're looking for changes. Are they different than they used to be? Let me give you some specifics. We talk about age regression in kids. When kids are under a lot of stress, when they've suffered a severe loss, they can have age regression - which means going back to a previous age. They may start wetting their pants again. They may progress to previous ages where they are sucking their thumb. And you say, "But gee, that's-- they're kind of old to be sucking their thumb." They may just kind of sit in the corner, or something like that. And if you notice that, that's usually a sign that they're under extreme stress and need to be attended to.

**John:** Wow. I'm guessing, for some of the younger kids then, there can be a lot of clinginess and other behaviors going on too.

**David:** Yes. Wanting to be hugged all the time, becoming very nervous, or downright ornery about you leaving the room. And have to be around you all the time - where they had gotten to a stage where they could play independently, they could be themselves. Yes, and then they're going back to a stage where they really have to have you around all the time.

**John:** What if a child or adolescent starts to express some of the feelings of grief and loss in a group setting? Is it okay to address it then, or are there some strategies that you think would be more helpful?

**David:** Well, if possible, I wouldn't do anything right then and there. Because you don't want to ostracize the child. You don't want to draw attention to him and say, "Look, Johnny is different than everybody else." Unless it's very disruptive, I would just let it happen. But note it. And every agency, every club, every organization that works with youth should have a policy, a written policy, about how to handle kids when you notice-- what to do-- when you notice that one of the kids is having difficulties, having some of these warning signs.

**John:** Yes, that's quite possible that many organizations don't have a policy put together. What would be some things that you would include?

**David:** What are the warning signs? When do we notify parents? How do we notify parents? What do we do if there's an emergency? When do we call 911?

**John:** It sounds like staff and volunteers really should be prepared for times of emergencies that could be associated with grief and loss.

**David:** It doesn't happen very often, so I don't want to worry people. But it can happen where kids talk about killing themselves, and we need to take this seriously. There's, unfortunately, a myth out there that children don't commit suicide; and if they talk about hurting themselves or killing themselves, they're just looking for attention. So if a child talks about hurting themselves, wanting to hurt themselves, or killing themselves, then you need to immediately consider that an emergency and take that seriously. And you don't want to make this up as you go along. You don't want to have a kid who says, "Gee, I got a knife, and I'm going to use it when I go home," and then to have to figure out what to do right then and there. You want a written policy that says, "In an emergency, here's who we contact. We contact the parents, we may call 911, to make sure that the child is safe."

**John:** Wow. We've moved into a crisis response, where staff and volunteers may, on rare occasion, need to have some skills in training to be able to kind of keep it together and help the child or the adolescent. What other suggestions would you have in this scenario?

**David:** This gets into training that counselors go through for crisis intervention, but there are some lessons that can be learned for youth workers. And that is, we talk about in a crisis situation, and then again, I don't want to worry people because it doesn't happen very often. But in a crisis, we talk about talking half as fast and moving half as fast. Trying to talk slowly, keeping your voice level, and walking slowly. Because with the adrenaline that's going through, when you're talking half as fast, you're going to talk normally. And when you're walking half as fast, you're going to be walking normally. If you speed up and you look like you're panicking, the kids are going to panic.

**John:** Got it. Okay, moving back to situations that probably more staff and volunteers would encounter, how can they demonstrate that they're truly listening to a child or an adolescent who's grieving?

**David:** The best metaphor I know for youth workers is to remember that we have two ears and one mouth. What I would say is: listen, pay attention to them, both verbally and non-verbally. Lots of people are talking to them. Especially, don't tell them what to do. And this is a caveat, especially for men, because the way we train men in our culture is that we tend to be problem-solvers. And we like to tell people what to do. So we have a tendency, when a kid says he's having a problem with the death of a parent or going through divorce, to say, "Well, here's what you should do to feel better."

Well, we need to understand that they've got parents telling them what to do, they've got teachers telling them what to do, they may have a religious leader telling them what to do, and they've got grandparents telling them what to do. They got aunts, they got uncles telling them what to do. So, one more person telling them how to fix this is not what they need.

What they don't have, often, is someone who will just listen. And I shouldn't use the word 'just', because it's important. Someone who will listen, who will say, "Hey, let's go out and shoot some hoops. And tell me how you're feeling. Just tell me about life. Tell me what you're going through. I want to know what you're going through. And I want to listen. I want to be there for you."

You may be the only person in their life that's doing that at this moment.

