



# *Gifted and* **Grieving**

Why It Is Critical to Offer Differential Support  
to Gifted Kids During Times of Loss

by Angela Burke

# Death,

illness, divorce, abuse — any degree of loss is unpleasant to discuss, unpleasant to think about. Yet, no one is exempt from the misfortunes that accompany life's journey. This includes gifted children, who at times may be perceived as self-sufficient and smart enough to figure out their own problems even if they are overwhelmingly upset (Peterson, 2006). However, due to their unique social and emotional needs, it is gifted children who during times of sadness may require differential support the most. This article discusses why gifted children need intervention during times of grief and offers strategies to help them cope.

## Rationale for Differentiated Support

Charkow (1998) explained four factors influencing the grieving process, which include (a) the significance of the lost relationship, (b) the manner in which the death or trauma occurred, (c) the child's personality, (d) and the child's chronological age and developmental level. The latter two factors may differentiate gifted children the most when considering grief's impact, due to gifted children's emotions that are at

times more intense than other children's and their ability to understand mature concepts.

To elaborate, many gifted children possess distinctive affective attributes that shape their personalities. These social-emotional characteristics may complicate their response to a loss, which may encompass a wide span of potential concerns ranging from excessive anxiety and depression to profound guilt.

Although grief is commonly linked to the death of a loved

one, grief is also associated with the disruption of familiar comfort and security, including divorce, family financial difficulties, frequent moves, loss of friendships and even loss of opportunities and goals. (Heath et al., 2008, p. 259)

In addition, grief can transcend beyond the gifted child's inner circle to tragedies encircling the globe. Due to the vast amount of information bombarding us daily via television and Internet, it is not uncommon for children to witness calamities across the world including war, famine, persecution, and heartrending illness and death. With such an influx of devastation, it is critical to examine how the gifted child is affected. For example, consider Justin's perspective on war in the following narrative:

I saw the list of names of fallen soldiers on television today and it awakened me. The names just kept rolling. I knew the war in Iraq was going on and I chose to deny it. I chose to pretend like the others that no one was dying. But then, when I saw names of real people who have died I was awakened from my sleep. How could I have been so blind? I don't want to sleep anymore! I want it to end and I want everyone else to want it to end too! (Justin, age 9)

According to Tieso (2007), Dabrowski theorized that gifted individuals with high degrees of emotional intensity would suffer more extreme pain during times of crisis than individuals with normal temperament. Why is this? Many gifted

**Table 1**  
**Symptoms of Grief That May Appear**  
**Intensified in Gifted Students: Strategies**  
**for Gifted Kids' Support Systems**

**Emotional Changes**

(denial, withdrawal, explosive behavior, fear, guilt, sadness, confusion, anger, obsession with death, decline in school performance)

- Bibliotherapy
- Art Therapy/Music Intervention
- Guided Viewing of Film
- Fantasy Literature
- Exploration of Spiritual Intelligence
- Simulated Journal/Narratives

**Regressive Behaviors**

(bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, baby talk, lapse to earlier behaviors)

**Somatic Symptoms**

(inability to sleep, loss of appetite, chronic fatigue, nightmares, loss of concentration, physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches)

**Emotional Distress**

(severe anxiety and/or depression, thoughts of suicide)

- Outside Support From Licensed Psychologist

children experience overexcitabilities, which, according to Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, is a powerful response to sensory stimuli demonstrated as abundant physical, sensual, creative, intellectual, and emotional energy (Silverman, 2000). With more channels opened to take in stimuli and information, many gifted children feel experiences more intensely (Gross, Rinn, & Jamieson, 2007). Gifted children who possess emotional overexcitabilities demonstrate intense emotional ties, empathy, and sensitivity, as well as complex emotions and feelings (Silverman, 2000). Due to this heightened sense of emotional awareness, a tendency toward depression may exist (Perrone, Webb, Wright, Jackson, & Ksiazak, 2006). Times of stress and grief may exacerbate these sensitivities, leaving the child particularly vulnerable as such heartfelt emotion can be scary (Peterson, 2006). Table 1 provides an

overview of strategies in dealing with grief, as well as symptoms that may be intensified in gifted children.

