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CHILDREN'S MINISTRY NETWORK LUNCHEON  
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## **HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH LOSS: Specific Guidelines for Children's Ministers**

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“Your first pain, you carry it with you like a loadstone in your breast,  
because all tenderness comes from there.”

-- Jane Bowles, in Two Serious Ladies

“To heal is to touch with love that which was previously touched with fear.”

-- Steven Levine, in Healing into Life and Death

As I imagined speaking with y'all today, I realized that I had an expectation...that there would be a *lot* of energy in this room...because I would be in the midst of disciples who love children, and who collectively have vastly more experience with them than I. Thank you for your work on behalf of children, and thank you for inviting me to speak at this luncheon. Our vocations—yours, ministering to the needs of children...and mine, entering the intimate world of individuals, couples, and families-- both carry with them the responsibility to teach people how to grow in their ability to love...to become better lovers.

We begin that process when we begin life. Birth is our first experience of loss ...it is a rupture of our state of biological

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oneness with our mothers. And afterwards, we need healing... We need our parents to provide for us all the physical touching, feeding, nurturing, and pampering possible during early infancy, and throughout the first year of life, so that we can develop a solid sense of attachment, of human value, and love.

But as time goes on, we need our parents to provide another aspect of love: we need them to say "no" to our dependence, to assert their boundaries, and to encourage our individual development. It's their job to teach us to obey, and in doing so, again, we experience a sense of loss... As we're told "no," our experience of bliss with our parents dissolves, and we enter into a struggle with them... often tough on each side, just ask the parent of any two-year-old(!) ... During this struggle we gain awareness of our limits as well as those of others. A two-year old asserting "NO!" is learning that she also has a will of *her* own. If it's accepted in its natural form, the child will develop pride in her own choices and learn from her mistakes. Children need to be allowed their expression of natural emotions in age-appropriate ways, and with respect, and they need us, in our responses, to show them unconditional love... Only when children are permitted and encouraged to express natural anger, for instance, can they move on and readily allow forgiveness to express itself. So... with loss comes struggle; with loss comes gain; with loss comes the possibility of personal growth.

I'm struck by the timing of this meeting... during Lent, and, shortly after Valentine's Day... because as I see it, helping children deal with loss—whether it be as a result of normative transitions like adjusting to a move or a new baby in the family... or more serious losses, like a parent leaving for Iraq, job loss, serious illness or death in the family... even when losses are the result catastrophic experiences, like sexual abuse, a flood, or terrorism,

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for example. – What children need *most* from you is for you to teach them basic emotional and social lessons: lessons of the heart. This is the first and most important area that you as children's ministers need to look at... and *that* means examining your own minds and hearts,... reflecting on *your* experiences of loss...and your commitment to paying attention to the thoughts and feelings that get stirred up when you do.

How were losses dealt with in your family growing up? How were they handled in your church? What was helpful? What was not, or even hurtful? What losses in your life are you aware of today? What needs healing? And what are you doing, or not doing, about it? Your first responsibility is to have your emotional house in order. If you do, you'll be able to be attentive and creative in your responses to children and parents. If you don't you'll be vulnerable to either being numb to their pain, trying to block them from showing it to you, *or* over-identifying with them, and losing a sense of appropriate boundaries. Remember that you cannot take away the pain of another, even when it is a child. But don't let your own sense of helplessness restrain you from reaching out to her. Let your genuine concern and caring show. **Never underestimate the power of love....** I'd like to recommend a book to you, a book that should help you and the children's parents. In fact, it could be a great Sunday School sort of Book Club Class selection: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting, by John Gottman, Ph.D. I think any person who lives or works with children should read this book. And I think that following its tenants will guide you in helping kids adjust to any loss.

You are positioned in the center of both church and family and have a responsibility and opportunity to be an advocate for the needs of children within your church system, so you should accentuate the importance of strong support systems for parents:

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- Develop and expand marriage and family life Sunday School classes, teaching adults about child development and family life cycle transitions, including how to deal with serious illness, death, and social ills that perpetuate things like sexual abuse.
- Integrate prayerful rituals that assist people in dealing with the losses incurred by illness, divorce, or lay-offs, for example.

Because children lack maturity and self-sufficiency, they're vulnerable not only to their own responses to a major loss, but also to the consequences of their parent's grief and the interruption of normal care and interaction patterns necessary for their growth and development. This is where the social community aspect of the church is so important. Programs like Stephens Ministry for example, can be a tremendous source of help for kids, because a Stephens Minister can hold up Mom and/or Dad when they need it most.

How can you *directly* help children with loss in general?

- View emotional moments as an opportunity for connection and teaching.
- Listen to, validate, and empathize with the child's feelings.
- Help the child label all the emotions experienced.
- *Words are power.*
- Help them to problem solve.

