

CHAPTER SAMPLER

Therapeutic Storytelling Toolkit

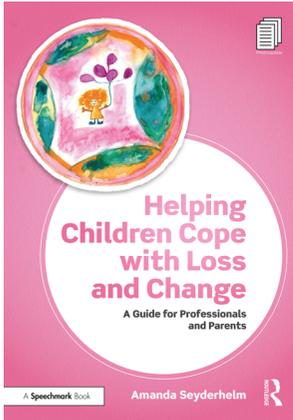
To Help Children Heal from Trauma



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Contents



1. Change

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From *Helping Children Cope with Loss and Change*



Teacher's Toolkit

The importance of the teacher/child relationship in therapeutic story

Next to parents and caregivers, a teacher is usually the most significant other in a young child's life, with the power to influence and engage that child, to help him or her grow and develop, build courage and resilience. All of this is done as well as engaging within the context of the educational task (P. Salmon, 1995, *Psychology in the Classroom*, London: Cassell).

Developmental psychology shows us that the child's self-image is internalized from significant others. The teacher's ability to listen actively, respond empathically, provide consistency and establish clear boundaries can all help the child feel secure within this relationship. You help the child develop a more positive sense of self by showing that both his anxieties and his story have been, as D. Winnicott (1960, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, London: Hogarth Press, p. 240) puts it, 'held in mind'. This holding in mind needs to be made explicit to the pupil and it is the practical ways of doing this that underpin my therapeutic storytelling approach.

For example, by using active listening skills the teacher can show the children she is aware of their personal anxieties. Reflective comments made verbally or in writing on the children's work are used to show the children that the feelings expressed in their story have been thought about. With the security the children receive from knowing the teacher has held them in mind, they become less preoccupied with their anxieties and are able to focus on the educational task (Waters, 2004).

How to use these stories

These stories are intended for use by professionals in primary schools. They are short enough to be read through in 15 minutes, and the questions at the end of the story can be worked through with the child. You will need to set aside half an hour to complete these questions with the creative exercises. I recommend that these are done in a safe space where the child can access creative materials and be quiet.

When should I use a therapeutic story?

If you notice that children are stuck or having difficulty expressing their feelings, that is the time to suggest reading a story with them. I emphasize with and not to – the difference is subtle and important when suggesting this to children. By using the word with instead of to, you are telling children that you are participating in this act together; this is not a teacher/pupil situation where there is an obvious power difference between those roles. In reading therapeutic stories with children you are starting a process where you are their companion, you do not have the answers to how they will respond to this story, and so in this way you aren't teaching them anything. They are in fact teaching you by allowing you to enter their inner world through metaphor. This is what gives them the safe distance to be able to open up to you.

A word about empathy

Empathy is your most important tool for you to use when reading a therapeutic story with children, and by constructing an empathic response you constantly give the children permission to tell their story. See Chapter 3 for more about empathy.

One of the most powerful benefits of using therapeutic storytelling is giving the children a context in which to explore their 'anti-social' behaviour so that they no longer need to act this out in the classroom. When they discover their demons and monsters in a story, this is where they can leave them.

The one rule

One reason why therapeutic approaches are not used in primary schools is the legitimate concern around being able to maintain confidentiality and relationship boundaries. By staying in the metaphor when reading a therapeutic story to a child, and only expressing interpretations within the metaphor of the story, you minimize these concerns (Waters, *Therapeutic Storywriting*, p. 19). Remember, the metaphor functions as the children's emotional cover, so stay in it until they are ready to come out of it. If you come out of the metaphor and start discussing the children's feelings, they may simply shut down. You will know when children are ready to abandon the metaphor when they start talking directly about their feelings. An example of metaphorical language is 'the tortoise feels sad about not seeing the ducks today'; the children are talking through the metaphor, whereas if they wanted to speak directly about their feelings they might say, 'I feel sad about not seeing my friend Freddie today.' In either version, take your cue from the children. Don't rush them to come out of the metaphor, they will tell you when they are ready to do so, and meanwhile, use this as an opportunity to learn more about what's upsetting them.

How to follow up and reflect back to the child

One of my clients chose to construct his own story through drawing pictures. This began when I asked him to draw me a tree, a house and a person, a useful exercise to use if a child is stuck in his emotional process. This child was very stuck, so much so that talking was impossible for him, he uttered single words, and his eye contact with me was non-existent.