Furthermore, students with sensitive personalities may display reflective and introspective traits prompting them to ask the big questions about life (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005). Emotional sensitivity generally accompanies high cognitive abilities as found in many gifted children (Hébert & Sergent, 2005). Feelings may run deep, straight to the gut of the gifted child. These children must learn to cope with a higher level of empathy for others, deeper compassion for the less fortunate, and worry and anxiety regarding societal issues (Hébert & Sergent, 2005). Some children may even experience what another person is feeling, causing their grief to intensify and manifest somatically (Gross et al., 2007). The following narrative depicts the emotional pain of a young

girl when she realized her grandmother was dying:

I can't stop thinking of how frail Grandma looked...when I hugged her she felt thin, fragile. I am dying inside with her...as if I am feeling her pain, feeling the fear of death, feeling the sadness of knowing the end is near. (Elisabeth, age 14)

To continue, as Charkow (1998) expressed, a child's developmental level is an equally significant factor in times of sorrow. Jean Piaget, a neuroscientist, identified four stages of child development from birth to adolescence. When looking at Piaget's phases of cognitive development, it is necessary to be aware that gifted children may have the ability to mentally comprehend at a higher level. However, a mismatch between what the child understands mentally and what can be handled emotionally should be greatly considered as a child may become overwhelmed when capable of understanding adult concepts.

For example, children ages 2-7 in Piaget's preoperational developmental stage believe that death is reversible. They do not understand the permanence of death until age 8 (Schoen, Burgoyne, & Schoen, 2004). But chronological age means little when gifted children are able to developmentally grasp concepts beyond their years. Typical children ages 7-11 fall into Piaget's concrete logical operational period in which they process more logically, but still struggle with the abstract (Schoen et al., 2004). This is not necessarily true for the gifted child who comprehends the abstract at a much earlier age. With an increased understanding beyond their years, it is evident that gifted children may struggle with intensified grief as described

by the mother of a gifted child in the narrative below.

My son is grieving . . . grieving for his friend and in his sorrow I feel he has drifted away to explore another place, another life with the friend he lost. At first he asked many questions, and now I have come to the conclusion that he is attempting to figure out the concept of death on his own. He acknowledges the beliefs of our religion . . . but I feel him needing more . . . He needs more than what I can explain . . . and although he is grasping the abstract, he is falling apart emotionally. Nighttime is the worst. He is fearful of falling asleep . . . afraid he will not awaken in the morning. And so, he sleeps beside me, curled up next to me as if he were three years old again and has just experienced a nightmare. (Mother of Luke, age 7)

Depression may accompany a child's ability to question existential issues and theological concerns that can be psychologically overwhelming (Peterson, 2006). Young children may be easily disturbed with issues seen as exclusive to adults, including problems outside of their proverbial sphere. Social justice issues, natural disasters, and war may cause unforeseen grief in gifted children (Peterson, 2006).

### Additional Factors in the Grieving Process

Realizing that a gifted child's unique personality and developmental level may impact his or her response to grief is critical in order to initiate a differential response. However, additional risk

factors may contribute to the degree and necessity of intervention needed.

#### Gender

Societal pressures may influence how gifted boys and girls respond to grief intervention, and matching the needs of the differing genders may be a critical piece to offering valuable support. For example, during difficult times, gifted girls are more likely to gravitate toward support-seeking strategies than boys (Preuss & Debrow, 2004). The American society favors feminine trends of clinical work that rely on expressiveness and utilizing the affective domain to solve issues (Walter, 2001). Males, who tend to prefer cognitive or action-oriented responses to grief, may struggle with female-dominated approaches (Walter, 2001). When placed in a clinical setting where sharing feelings is expected, boys may become overwhelmed. Sorting issues in a problem-solution format may be most effective in order to support boys' needs (Walter, 2001).

#### Culture

The tendency to move away from others and establish self-reliance during times of grief is valued in American society and asking for help often is perceived as a weakness (Catlin, 2001). Continuing bonds with the deceased is considered a form of unresolved grief with European Americans who perceive grief to be an individual process (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). Many micro-cultures within the United States possess differing views of grief. Coping strategies that maintain the bond with the deceased are called continuous bonds. The Day of the Dead in Mexico demonstrates this concept as the deceased are presented with gifts of food, incense, and flowers at grave sites by surviving loved ones (Lalande &

Bonanno, 2006). Similarly, in Japan, a Buddha altar is created within the home and is decorated with memorabilia, bells, candles, and photographs. Food is offered to the spirits of the deceased (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). In Tibet, meditative visualization is practiced in which the survivor leaves all egocentric tendencies behind and allows the self to know death, opening the heart to all emotions associated with the grief (Goss & Klass, 1997). Family members then interact with the deceased to bring merit to the dead, celebrating death anniversaries with prayer for rebirth and practicing compassion for others and the dead in order to achieve self-actualization and discovery (Goss & Klass, 1997).

