

Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss



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**REVISED
EDITION**



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right?" Donna nods. The helper moves closer to the child: "Danielle, would you look at your mom for a minute? Do you think she is mad at you?" Danielle shakes her head no. "That's what she told me. She told me that you didn't do anything wrong or bad. Do you believe that?" Danielle shrugs her shoulders. "Looks like maybe you're not so sure about that right now. I think we should ask her. Donna, are you saying good-bye to Danielle because she was bad?" Donna says no. "Do you know what else your mom told me? She told me that she hopes that you have a good life and that you find a family to love you and help you grow up. Do you think she meant that? Do you think it would be all right with her if you loved them, too? Donna, I want to check that out with you: Is it really and truly okay with you if Danielle is happy and loves people in her new family the way she loves you?"

During these good-bye meetings, the helper can serve as either a silent or an active witness to the exchange of the positive things both adult and child said at the preparation meetings, until all the hard but loving things have been shared. If caregiver and child have the emotional energy, the candle ritual described later in this chapter might serve to conclude the ceremony. If they are shutting down or getting fidgety because of the intensity of the meeting, the ritual could be done separately with each of them at another time.

It is useful to tape the final session, making copies for the caregiver and for the child's caseworker, or foster parent, or therapist, so that the child can play it over and over as a way of integrating the finality of the good-bye and its blessings. It is also useful to take pictures at the meeting and to give prints both to the child's caregiver(s) and to whoever can take care of them for the child; these pictures can help all concerned hold on to the validity of their memories and feelings. If the child is adopted, his or her new parents may find it easier to support the grief process if they can hear the tape as well, so that they can directly witness the struggle of the good-bye and the courage and emotion that caregiver and child shared. It may make it easier for the new parents to leave the child's feelings for the birth parent(s) or other caregiver(s) alone

and concentrate instead on cultivating their own relationship with the child.

These good-bye meetings can be hard for everyone. Helpers may find themselves moved to tears by the courage and pain involved. They need to know that it is all right for them to be visibly moved. In many ways, they are like the mourners at a funeral who share in the grieving. Two decades of working with children facing final good-byes have convinced me that meetings such as these are one of the best ways to prevent misunderstandings that we have to offer. As mentioned in chapter 1, similar meetings can be arranged when a parent or family member is dying or when there will be no more contact for some other reason. Whatever the situation, the chance for everyone to express their love and best wishes can make a significant difference to all. These meetings free adults and children to mourn their loss clearly and help to minimize the confusion, conflict, and ongoing difficulty that can complicate the grieving process seriously and contribute to long-lasting trauma.

Conducting the Candle Ritual: One good technique for letting children know that they can love a new family without giving up the love of other significant people is a candle ritual. First make enough holes in a board or a strip of Styrofoam to accommodate candles representing the caregivers in a child's life. (The Sabbath candles found in the kosher section of the grocery store work very well; birthday candles are not as good because they burn out too quickly.) Then set up the candles, one for the child's birth parents and one for each of the child's subsequent caregivers or each place the child has lived. Here is one child's story to show you how the ritual might go:

Holding a new candle, the helper begins, "When you were just born, you were born with a special gift—that was the gift of being able to love and to be loved. This gift of loving is like a light; it makes you feel warm and happy." [The helper lights the candle.] "This candle reminds us of your very own light—the special light of love inside you. When you were brand new, you went home with your mom and dad. You and your parents spent time together. They fed you, even in the middle of the night. They

changed your diapers when they were wet or messy. They probably smiled at you and cuddled you. And you got close to them, and they got close to you. Of course, when people get used to one another and they get close to one another, they begin to have special feelings. They share the loving gift inside them. And you lit a love light with each other." [The helper puts the child's lighted candle next to the unlit candle that represents the birth parents until it, too, lights.] "After a while your parents began to fight a lot and hurt each other. Other people heard them fighting and hitting and finally someone called the police. When the police came, they could see that someone had been hitting you, too. They knew the rule that children are not for hurting, so they took you to see the judge, and the judge decided that you would need to find another family to belong with. Your social worker took you to live at the Robersons' foster home until the grown-ups could figure out how best to make things safe for you. At first it was strange and scary for you at the Robersons. You told people you wanted to go home. But after a while you got used to them, and they got used to you. You all got close to one another [the helper now puts the child's candle next to the second candle until it lights], and you lit a love light with them, too. The important thing is that getting close to them and loving them did not make your love light for your birth parents change. A wonderful part of the gift of loving is that you can love as many people as you get close to and never run out of loving.