He looked down at the floor most of the time, with his head falling almost onto his chest. He was distressed but he could not verbally tell me why. However, when he began to draw the tree, I noticed that his body language and posture changed; he sat up straighter, and drew his picture with some attention and consideration. Afterwards, during our discussion about the tree, I asked him to tell me more about the roots of his tree.

‘Those aren’t roots, those are tunnels,’ he said.

‘Ah, those are tunnels,’ I said, curiously and empathically. I had wrongly assumed they were roots, which just goes to show – never assume what a child’s drawing means! Let the child explain, if he wants to.

‘Yes, the tunnels are for the moles,’ he said.

I was intrigued, and as I continued to ask him open questions and empathize with his answers, so he began to tell me the story of the mole family. This story continued over several sessions, until he had extended his drawing over several pages of A4, and stuck these pages together. The mole story was told entirely through metaphor; at no point did he come out of this and talk about his feelings, which told me that he was not yet ready to make any comparisons between the mole family and his own, but there were some very interesting aspects in the story which told me something about how he was struggling with feeling lost and alone since his grandad had died.

Symptoms of grieving and the accompanying stories

This book focuses on grief and healing in general and in different situations; for murder, suicide and death through war and natural disasters, reactions may be different, and I refer you to consult specialist support for these areas.

Changes in behaviour

At times children may seem unaffected by the death and play happily as if nothing has happened. But watch out for any changes in their behaviour, which could be their way of expressing feelings they can’t talk about. These could include:

- Clinginess. Refusing to be left or clinging to you or someone else can be how children express the need for reassurance that important people aren’t going to die and leave them too.
- Distance. Some children can put up a barrier with remaining members of the family because they’re scared of getting hurt again. They might want to spend more time away from home, with friends or at school.
- Aggression. This may be your child’s way of expressing helplessness in the face of loss.
- Regression. How children respond to death can vary a lot from day to day. Acting like a younger child can be a sign of insecurity. Young children may start wetting or soiling themselves, or want a long-forgotten bottle or dummy. They may become more prone to illness or even lose weight.
- Lack of concentration. Your child may find it hard to concentrate at school and fall behind with in work.
- Sleep problems. Your child may find it hard to sleep and become afraid of the dark.

The therapeutic stories that follow deal with the symptoms of loss and contain creative tools to help children express their feelings and build resilience:

- **Aggression** after a teacher leaves primary school
- **Anger** after the death of a friend
- **Anxiety** after the death of a pet
- **Clinginess** after the death of a parent
- **Feeling different** after being adopted
- **Magical thinking** after the death of a sibling
- **Separation anxiety** after the loss of a friend
- **Separation anxiety** after parents' divorce
- **Sleep disruptions** after the death of a grandparent.

This kind of work does trigger adult losses, and one of my key messages is to help adults learn how to separate their own feelings of loss from those of the children they are reading with, which makes adults more effective – a clearer channel for the work – look at Chapter 3 for some case examples of adults struggling and how they coped, or anecdotes about how adults have dealt with being the caregiver and also having to grieve on their own.

At the end of each story there are two options for the teacher to choose from depending on how much time he/she has:

- The main course exercise – to be done out of classroom – 121 and in groups – 30 minutes.
- The appetizer – adapted for the classroom – can be done in 10–15 minutes.

The deck of cards

You can download a set of cards from my website. Each card has a key message written on one side and is blank on the other side for children to write or draw on after the exercise, to record their thoughts/feelings.

Classroom activity

There are two exercises at the end of each story, the Appetizer and the Main Course. These have been designed to give you choices in the classroom depending on the scale of the issue the child presents and, the amount of time you have available at the time to deal with this issue. Think of them as your 'go to' classroom tools. When the emotional temperature suddenly heats up and looks like it may be about to boil over, use one of these exercises to try and bring the temperature down. Remember this type of overheated response happens when the children's invisible (emotional) backpack starts to feel too heavy for them to carry anymore, which is why their reaction is to have a meltdown. At that point they have moved out of the left side of their rational brain and are in the fight or flight side with their feelings. This is where using creative tools can reach them and help them to recalibrate their emotional response.