**John:** I realize that we're not training staff and volunteers to be professional counselors. That takes years of training and preparation. But how is it that a counselor communicates to a child or an adolescent that we're truly paying attention and we're engaged, that we're truly listening?

**David:** Counselors refer to this as unconditional positive regard. And what that means is that you're giving the message to the kid that, "You can talk to me. You can say anything you want. And I'm not going to judge you, and I'm not going to tell you what to do, and I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. I'm going to really understand what you're saying and listen to you." We all need that.

**John:** Yes, we sure do. Now let's look at issues related to when kids experience adversity, loss, they're grieving. Usually, there's a lot of change, and there's the feeling that life has become unmanageable. What suggestions would you have for staff and volunteers to help kids who are struggling with this type of an issue?

**David:** When kids go through emotional difficulties, when they go through a significant loss, their whole life gets out of kilter. And providing structure is very important to them and very helpful for them. Building in a routine for a while, where the child is going to do the same thing every day. They're going to have breakfast at the same time, they're going to have lunch at the same time, dinner at the same time. That from 10 to 11, they're going to go outside and play at the same time. That becomes very helpful then, to know that for the next couple of weeks, I know that at 10 o'clock, I'm going outside every day. It's a structure that gives them predictability. Because you need to think that with loss, with the death of a parent or going through a divorce, the predictability of life has been taken away from them. And youth workers can give that back to them.

**John:** Okay. What other signs, what other changes in behaviors should we be looking for?

**David:** Is the child different? Is the child or adolescent different? Has their mood changed? They used to be sunny, they used to be happy, but now they're down all the time. They used to smile, but you haven't seen them smile since the death. Were they gregarious and used to hang out around other kids, but now they're kind of withdrawn and off by themselves? Are they listless - which may indicate depression? Are they different? Are you hearing that they are different in school? That they used to study a lot, but they're not studying anymore. They used to be okay in class, but they're cutting class or they're acting out in class. Are they different at home, with the parents telling you that they're acting out at home or they're going to their room, whereas before they used to come out for dinner? Now, they are refusing to come out to dinner. You're looking for changes, behavioral changes, are they a different type of kid.

**John:** What if a staff member or volunteer is working with a child or an adolescent who's demonstrating some of these signs? What should they do?

**David:** We talked before about that every agency, club, organization that works with youth, should have a plan for kids who are going through significant loss. Part of that should be a list of area professional counselors or other mental health professionals to be able to refer the child to, and to let the parents know about that. Mental health professionals who specialize in counseling children. So, when you see these kind of changes, you can suggest to the parents, give a name and a telephone number or email address, website address, where the child can go get some help, go get assessed.

**John:** And how about for adolescents? Is it the same story, or should we be looking for different signs?

**David:** For the older children, for the adolescents, we want to watch for things like alcohol use and alcohol and other drugs. Do you smell alcohol on their breath? Have they reported doing drugs? That's an issue. What that does is anesthetize the feelings. That generally indicates to you that they are feeling overwhelmed with the feelings, because their mom or dad died or because of the divorce and the pain that's going on, and they feel like they need to anesthetize themselves, so they're going to do it with alcohol or drugs or other drugs.

Sexual activity can be a way to distract yourself from the pain. This is an example when you want to spend time with the kids, be non-judgmental. Say, "Just tell me about life." And they may, in fact, tell you about engaging in sexual activity, and you don't want to judge them, you don't want to tell them it's wrong, you don't want to tell them not to do it because it doesn't work.

Again, they have got other people telling them what to do. It's great that they told you that, and then you go back to your plan, and say, based on our plan and some dangerous stuff that's going on, how can we make this kid safe?

And of course we talked about killing themselves or hurting themselves. If they do that, that needs to be attended to immediately.

**John:** I know that group activities are pretty common in community centers working with youth. Is the group environment a smart place to address issues of grief and loss?

**David:** You have got to be a little careful about when you get kids together to talk about significant losses because the dynamics can become very deep, very fast. So, I would not recommend that a volunteer or just general staff members get the kids together.

**John:** So what should staff or volunteers do if they're working with a group of kids who all have experienced some grief or some loss?

**David:** If you're working in a setting where a number of youth have gone through losses, with the permission of the parents you might want to bring in a professional counselor from a local community mental health center or the mental health professional who has experience working with kids and loss and spend some time with them, do a group session or two, and a professional counselor will be trained on how to handle the dynamics that come out of that.