Culture plays a large role in how students may react in times of sadness, particularly regarding collective versus individual grieving practices. It is imperative to realize that gifted children come from various backgrounds, and schools need to be sensitive to the diversity of individual grieving preferences (Rosenblatt, 2008).

#### Availability of Support

It is essential for school counselors to become familiar with the differentiated affective needs of the gifted, particularly in times of grief and bereavement. However, only 62% of school counseling programs address gifted needs, and 47% require 3 or less contact hours (Peterson, 2006). This indicates that school counselors may not have the necessary training to effectively help gifted kids in times of crisis (Peterson, 2006).

Furthermore, counselors tend to focus their attention on students who are failing academically, and gifted students often are overlooked until problems escalate (Hébert & Sergent, 2005). Gifted children who are suffering from grief may develop anxieties about death,

including their own (Charkow, 1998). They may act out and become destructive to themselves and others, their academic performance may diminish, and they may develop school phobias (Charkow, 1998). To complicate the issue, strong overexcitabilities may be viewed negatively and perceived as excessive emotionality, even neurosis, making the gifted child feel different and stifling any willingness to express feelings (Gross et al., 2007). It is

expected that many students fail to communicate with their parents, and an even greater number do not confide in teachers about critical topics (as cited in Peterson, 2006). Providing a safe environment for children to share concerns is vital to their emotional health.

Teachers are responsible for much of a child's day. It is critical that teachers receive training in the unique social and emotional aspects of gifted children in order to help them establish

expected to be a "grownup" (Schoen et al., 2004). Children ages 7–11 may feel intense guilt that they could have prevented a loss. They may disguise their pain and develop sleeping or eating disorders or erupt emotionally (Schoen et al., 2004). Children ages 2–7 may blame themselves for the loss, feeling that they did something wrong. They may even believe that they can bring the lost person back. They may isolate themselves, escape through play, and regress to bed-wetting or thumb-sucking behaviors (Schoen et al., 2004).

Regardless of the stage of development the gifted child falls into, guilt exists and it is essential that a safe and nurturing environment be provided that gives permission for the child to mourn (Schoen et al., 2004). Maintaining routines, allowing for in-depth discussions and questions, and establishing security through supportive adults can alleviate unnecessary guilt, particularly for the gifted child who may internalize feelings of remorse more powerfully.

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# Teachers have the ability to become protective figures to foster resilience in their students

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important to note that gifted students often are reluctant to ask for help and their pain often is invisible to adults (Peterson, 2006).

A bias exists that gifted children are not at risk and do not need counseling services because they are mentally healthy and self-sufficient in handling their problems (Peterson, 2006). Gifted children possess strong problem-solving skills, but many, particularly the profoundly gifted, are prone to higher levels of anxieties, heightened sensitivities, suicidal tendencies, and depression (Peterson, 2006).

To continue, teachers often fail to perceive internal issues faced by gifted children, due mostly to a lack of training and awareness of their needs (Greene & Margison, 2004). Peterson and Rischar's qualitative study in 2000 found evidence indicat-

lines of communication and direct them toward necessary counseling services. Teachers have the ability to become protective figures to foster resilience in their students (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005).

### Guilt

Throughout all of Piaget's levels of development, a common factor among grieving children is guilt, although symptoms may manifest differently within each cognitive stage. For example, adolescents in the formal operations level may suffer from role confusion, in which they try to comfort younger siblings or take on additional responsibility for a grieving parent. Teenagers' guilt may numb their ability to talk about the grief they are experiencing, particularly if they are

### Society

The dominant American culture is a grief-avoiding culture, which is unfortunate (Schoen et al., 2004). When experiencing a loss, society is prone to shield a child from the realities of the grieving process, which ultimately can confuse the child and cause undue distress, particularly if questions are left unanswered (Charkow, 1998). Gifted children have a need to understand on a deep, multifaceted manner and withholding facts may alter their ability to grieve (Cross, 2002).

Societal influences have transformed death into a topic of fear and awkwardness, an abstract concept instead of a reality (Charkow, 1998). After experiencing a loss, society expects an individual to feel better after 6 months, making a full recovery within a year

(Rodebaugh & Schwindt, 1999). But grief does not have a timetable and cannot be scheduled. Grief can last for an indefinite period, as healing requires an internalizing of the loss that becomes a part of the person (Rodebaugh & Schwindt, 1999). To have unrealistic expectations and assume the loss will be forgotten after the projected grieving period is detrimental (Rodebaugh & Schwindt, 1999). Children must have the opportunity to grieve, but unfortunately the children of America are the most overlooked mourners of society (Schoen et al., 2004).

