
How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play

INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the article, “How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play,” from Edutopia. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

Goals

- ◆ Understand the ways that children cope with and process traumatic events through play.
- ◆ Observe the play of children who have experienced trauma in your care and identify children who may benefit from additional support.
- ◆ Create an action plan to create play opportunities that support preschoolers to process trauma.

Activity

- ◆ Read the article.
- ◆ After reading, use the guiding questions to support your development of an action plan.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support imitation and symbolic representation.

Through play, children ‘control the tempo and the pace and the content’ of a situation and gain the ability to anticipate what happens next—all of which can take the sting out of scary situations.

Emily Kaplan

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What caught your attention from the article? What made that fact, excerpt, or example meaningful to you?



- ◆ This article discusses several ways that dramatic and imaginative play can allow children to process and cope with trauma, such as grief or loss.
 - What might children’s play look like when they are processing trauma?
 - How do these experiences foster children’s coping and processing of traumatic events?



- ◆ Observe the play of the children in your care who have experienced trauma.
 - What play schemes do you notice?
 - Do children use props or symbols in their play?
 - Do children repeat play schemes as if they are ‘stuck?’
 - What emotions do children display?
 - How long do children explore their feelings and trauma during play? Do they dive deep into an experience, or do they quickly resolve it?
 - What role do you take in children’s play? Do you join in children’s play without interrupting?



- ◆ The author states, “...the very instinct to explore a subject in play likely means that the child is ready – and perhaps needs – to do so.” Based on your observations, identify the preschoolers in your care that may benefit from additional support to process and cope with feelings of trauma.
 - Consider feedback provided by the family when identifying children who may need additional support.
 - Would some children benefit from a referral to a counselor or therapist?



- ◆ Create an action plan to provide supportive play opportunities for the preschoolers in your care who have experienced trauma. Consider the ways the article suggests educators can “set the stage” for “productive play” (i.e., play that allows children to process their emotions and acquire the cognitive and social-emotional skills).
 - Consider how you will:
 - Use the P.A.C.E. Approach (more information provided in Additional Resources).
 - Refrain from shaming children during play
 - Create conditions for imaginative exploration and pretend play
 - Watch for unproductive play (i.e., play that intensifies their feelings of distress)
 - Carefully monitor children’s progress and modify your supports as needed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about imitation and symbolic representation:

- ◆ **Source:** DDP Network
- ◆ **Article:** What is P.A.C.E.?
- ◆ **Link:** <https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>
- ◆ **Description:** This article provides information about the P.A.C.E. approach to supporting children's feelings of safety and security.



- ◆ **Source:** Childhood Education International
- ◆ **Article:** The Power of Play for Addressing Trauma in the Early Years
- ◆ **Link:** <https://ceinternational1892.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TraumaPowerPlayBrief.pdf>
- ◆ **Description:** This article describes the ways that children can heal from past traumas through play experiences. It provides suggestions for supporting children's resilience through play.