I have handouts for y'all which include a pretty extensive bibliography of books for all ages on various experiences of loss and how they affect children. Several are for adults, but most of them are *for* children, to help them resolve their grief: there are books on miscarriage, death, suicide, cancer, pet loss, divorce,

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losses caused by violent weather, terrorism. They can be easily ordered on the phone or internet, or recommended to parents.

I'm going to elaborate now on some specific losses and how you should respond and/or encourage parents to respond. You will notice similarities in the lists. This is because there are basic commonalities in the mourning process regardless of the type or severity of the loss. My goal is to give you enough information for you to have the basics, and also to provide resources you can call upon for further help and understanding:

### DEATH

- A child should be told immediately when someone in the family has died in order to prevent her hearing it from someone else. Use a normal voice, not a hushed whisper. Whispering would only intensify a spooking feeling.
- Someone close to the child should tell her, preferably in familiar surroundings that give her security. (By the way. I'm using female pronouns in this talk today, rather than the usual male pronouns, or both, which would be cumbersome, but I do mean that the material applies to both girls *and* boys.)
- Give her as honest an explanation as possible within her limits of understanding.
- Avoid euphemisms (like lost or sleep). It's important that you look at the meaning of what you're saying from the child's perspective. *Young* children in particular, interpret things literally.
- Recognize that repeated questions, either at the time you inform her or in the weeks and months afterwards, are not as much for factual information about the death as they are for reassurance that the story has not changed.

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- Predict for the child that she may feel sad and even have strange or different feelings for a while. For example: "It's normal for you to feel this way. Come to me and we can talk about it, or maybe even cry together. Someday it won't hurt as much."
- Tell her what to expect of the activities of the funeral and grief in general. Children should be allowed to attend a wake or funeral if they want to, but not forced to do so, and never forced to do anything like kiss the cheek of a corpse.
- Give affection and security. Tell her that she is part of the family and of the church community and that you will all get through this together.
- Look for ways to help her express emotions both verbally and nonverbally. Art and play are especially good avenues of expression for children.
- Watch out for her casual connection of her personal wishes or actions to the death of her loved one. (Ex: wishing someone were dead or would disappear)
- Account for variance. No two children will react exactly the same way.

*(I am often struck by some synergy between my family life and my life as a family therapist. The family pet of two of my granddaughters, a black lab, died on Monday while the children were at school. When the girls (ages 5 and 3 ½) came home, the family all lingered on Mommy and Daddy's bed and talked and cried. After nap time, the 5 year old, was still weepy and wanted to carry a photo of him around with her. In contrast, the 3 ½ year old, was not crying. She got out of bed, walked over to her mother, said "I'm fine with it now, Mommy," and shrugged. "You and Daddy are still here.")*

- Remember also, that a child's ability to remember a loved one in their absence may be inadequate. Photos do help. And this is so important, not just in relation to the death of a person or pet, but also in relation to the death of a

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- relationship...a divorce. Kids need pictures of Dad and Mom around their homes and their grandparents' homes.
- Realize that the child may be expressing feelings not only about the actual death itself, but also about the changes in members of the family after the death.
  - If the death is the result of a **suicide** define it in simple and direct language that eliminates judgment, such as “when someone chooses to make their body stop working.” One of the books I have listed in the bibliography is entitled Bart Speaks Out, and the author writes that “Our inability to discuss suicide openly with children could create an atmosphere of secrecy, loneliness, and isolation that may be far more damaging than the actual death of someone close to them.”
  - Retell good memories. This is *very* important.

How would you know if the child's mourning is not progressing normally? What should you *do*? What factors indicate it's time to recommend professional help? And if it's time, how do you go about suggesting that to the parents?

Here are some guidelines for you...and they are also applicable for divorce and even for abuse:

- if normal reactions go on for a protracted period (6-9 mos.)
- the child frequently asks for help with things that she was previously able to do by herself
- she cries a lot
- her performance declines and doesn't pick up again
- she seems preoccupied, worried, anxious, and nervous
- she develops fears that are unreasonable
- she can't concentrate on schoolwork
- play centers on family breakup & coming back together again, illness, death, touching of her genital area, or hitting

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- she loses interest in playing; doesn't seem like a child anymore
- she isolates
- she seems to have low self esteem and little self confidence
- sleep problems develop
- bedwetting
- provocatively sexual behavior

There is a list of professional help resources in your handout, and I'd like to point out a few of them right now. First of all, as I mentioned before, there are books for adults and for children, to educate about loss and to use (the children's books) as a vehicle to help children process their grief and to normalize their reactions. Let me read you a few of them:

.....  
(*Choose books extemporaneously to review and discuss*)

.....  
There are also two professional organizations listed, with their contact information:

- The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy's referral website: [www.therapistlocator.net](http://www.therapistlocator.net). On this website you can key in your zip code and all the Clinical Members in your area will come up. Some have expanded listings. Call them. Get to know them. You need a referral network.
- The Georgia Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and the Georgia Association for Play Therapy are also listed. Play therapy is a wonderful resource for children.