These exercises are meant to be used interchangeably and repeated as often as is necessary. The point you are aiming for is for the children to learn how to contain their feelings and express their needs without needing an external trigger. If you find after completing these exercises a few times that the children are still distressed and acting out, it is possible that the issue is more deeply rooted in the children's psyche and possibly influenced by their family dynamic. At this point I would recommend a more direct therapeutic intervention, like play therapy, where the issue can be addressed over a period of time with a qualified therapist who can hold these difficult situations and offer support to the family.

You will find these exercises at the end of each story. In preparation and before using these exercises, I recommend that you gather together the creative resources I have used into a box and keep this box in your classroom. That way you can easily access this when the situation arises. Make sure that when you have used a resource that you replace it because I guarantee that if you don't, that will be the one resource you need! Save yourself the energy and hassle of looking for this resource when your attention and focus needs to be with the children. They may ratchet up the volume if they see you unprepared which may then have a knock-on effect on your stress levels.

Appetizer

Each story in this book has a different Appetizer which is unique to that story's context. This is a 10-minute exercise designed to contain the children's emotions quickly so that they can remain in the classroom and continue with their work. If you find that the children do not settle after doing this exercise then move onto the Main Course. Tell the children you will schedule the 30 minutes required to complete the Main Course and prepare yourself following the instructions below. Tell them when the Main Course exercise will take place.

Main course no. 1: Four-part pizza

This is a 30-minute exercise designed to satisfy the children's immediate emotional need and help them to formulate and articulate their request for change and help. What tends to happen is that the children's request often gets drowned out by the volume of their emotional distress, so these questions are designed to help them uncover those requests. This exercise is based on Marshall Rosenberg's NVC method and contains four key questions. I have adapted these and made them child-friendly, so instead of simply asking the children the questions, you are going to invite them to make a 'pizza on paper' by answering one question per slice. They get to decorate each slice with different toppings, which you are going to provide in the form of crafts. This four-part pizza Main Course will be the same for each story. My reason for this is it provides a clear framework for you to contain the children while being playful enough for them to engage with. Afterwards you will be able to use this information to assess their progress, and may find that they want to return to it and make another pizza on paper!

Pizza ingredients

Below is an example of the four-part pizza main course exercise. Blank sheets of this are available at the back of the book for you to photocopy and give to the children to fill out.

Start by having a set of crayons available as well as glue and coloured tissue paper for this exercise.

The children will have witnessed something or, engaged in an exchange which has triggered their emotional response. You are going to use this as the focus for this exercise so you can understand what unmet emotional need is driving this response. Be prepared for anything! Try to set aside any judgement or preconceptions you may have about this child and stay open. This will help you to attune your listening and hear what they are telling you which will in turn make them feel heard.

Give them the blank pizza on paper and explain that there are four slices to the pizza. Each slice has a different topic and you want them to draw their response in each slice and then give one word for each slice. They are free to choose whichever resource they want from your

box. Explain that the tissue paper can be folded or torn and stuck onto the pizza. The one rule is that they have to keep their drawings inside the lines of the pizza slices. This is to help them start to contain their feelings and responses as they go through this exercise.

The four slices

You say:

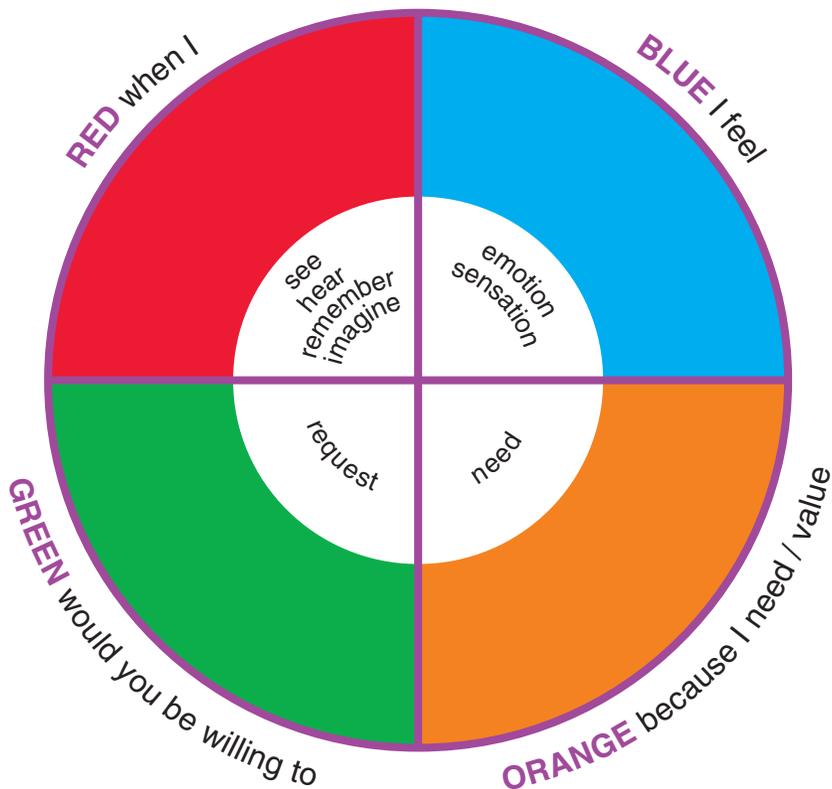
1. When I see, hear, remember, imagine (name the triggering incident)
2. I feel emotion, sensation – (name that emotion or sensation)
3. Because I need SOMETHING – (what is it that you need?)
4. Would you be willing to do X for me (their request)?

For example:

1. **When I** hear someone talking about their grandma
2. **I feel** angry
3. **Because I** want to talk to my grandma but can't because she's dead
4. **Would you be willing** to talk to me about my grandma?

In this example, the children need to be heard, to have their grief and loss acknowledged.

Child: 4 part PIZZA



Main course no. 2: Unpacking your backpack

We all carry an invisible backpack around with us on our life journey. In the backpack we carry our story. This consists of our hopes and dreams, fears, anxieties, losses, life's experiences and expectations, and these influence and shape our identity and sense of self, who we are, what we do, and how we go about our daily life. The story contents of our backpack affect the way we think, feel and act: towards ourselves, towards others, and towards our life generally.

When these build up and up until the backpack is overflowing, that is when we can be triggered to react in an inappropriate way. Children who are dealing with some form of loss usually carry heavy backpacks, so one of the most useful tools you can include in your toolkit is teaching them about how to empty their backpacks so that they can contain the good stuff.

My aim in helping them to unpack the backpack is to allow them to *express* and *explore* feelings that may feel shameful or too painful to be shared with other people. Through being *held* and *contained* the children learn how to cope with those overwhelming or potentially explosive emotions. This is not something I 'do' to my clients. It is based on a collaborative, witnessing process and it is something you can also learn how to do.

The most effective way to learn how to unpack the children's backpack is to unpack your own first! Completing this experiential exercise will not only give you the framework but also invaluable insight into yourself. You will appreciate the courage it takes to unpack an emotional backpack so that when you ask a child to do this, you will be able to do so with compassion and empathy.

The benefits of unpacking the backpack are:

- The children have more space in their head and heart to hear and listen, to follow instructions, be creative and thoughtful – while the backpack is overflowing, they will struggle to do these things, which can result in a lack of attention in class and general disruptive behaviour. Their work may suffer and their friendships may show signs of strain.
- The teacher is not spending as much time resolving conflict and emotionally caretaking which frees her up to teach.

Learning to unpack and repack your backpack is a five-step process which helps you to identify two things:

- Painful losses which may be affecting your ability to cope
- Resources to help you move forward with making changes



Children carry two backpacks. The visible one which they literally carry on their backs contains their school books and materials, and the invisible one contains their dreams, hopes, fears, worries, anxieties and losses. This exercise involves the children identifying which of those things they no longer want to carry around in their backpack because they are too heavy, and what they need to move forward with. This heaviness will be for one of three reasons:

- X has served its purpose;
- The purpose does not make sense to the children – maybe someone else’s expectations;
- The pain of carrying a loss becomes unbearable.