### Strategies for Providing Grief Intervention

Understanding that gifted children are vulnerable in times of grief and bereavement is critical to their healing process. Experiences with death that are not dealt with positively can affect the child later on (Charkow, 1998). Knowing this, how can we help gifted children in times of sorrow? The following strategies may help teachers, parents, and school counselors when assessing how to best assist a grieving child.

#### Utilizing the Arts

Gifted children may find that music and art therapy are helpful strategies when attempting to channel restless energy into a positive product, regardless of whether or not they have been identified as gifted in these domains. Both music and art are universal devices that cross cultural lines. Creating art can aid in one's ability to work through life problems by expressing emotion in which words seem insufficient (Barker, 2006). Anyone can use art as a conduit to freely explore thoughts, and talent is not required (Barker, 2006). Suggestions for art therapy include creating a self-portrait or an

abstract creation utilizing colors that represent emotion and textures that portray feelings. The American Art Therapy Association provides numerous resources on its Web site (<http://www.arttherapy.org>).

Music intervention offers similar benefits for grieving. Music can help restructure problems while providing a holistic approach to pain (Gallant & Holosko, 2001). Music has the potential to stimulate creativity and allow for spiritual insight (Gallant & Holosko, 2001). When composing music and lyrics, themes of grief can be evaluated in order to reshape the self psychologically and emotionally. Examples of utilizing music in periods of sorrow include improvisation, personalizing lyrics to a favorite song, and simply listening to inspiring music (Gallant & Holosko, 2001).

#### Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is a strategy that supports children as they cope with difficult situations (Heath et al., 2008). The essence of bibliotherapy is to utilize children's books to aid in the solving of personal problems (Silverman, 2000). It is particularly helpful if an adult is unsure of what to say to a child or is uncomfortable discussing an issue related to grief (Heath et al., 2008). Because gifted students often possess advanced reading skills and have the ability to grasp metaphorical connotations, bibliotherapy is an excellent counseling tool (Silverman, 2000). Bibliotherapy allows the child to explore approaches to real-life consequences through the characters in books and has been helpful for students suffering from existential depression (Silverman, 2000). A valuable Web site with an online bookstore offering many suggestions of children's books associated with grief is <http://www.griefnet.org>.

#### Guided Viewing of Film

Similar to bibliotherapy, guided viewing of film is a therapeutic strategy to engage children in drawing out parallels to their own lives (Hébert & Sergent, 2005). Contemporary and enjoyable, movies provide a safe approach to discussing problems through the lives of movie characters (Hébert & Sergent, 2005). Guided viewing of film should include a carefully selected movie or clip, sensitively designed discussion questions, and creative follow-up activities (Hébert & Sergent, 2005). Bibliotherapy and guided viewing of film may overlap with the use of books that have been made into movies. Examples of classics include *The Secret Garden* and *Little Women*. More contemporary films may include *The Lion King*, *Stepmom*, *Finding Neverland*, *Shadowland*, *Steel Magnolias*, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Heath et al., 2008).

#### Fantasy Literature

Because gifted children gravitate toward imagery and metaphor and have the ability to restructure imaginatively, fantasy literature can be beneficial during difficult times (Black, 2003). Fantasy literature allows children to escape beyond the walls of their own reality to a safer place in which they can experiment with the challenges characters face (Black, 2003). The *Harry Potter* series is an excellent example of fantasy literature that addresses loss and allows students to evaluate personal conflicts while providing an avenue in which to investigate the mysteries of the universe (Black, 2003). Students can identify with Harry's struggles while finding purpose in them. They can discover congruencies within their own lives while attempting to answer provocative questions regarding morality and

ethics (Black, 2003). *Harry Potter* can also be used as a stepping stone for writing original, magical stories based on personal encounters (Black, 2003).

An activity to use in conjunction with fantasy literature includes simulated journals in which students pretend to be a character in the story. Students record events and feelings symbolic to tough issues in the literature and then analyze their writing to make personal connections to events in their lives (Black, 2003).