"You know what happened next. After a while, the judge decided that it did not seem as if you could go back to live with your birth family and that you needed a family where you could live until you were all grown up. Since the Robersons were the kind of family that takes care of children until the judge decides whether children will be going back to grow up with their birth family or whether they will need a different family, your social worker began looking for the kind of family that could love you and take care of you the whole time you were growing up. Your social worker found the Gilberts, who have been wanting another child to bring up. You have been visiting them for a while and getting ready to move in with them. Just like when you first went to the Robersons, it may seem strange and scary and maybe sad; maybe you'll be angry

sometimes and wish you could go back to your foster home. After a while, I think you will get close to them and they will get close to you, and you will light a love light there as well, but you can still love all of the people who have taken care of you and been close to you for as long as you want."

The ceremony shows, in ways that even the youngest children understand, that new family constellations do not demand the death of old relationships and that differences between family members can be tolerated. The ritual is easily adapted to almost all circumstances. Variations can be used with children who have lost a parent, foster children, children who are being adopted, and step-children who are worried that if they have to share a parent with a stepbrother or step-sister they will somehow lose that parent's love. Obviously, it will be necessary to add different details if the child was not well nurtured in early life. The specifics of the ritual are as diverse as the circumstances are endless. Depending on the situation, a helper might say, "Your dad and mom stopped loving each other. Your dad went to live in a different house. But his love light for you still kept going, and your love light for him kept going too." Or, "Your mom had an accident and died. The warm, loving part of her was gone [here extinguishing the candle or moving it out of sight, depending on religious beliefs]. You kept loving her even after she was dead, and your light stayed burning." Or, "Now your mom is going to marry Ted. He will be living in your house and doing some of the things for you that your dad used to do when he and your mom were still married. In time, you may get used to having Ted help you with things. You may get close to him and he may get close to you. [The helper lights a new candle representing the stepparent.] When that happens, there will be one more person for you to love and who loves you. The important thing for you to remember is that the light of love you feel for your dad will not go out. Loving is not like soup that you dish up until it is all gone. You can love as many people as you get close to. But no one will make you blow out any of your candles. You do not have to take the love you feel for your dad away to love Ted."

Whatever the variation, the child must recognize the permission to grow close to a new caregiver. And, since children do not always

get close to their caregivers and they may not have loved or felt loved every place they lived, the child should be the one to decide whether to light candles or skip over them. The beauty of the ceremony is that it makes clear to the child and to the adults involved that it is unnecessary for a child to be forced into feeling that love for one important adult must be extinguished in order to love or to please another. It also lays healthy groundwork for the notion that the child has the capacity to belong and love in a number of new family constellations, while making it plain that if the love doesn't happen, it was because something got in the way of the child and the caregiver getting close.

Frequently, children show visible relief following this concrete ritual. Even very young children have been known to object, loudly and rightfully, "Don't try to make me blow out my candle," when they are caught in a tug-of-war between different caregivers. It also helps the new caregivers understand at both intellectual and symbolic levels that they should focus on how to enhance their closeness with the child, concentrate on their own candle, and let the others alone.

Because the candle was chosen for its symbolic connection with how children perceive love—as light and warmth—it is important to close the ritual carefully:

"I can see, Andres, that you understand about loving. I don't think you need these candles any more today to help you. This candle is not really your mother. She will not stop loving you if we put it out. Are you ready to help me blow it out?"

For very concrete- or magical-thinking children, you may need to ask permission before extinguishing each candle. For others, you can say, "I think we are through with these candles for today. Are you sure it's safe to blow them out and that the loving goes on even after they stop burning?"

"Handing Over" the Child: For infants or young children who cannot understand the symbolism involved in the candle ritual, the ritual of physically "handing over" the child to the new caregiver seems to work best (Fahlberg 1991, 210-12).

The Parkers are delighted with Joy, the fifteen-month-old daugh-

ter they will be adopting. In order to help her make the transition from her foster parents, the Wilsons, the Parkers have spent part of two days visiting the Wilsons' home, and Jan Parker has closely watched Joy's routine. Sitting with Barbara Wilson at mealtime, she sits smiling at Joy while the child is being fed. Midway through the meal, Barbara passes the spoon to Jan and lets her take over the feeding. Watching her foster mother's face and body, Joy has a chance to see in her familiar parent's eyes that it is safe to take nurturing from this new person, making her feel that the familiar adult trusts the new one with her safety and well-being.

This technique can be extended to include putting the child down for a nap, packing for the move, and other routines. An important action seems to be the actual handing of the child from one adult's arms to the other's at the time of the final move.