The invisible backpack is similar to a broken heart – we can’t literally see it, but we can become aware of the pieces and signs when this backpack gets heavy and burdensome for the children. These signs show up in the form of the children’s changed behaviour; their focus and concentration may deteriorate, their sleep pattern may be disrupted, and they may become ‘demand resistant’. At this point, it maybe tempting to reach for an ADHD assessment, but I say hold fire on that until you have looked inside their backpack. You maybe surprised by what you find there.

Items you will need for this exercise

The first thing you are going to do is to give the children a small backpack and get them to fill it with stones. You will have collected these stones for your toolkit. Use any type of garden stone, as many as you can fit into your toolkit. If the child needs more stones, have a stack of paper plates available onto which they can write their worries.

Use the questions below to help the children name each stone that they put into the backpack. Some children call the stones, ‘homework’, ‘being told what to do’, ‘my annoying brother’ – you will get a list which will get progressively more serious. This is quite common as the child allows herself to unload her worries and anxieties. Encourage the children to use all the stones and to fill the backpack. Then ask the children to wear the backpack and feel how heavy it is. Next, ask them to remove the backpack and use the questions below as prompts to encourage them to take out the stones that they no longer wants to carry. Have a waste paper bin to hand and let the children drop the stones into the bin. Ask them to tell you how it feels to let go of the stones they no longer need.

This exercise is one which you can return to again and again. You can also complete one step each week for five weeks. It’s important to make a start, and to create an awareness with the children about the connection between cause and effect, i.e. by acknowledging the heaviness of their worries they can then begin to understand the impact of those on their behaviour and learn to do something about that, i.e. choosing how they react. That is the sign of resilience and coping that we want to see. That will be the subject of your continuing work together. It would be possible, desirable even, to suggest to the children that you make this exercise part of a weekly game, which would allow them to process their feelings with you and to continue to discover new coping strategies for themselves.

Step 1: What is inside your backpack? Name each stone

What’s in your backpack that’s affecting your ability to cope with daily life?

- Past experiences – memories, thoughts, images, dwelling on the past.
- Current concerns – life circumstances, worries, anxieties, losses, changes.
- What's fuelling your problems now?
- Future – anxiety about what might happen and your ability to cope.

Step 2: If you could see your backpack, what would it look like? Draw a picture of it

- What colour is it?
- How big is it?
- How do you carry it?
- How is it fastened? How secure does it feel? Does it have a zip, velcro, buttons, straps, padlock, etc?
- How do you know it's your backpack? Does it have your name on it?
- What would cause it to come undone and open up?
- What would others see (about you) when that happens?

Step 3: What does it feel like when you're carrying your backpack? Draw or talk

- What sensations do you feel in your body? Tiredness, headache, heart racing or pounding, breathing changes, shaking, dizzy, light-headed, tense muscles, hot, sweaty, can't concentrate, poor memory, restless, etc.
- What thoughts go through your mind?
- What emotions do you experience?
- What do you do that helps you cope or feel better?



Step 4: What would your ideal backpack look like? How different would this be?

- What would you like to take out of your backpack for good?
- What would your new backpack feel like?
- What colour would you like it to be? How big would it be? How does it fasten? How do you wear it? How heavy would it be? What would be in it? What would you carry?
- What would be most helpful for you to carry with you?

Step 5: Take a different step forward

Now that we know more about your backpack, and how you'd like things to be when you lighten the load of your backpack, make an action plan to start creating the process of change:

- What do I want to stop doing?
- What do I want to do less of?
- What do I want to start doing?
- What do I want to do more of?
- Who can help me to make these changes?



I would not recommend doing this exercise with children who are recently bereaved because it will be too soon for them to access their feelings. You could do this after a few months. If you find that children get stuck at various steps, you could try using a creative visualization exercise with them before moving onto the next step. I find creative visualization very useful with children who may be left-brain dominant because it helps to bypass their rational thinking and takes them directly to their imagination and feelings. This is listed in the appendices.

Ways for teachers to support children through loss and change

- Help the children unpack their backpack – find out how they are feeling: ‘How are you feeling about Jane leaving?’ ‘Will you miss her?’ ‘What will you miss?’ At the same time, try not to probe nor make assumptions about how the child might be feeling.
- For example, reassure the child that their new teacher will make sure they are well cared for and safe. Talk about what will be the same (i.e. friends and other teachers who continue to be with the children.)
- Recommend that parents try to minimize other changes in the child’s life for a while: the people, places, routines, and rituals. Try to keep consistent home routines and boundaries.