You would want to do that with the permission of the parents, you wouldn't want to surprise the parents that this is going on, but this can be very helpful for kids. It's done in schools all the time.

**John:** It's pretty common that kids will ask, "Why, why did this happen?" What suggestions would you have for staff and volunteers working with kids who ask these type of questions? They really want to know why this happened.

**David:** There's sort of a natural tendency to want to give a reason for why this happened, and that's really not helpful for kids. So, we tend to want to say things like, if a parent died, it was God's will, or it was their time, or they're now at peace, so it was a good thing that happened because they're now at peace.

There are a couple of things to think about with that, one is children will often see this as cruel. So, for you to say that it was God's will, the child will say, "What kind of a God could it be that would take my own parent away from me?" So, you have got to be careful about that.

The other thing that volunteers and staff need to be aware that any reason that they give for death or divorce may conflict with their religious background, or what the parents were saying, or what their religious leader was saying to them.

And once kids start getting conflicting messages about that, they get very confused and can get very upset. And kids will ask lots of 'why?' questions. They will ask you, they will ask staff, they will ask volunteers, "Why? Why did this happen?" And it's important to understand that when kids are asking "Why?" they're asking it on a very different level than adults' experience. So, we adults have the tendency to want to give an adult answer. For example, kid may say, "Why did my parents get a divorce?" and adult answer might be, "Well, it was because your mother drank."

Kids don't want to hear that. Saying that "your mother drank and that's why the divorce happened" makes the child have to choose between their mother and father.

**John:** Counselors experience this all the time. What might be the best answer for staff person or a volunteer to give?

**David:** The best answer that I know of, when kids ask, "Why? Why did my mother die? Why did my parents get divorced?" the best answer in the world for a volunteer or youth staff member to give is, "I don't know. Let's talk. Let's talk about how you feel. I don't know why this happened but let's talk about what happened."

**John:** You know David, I'm aware that talking about feelings of grief and experiences of loss may also stir things up for the staff and volunteers. What suggestions would you have for them?

**David:** It's one of the reasons why it is very useful as part of this plan to help kids deal with loss, that there's a list of professional counselors and other mental health professionals in the area because staff and volunteers can utilize them too. It can be extremely useful to go talk to somebody and talk about your feelings and get it out, and talk about what's going on. It can be very useful to bring in one of the employee assistance program counselors to talk to the entire staff.

**John:** So the staff and volunteers also need to take care of themselves.

**David:** It's critical for a very selfish reason, and the selfish reason is, if you don't take care of yourself, you're not going to be there for the kids. So, in order to be there for the kids you have to take care of yourself.

**John:** Several years ago I worked as a counselor in both a hospital setting and at hospice, and we would frequently deal with families that were struggling with grief and loss. One thing that I often heard were adults telling kids they had to now fill the shoes of a parent that had died. What are your thoughts about that? It's always struck me as a very painful thing for a child to hear.

**David:** We really don't want to do that because children should be allowed to be children and when we ask them to be adults, it puts them into a role that they're not prepared for, and they're going to fail and they're going to feel badly about.

For example, you see this at funerals where people will go up to a boy and say, "You're now the man of the family." The last thing in the world you want to say to a boy whose father just died is, "You're now the man of the family." He should be allowed to be a child.

**John:** Tell about situations of divorce. How could staff and volunteers help these kids?

**David:** You will often see in divorce that the oldest girl is asked, maybe subtly, to take over parenting roles and to take care of her siblings. You're now the mother because you're not living with your mom, you take care of your brother and sister. You don't want to ask a girl to take care of her brother and her sister, that's an adult role. You want to let her be a kid. Don't suggest to the kids that they take on adult roles, that they become man of the family, or that they take care of one their parents going through a divorce.

**John:** So, I'm imagining that there may be a few listeners who are starting to feel like, "Oh, my Gosh! What if I make a mistake? These kids are coming to this community center, they're relying on us for good quality programing for a safe environment." What would you suggest to these volunteers and staff, who may be afraid to make a mistake?

**David:** What kids want from you is that you care. You can make a mistake, you can say something that you need to walk back, you can say something where you might need to apologize to the kid, it doesn't matter. What counts is that you care and if you care, that will overcome everything.

**John:** Well said. I couldn't agree more. David, thank you so much for your time today. That's all the time that we have for our program, I want to thank everyone for listening. If you have any questions, you can email them to [podcast@counseling.org](mailto:podcast@counseling.org). I'm John Duggan, thanks so much for joining us.

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