We here are the RUMC Counseling Center have two Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists: Myself and Mary Amos, and a Licensed Professional Counselor, Gail Lyle, who is also experienced working with children. Carol Rawlinson specializes is

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pet loss bereavement counseling. There is also a therapist listed who practices down the street, Doyle Hamilton, who does workshops for children, called "Hope for Grieving Children."

How do you broach the subject if with parents if you think a child needs professional help?

- ask them if they've noticed anything different about their child
- if they haven't, tell them what you've noticed
- ask them what they think it's about (be prepared that you may get a very emotional response; for example: a mother may burst into tears and tell you she's recently learned that her husband's been having an affair, etc.)
- Tell the parent that if it were your child, you'd want to get a professional opinion, or mention you'd worked with a similar child situation and how helpful input from a professional was.

If you suspect that a parent has abused a child in any way, consult immediately with a therapist, the Department of Family and Children's Services, the "chain of command" at your particular church, and perhaps even an attorney. If a child *tells* you that she has been sexually abused your first reaction should always be to look her in the eye and gently but confidently say, "*Thank you*, for telling me. Because I am a grown up, I know what to do about it and I will help you."

Something to remember, is that sexual abuse is far more common in patriarchal systems. And because many church systems are still plagued with sexism, it is too frequently a system in which sexual abuse is perpetrated on children. Never disregard a child's disclosure to you or your gut level instincts, even if the alleged perpetrator is a member of the clergy. Again, consult, as I said

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before: therapist, Department of Family and Children's Services, attorney. Each church should also have policies in place, guidelines to follow in these instances. Familiarize yourself with them. And if there are none, be proactive in making them happen.

Remember that whatever the losses children are dealing with, they are children first, before they are mourners. They have many of the same feelings and needs as you; however they have far fewer resources and abilities to cope with them.

### **TERRORISM**

Unfortunately, another loss that children need help with today... a loss of innocence... loss of security,... that is unpredictable as to its timing, but expectable in that it will touch our children and ourselves, is terrorism. I mention this because it is constantly on the TV, radio, and computer. We experience it daily whether we want to or not. One day, I was driving my little granddaughter out for ice cream and reached to turn on the radio... gunshots; machine gunshots... were being broadcast as the beginning of a news report. I turned it off, but she wanted to know what it was, why it was, if someone was going to be killed, what killed means, etc. ...they are affected by it. Since September 11 we all are, and will continue to be... I had a high school senior in my office recently who was experiencing a lot of anxiety in making his college choice. He hated admitting it, but the massacres on college campuses were contributing to his feeling of being stuck.

If a child is on the scene or close to a family member who was killed in recent terrorist activity, she should receive immediate professional counseling... but for the majority of children, that is not the case. Fern Reiss has written an excellent book called Terrorism and Kids: Comforting Your Child (it is listed with the

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recommended books in your handouts). In it, she suggests the following strategies to help them:

- Limit television and internet viewing
- Limit news viewing.
- Don't let children listen alone
- Exhibit your emotions; children need to see you react
- Offer reassurance
- Keep to a routine
- Talk to them, at their level, and let them talk to you
- Let them say what they want...they may have strong feelings
- Don't lie to them, *AND*
- Convey a sense of hope

With loss comes struggle; with loss comes pain; with loss comes the possibility of personal growth. And that possibility is enhanced by the loving embrace of those who care, both in our homes and in our churches, in our communities. Everything you do to create an emotionally safe, caring, spiritually inspiring and socially responsible atmosphere in your churches helps children ... and their parents... deal with loss.

In closing, I want to tell you about a program I'm involved with called "Bringing Baby Home," developed by the same John Gottman who wrote the book I recommended earlier. "Bringing Baby Home" is a 12-hr. workshop for expectant couples we are trying to integrate here at RUMC, and I'm also talking to other churches about holding one as well. Right now we have one scheduled in July and one in November. "Bringing Baby Home" is not just a compilation of activities somebody thought would be useful...It is research-based and research-tested – *proven* to help couples increase the quality of their friendship while experiencing the transition to parenthood, a transition during which 67% of

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couples ordinarily experience a profound drop in relationship satisfaction... Attending this workshop also leads to a decrease in post-natal depression, *and* teaches couples about the psychological needs of their baby... We want to *lower* the odds that the children who are now coming into the world will experience the losses that would occur if their parents were to divorce, we want to *lower* the losses that would be experienced as a result of inadequate parenting, we want to *lower* the chances of abuse happening to children. We want to *prevent* the devastating losses that make it hard for children to believe that “yes, *Jesus loves me.*”

There is information about “Bringing Baby Home” in your hand outs as well. And within a few days you will be able to access a copy of this talk on the website, should you want to refer back to any of the information in this talk.