- Acknowledge and accept the sadness or anger children may feel. ‘We all feel sad when someone leaves us. Sometimes you may feel angry that he or she isn’t your teacher anymore and that is OK.’
- Ask the child if he or she would like to write a message or draw a picture to send to the teacher who left.
- Find time out to read the child a story.
- Create a bounded space in the class where the child retreats to go and cool down.

In order to cope with any change, children need to feel supported in that process especially as any change involves some kind of loss, or what I call, ‘big little losses’ which can get overlooked during the preparations for change.

When losses are not acknowledged a child can feel anxious and stressed which then compounds the issue of transitioning, in any context. Children need boundaries, routine and rituals to help them signpost and feel secure and when these change they need help to create new routines and rituals. Losing the consistency of the routine can be upsetting, especially if the child has become attached to these teachers who leave. At this point their ‘backpack’ may feel heavier than usual and they will need to unpack this anxiety so that they have more room to cope better by accessing their left side of their brain.

A new teacher is a big change for a child because it means they have to start all over again to build a relationship with that new teacher. I know that many schools do start to prepare children for this transition and the story in this section is designed to be used by teachers to complement their activities especially with children who are particularly sensitive to this change.

Key messages

There are two main messages which adults give to children. Sometimes the denial message can be used if the adult is under time pressure or stress, but the resilient message is the one we need to be aiming to use:

1. A denial message (look how many new and exciting things there are to do here!)
2. A resilient message (I know you really miss your best friend and how difficult this is for you.)

Parents may say the first message if they are feeling guilty and struggling with their feelings, which makes it harder for them to do what I call, the three As:

1. Acknowledge
2. Accept
3. Action

They move quickly to Act before acknowledging the child’s feelings and helping them to accept them. If the child doesn’t feel her feelings have been fully acknowledged and accepted, this is usually when her behaviour will ramp up. This is code for ‘You are not listening to me, pay attention!’ The way to de-escalate this behaviour is to acknowledge how the child is feeling first.

I know from parents and teachers in my practice how difficult it is sometimes to stay listening when their child is pushing all their buttons. The main button is the one called, ‘I

want you to stop hurting’. One of my clients has said that nothing is worse than watching his child struggle and being unable to stop this struggle for them. My point is this, when we try and remove the struggle we also remove the children’s right to have their feelings and to find their own solutions. If we impose a solution on the children, we risk them missing out on this valuable learning – how to discover their own solutions. Sometimes adults impose solutions with the best intentions but usually there is an element of being unable to tolerate their own discomfort. In my view, this discomfort is not their children’s problem. The adult has to learn how to tolerate their discomfort and to help support their children in their struggle for answers.

What we need to do is to acknowledge they are struggling and accept the pain this is causing them, and we do this by doing what Carl Rogers called ‘active listening’. So in the midst of a struggle, we can start by asking children questions., such as: *What do you need from me right now, in this situation?* And then wait for the answer! Carl Rogers and Richard Farson coined the term ‘active listening’ in 1957 in a paper of the same title (reprinted in 1987 in the volume *Communicating in Business Today*). ‘Active listening’ is an important way to bring about changes in people. Despite the popular notion that listening is a passive approach, clinical and research evidence clearly shows that sensitive listening is a most effective agent for individual personality change and group development.

Active listening requires that the listener fully concentrate, understand, respond and then remember what is being said. This is opposed to reflective listening where the listeners repeats back to the speaker what they have just heard to confirm understanding of both parties.

I use active listening in my work with families, especially parents who are at the end of their patience with their child’s ramped up behaviour. I usually start by asking them: *What do you think your child is trying to tell you based on what you hear?*

Nine times out of ten the parents are shocked when we have drilled down on this question to find what the child is really trying to say! Once they have ‘got it’, parents are more equipped to cope with the ups and downs of their child’s emotions.

Active listening is particularly challenging for busy, stressed parents and teachers because so often they are operating in ‘fix-it’ mode which is all about taking action. We need to find a way to slow things down during communication so that we can actively listen and hear what the children are saying or communicating through their behaviour.