### Imaginative-Postmodern Model

Comparable to simulated journals, the imaginative-postmodern model incorporates narratives along with the use of imagination and concept development (Thomas & Ray, 2006). The student designs a story or artistic representation centered on personal feelings and life events. Then, by objectively observing the creative product, the student has a vehicle in which to gain insight as well as control within his or her own life (Thomas & Ray, 2006). The child can end the story positively or however he or she chooses (Thomas & Ray, 2006).

### Tapping into Spiritual Intelligence

Spiritual intelligence is an awareness of the dimensions of the self that includes mind, body, and spirit (Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, & Sisk, 2008). There exists a link between spirituality and mental health, life satisfaction, and a sense of hope, strength, and peace that can aid an individual during difficult life events (Perrone et al., 2006). Knowing this, it is important for educators to dismiss the fear of allowing spirituality in school (Sisk, 2008). When children are able to develop the essence of their spirit, wisdom will unfold (Sisk, 2008).

Several strategies involving spiritual intelligence can be implemented:

- An existential approach to counseling can address issues including the existence of a higher power, freedom, responsibility, and the impermanence of life (Perrone et al., 2006). Discussing existential questions, including the meaning of life, will guide students in their quest for understanding (Sisk, 2008). Self-understanding adds to children's sense of control, strengthening their ability to cope (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005).
- Creating a caring classroom allows students to explore how they connect to the world (Sisk, 2008). This may involve opportunities for visualization and meditation in the classroom as the teacher takes on the role as an agent for transcendence, not just a trainer or data collector (Sisk, 2008). Allowing quiet time to daydream or listen to soothing music creates a pen- sive environment, conducive for thoughtful reflection.
- Help students strengthen their bond with the natural world by providing access to gardens and animals (Sisk, 2008). Consider taking children for walks outside to connect with the healing power of nature. Exercise can increase an individual's energy level and improve mental health after a loss (Parachin, 1996).
- Offer safe havens, or places for children to retreat when feeling sad, lonely, or discouraged (Hargrove, 2007). Teachers can provide sanctuaries within the classroom, such as a quiet reading corner, or mental opportunities to escape through literature or projects (Hargrove, 2007).
- Study spiritual pathfinders who can serve as models for solving problems such as Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, and Lao-Tzu (Sisk, 2008).

- Implement service learning, which encourages focus on others and provides a positive channel of energy that nurtures the spirit (Sisk, 2008). Service learning can strengthen spiritual intelligence and empower students to contribute to solving societal problems, which can turn into transformative experiences (Terry et al., 2008).

### Collaboration Between Adults

It is essential that counselors and gifted personnel collaborate on behalf of the grieving gifted child (Peterson, 2006). Locating a counselor familiar with gifted needs is ideal (Peterson, 2006). Parent groups of the gifted, university-based services, private and agency counselors, and school counselors can be helpful, particularly if a knowledge base regarding gifted characteristics exists (Peterson, 2006). Organizations with online resources include the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at <http://www.aacap.org> and the Center for Mental Health Services at <http://www.mentalhealth.org/child>.

## Conclusion

Gifted children are not exempt from the realities of life's travesties and may be more vulnerable to symptoms of grief. Because of emotional overexcitabilities, gifted children may feel emotions more intensely than typical children. Likewise, gifted children are advanced cognitively, which may not match their emotional maturity level. Understanding concepts they are not ready for emotionally may cause undue stress and anxiety.

Grief also can be complicated by additional factors including gender, culture, guilt, society, and availability of support. In combination with dif-

ferentiated affective and developmental needs, it is evident that gifted children are strong candidates for needing support.

Furthermore, it is critical to realize that grief is not solely related to death and that gifted kids may be sensitive about a gamut of issues. Divorce, relocation, or a loss of a friendship or pet may cause grief, as well as worldly issues. Gifted children also may grieve over lost opportunities and perceived failures of goals and expectations. Knowing this, it is imperative that adults recognize potential patterns of grief in order to alleviate undue stress, guilt, anxiety, and depression.

Gifted children may have many unique characteristics including heightened sensitivity. It is crucial to nurture this gift in times of grief and offer support and strategies that will allow gifted children to gain a clearer understanding of themselves, the world, life, and death. Because gifted kids have strong capabilities for solving problems, giving them the necessary tools to deal with loss will not only aid them in times of sorrow, it will strengthen their resilience for the future. The ability to be emotionally aware of one's self and others will allow the gifted child to experience self-actualization and in return, impact the world in profound ways. **GCT**

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## Author Note

Student narratives appearing in this article were taken from personal journals. The parent narrative is based on an interview conducted by this author. All names have been changed.