In closing, I thank you for your dedication to children and for your time and attention today. I hope that you have gained *something* in this talk that you can bring with you in your ministry... God bless and the children you serve.

**This is a transcript of a talk, therefore there are no footnotes. Sources are listed in the list of references on the last page. Further documentation is available by request.**

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**REFERENCES**

Gottman, John, Ph.D., Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Goldman, Linda, M.S., Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence of Suicide, Los Angeles, California: Western Psychological Services.

Kaplan, Louise, Oneness and Separateness: From Infant to Individual, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Phelen, Thomas, Ph.D., 1,2,3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12, Glen Ellyn, Ill.: Parent Magic, Inc., 2003.

Rando, Theresa, Ph.D., How to go on Living When Someone You Love Dies, New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

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[www.peanutbutterandjellypress.com](http://www.peanutbutterandjellypress.com).

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### **RECOMMENDED BOOKS**

Goldman, Linda, M.S., Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence of Suicide, Los Angeles, California: Western Psychological Services

Gottman, John, Ph.D., Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997

Ives, Blakeslee, & Lash, The Divorce Workbook, Burlington, Vermont, 1985 (a guide for kids and families)

Lowry, D., What Can I Do?: A Book for Children of Divorce Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2001

Prokop, Michael, Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids, Warren, Ohio: Alegra House Publishers, 1986 (for kids ages 3-15)

Rando, Theresa, Ph.D., How to go on Living When Someone You Love Dies, New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

Reiss, Fern, Terrorism and Kids: Comforting Your Child, [www.PeanutButterandJellyPress.com](http://www.PeanutButterandJellyPress.com)

Varley, Susan, Badger's Parting Gifts, New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shephard Books, 1984

Wood, Douglas, Granddad's Prayers of the Earth, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 1999

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From Centering Corporation's *Seasons of Grief* Books:  
(may be purchased @ 402-553-1200 or [www.centering.org](http://www.centering.org))

CODE SIGO, \$2.00 Sibling Grief (After Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Infant Death)

CODE NSCO, No Smile Cookies Today by Kathy Tapp  
(Katie and Mom made smile cookies to pass out at school when the baby was born. Instead, Katie's brother died)

CODE TWCC \$1.65 Talking With Children About Perinatal Loss

CODE MHSO \$8.95 And Mommy's On Her Side by Heidi Morse Travis  
(A fun story about how everyone helps out around the house while Mommy is on bed rest)

CODE LIAD, \$9.95 Life Isn't Always a Day at the Beach  
(A book for children whose lives are affected by cancer)

CODE MMDC, \$6.95 Molly's Mom Died (age range: 8-10)  
SDDC Sam's Dad Died

CODE SWMC, \$3.95 Sweet Memories

Jordan, Mary Kate, The Weather Kids, (Sometimes sad things happen, like a (tornado, earthquake, or flood)

Hemery, Kathleen Marsh, Not Just a Fish  
(A child struggles with pet loss)

CODE SFTO, \$15.95, Campbell, Laura Ann, Storybooks for Hard Times  
(Covers issues related to new sibling, starting school, death of a pet, death of a grandparent)

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**PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES**

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, referral site: [www.therapistlocator.net](http://www.therapistlocator.net)

Georgia Association for Marriage and Family Therapy: [www.gamft.org](http://www.gamft.org) 404-261-1185

Georgia Association for Play Therapy 770-491-7423

Therapists: RUMC Counseling Center 770-998-0424

Mary Amos, LMFT

Gayle Lyle, LPC

Cathy McCall, LMFT

Carl Rawlinson, D.Min.

“Hope for Grieving Children” Groups,

Doyle Hamilton, LMFT 770-915-2537

Suicide prevention and recovery programs:

The Link Counseling Center, Sandy Springs

404-256-9797

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To be used by luncheon facilitator when introducing Catherine as the speaker:

**Catherine McCall is the newest addition to the RUMC Counseling Center. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist with 25 years of experience, a Clinical Member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and a past Vice-president of the Georgia Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. She has been married for 38 years; she and her husband have reared four daughters, and are now grandparents to 5 precious children.**

**Catherine has written a memoir about her own childhood losses growing up with a mentally ill father and alcoholic parents, and the profound role her childhood church community played in her survival and eventual healing. It will be published by Seal Press in Spring, 2009.**