Patty Wipfler and Tosha Schore, authors of the book *Listen*, call this practice ‘stay listening’ which means listening all the way through your child’s upset. If your child is crying, stay with them instead of giving them a fix-it solution: if you stop crying we can go and get ice-cream, for example. I know that it can be tough to slow down communication in a busy classroom which is why I hope using the story ‘The egg without a shell’ will be a useful tool for when there is time outside the classroom to spend one-to-one with the child. And in most cases, the most useful tool will be the three As: Acknowledge, Accept, Act.

Anger after the death of a friend

CASE STUDY 2.2

Evan was 6 years old when he was referred to me by his primary school teacher. She was concerned about some of his behaviours which seemed uncharacteristic. He had started pinching other children. The children he was pinching were upset and told Evan to stop but this seemed to anger Evan until he eventually burst into tears literally in a heap on the floor. After I consulted Evan's parents they told me that Evan had recently lost his best friend Joe, who had died suddenly in a car accident. The whole school was affected by Joe's death but for Evan this loss was particularly tough as his grandad had died the year before. The family were grieving heavily and found it difficult to cope with Evan's behaviour which they were calling 'challenging'. This amounted to Evan pushing all their patience buttons and having angry meltdowns when his needs were not immediately met. The parents were at their wits end.

Working with grieving children is like peeling back the layers on an onion. The first layer was Evan talking about Joe, but then he quickly moved onto the more routine issues that bothered him at school, before circling back to Joe. His loss was held in little pockets inside him and together we slowly unpacked these over many weeks through creating paintings and clay models, until Evan was ready to leave the safety of his play therapy room. I always know when children are ready to leave because they start to self-direct their play which is what Evan started to do. This is a healthy sign that the child has taken enough in through the play and stored those resources inside them, ready to use in the outside world.

I always give a child in play therapy a small empty shoe box in which they can keep the objects they make in their sessions. The objects are symbolic of the resources they are finding within themselves. Evan filled several boxes with his drawings, paintings and clay models, and letters to Joe. On his final day, we carefully packed his boxes into a large plastic holdall which he took home, and according to his parents, he kept this in his bedroom and took it out sometimes before bedtime to look at.

Sometimes Evan and I talked about his drawings but often we didn't. The act of creating the drawing was enough for him, and he would carefully place these inside his box. Children in play therapy intuitively know what they need and are very skilled at showing you through the creative mediums, which is why I believe the stories are useful tools to use with children who are stuck in their grief.

Theory

According to Cruse Bereavement, anger is a common response to bereavement amongst children. Compounding this is the fact that bereaved children can find it difficult to understand their emotions and verbally articulate how they are feeling, so their anger can sometimes be expressed indirectly through acting out.

They can also feel angry with people they feel did not do enough to prevent their loved one from dying. A child might be extremely angry towards the nurses who cared for his mother whilst she was dying believing that their care was inadequate or lacking in some way and that was why his mother died.

Quite common is the anger a child or young person feels towards the person who has died. This anger can be directed at the person who has died for not allowing the child or young person the time to say goodbye, or it could be because the child or young person feels that they have been abandoned by the person dying. Anger can also be directed at the person who has died because their death has left the child or young person to deal with the strong emotions that grief entails by themselves.

Anger can manifest itself in various ways according to the child or young person's understanding of death at the time of the bereavement. Younger children may have tantrums and become aggressive towards others; older children might become disruptive at school and get in to fights with other children.

Anger is an understandable response to bereavement and it is something that the majority of children and young people will experience as they grieve.

Story 2.2 Seeing red

Billy was always getting into trouble at school. He spent a lot of time in class detention.

Billy felt lonely. Since his best friend Monty died he had no one to talk to about stuff. Monty and Billy shared a love of trees. During break time, when other children were racing around the playground, Billy and Monty were having a competition about how many different shades of green they could see.

His Mum and Dad told him that he would eventually get over his sadness but Billy wondered how he was meant to do that, and what did 'getting over it' mean anyway? He felt frustrated that no one could explain that to him. Did they mean that he would be over Monty when he stopped thinking about him?

Didn't they understand that Monty was his best friend! They went on family holidays together every year – no one understood Billy's fascination with snails as much as Monty did. Their snail hunting trips were their weekend ritual and their collection was the only thing Billy now had left of Monty. As he looked at the collection Billy wished he had told Monty how much those trips meant to him.

In his bedroom at night he'd say out loud:

'Why didn't I die with you in that car crash Monty?! Why you and not me?'

At school Billy's teacher noticed how angry he got if something didn't go his way or, if Billy lost at a game in class. Billy's face would turn bright red as he struggled to control himself before he burst out:

'It's not fair, why am I always the one who loses?' before sweeping his pen and pencils off his desk onto the floor.

No one in the class knew what to say to Billy when he was angry to make things better for him. Immediately afterwards Billy would go quiet as he felt the shame of his angry outburst. Inside Billy's tummy was rumbling and upset.

His teacher tried to calm Billy down, but Billy pushed his chair away from his desk and stood up, fighting back his tears. He didn't want them to drop in front of his friends; he was scared they would laugh at him. He looked at his teacher.

'I tell you what, Billy, why don't you go outside and sit on the chair in the hallway?' she said.

Billy wandered outside and stood with his back to the wall, one foot against it, hands in his pockets. The autumn wind was chilly. His boots felt heavy.

The big oak tree standing in the middle of the school's garden suddenly looked very big to Billy. It was covered with thousands of green leaves – he started to count the different shades of green until he noticed something different – were some of them red, he wondered.

One of the leaves looked like a bright red apple! His Mum sometimes made him baked apples for when Monty came round for his tea, and added ice-cream when he got a good report, which wasn't very often these days. Since Monty died Billy couldn't concentrate as well on his school work. Apples reminded Billy of Monty. Billy suddenly felt hungry for his Mum's baked apples.

Maybe if he had a closer look at the tree he'd be able to pick some apples to give to his Mum, and he could ask her to bake them for tea!

Billy felt excited again.

He took a quick look into the classroom and saw his teacher writing on the backboard. She'd never notice he'd gone ...

Billy sprinted across the quad, and slowed down as he approached the garden of oak trees. Monty's favourite tree, he thought wistfully. All the leaves had turned red! Bright as a neon sign. Billy wondered if he was in the wrong place, but before he could run away, he heard a voice say:

'Hello Billy, I've been waiting to meet you,' she said.

Billy jumped about five feet into the air.

'Who's that?' he asked.

'It's me. Dilly Dangle.'

Billy turned around so he could see where the voice was coming from.

Dilly had removed her hat and revealed her long flame red hair which unfurled almost to the ground.

'Here I am, Billy.'

Billy looked dazed and was lost for words.

'It's OK, Billy, I'm not here to tell you off. I'm here to tell you that I know how sad you are about losing Monty,' she said.

'I'm not sad,' said Billy, 'I'm angry – why has he left me alone?' Billy cried. 'Sit down and get comfortable Billy,' said Dilly.

Billy plonked himself on the ground which had suddenly become dry instead of muddy, and felt soft like a velvet carpet. Billy felt comfortable sitting there.

'When you get these feelings, do you notice anything else right before you get them?' asked Dilly.

Billy closed his eyes as he thought for a second.

'Yes!' he said. 'I get a jangly feeling in my tummy, and sometimes my head hurts, or my nose itches,' he said. 'I just see red! And before I know it I am feeling very cross.

'That's me Billy trying to get your attention. When you feel jangly that's because I am trying to tell you something,' explained Dilly.

Billy looked intrigued.

'You mean you are the one who warns me because sometimes I see a little red light flashing, and I can't stop it,' he said.

'Yes, Billy, that's me, I'm dangling from this tree to get your attention because I want you to stop and listen,' Dilly said.

Billy looked like a light had been switched on inside him. He stood up and walked closer to Dilly.

'I'm your friend, Billy. You can come and talk to me anytime,' said Dilly.

Billy put his head on one side, listening intently.

'Anger is like an iceberg, Billy. These jangly, red feelings are just the tip that you and everyone else sees, but underneath the ice there are others, and these are called frustration and helplessness,' she said.

The wind rustled the leaves. Suddenly Billy could feel Monty's presence. He couldn't see him but he felt he was nearby. He didn't feel scared, just intrigued.

'You feel frustrated that Monty has left you – he died and you didn't, and that makes you feel helpless. The world now feels like a scary place. Does that make sense?' Dilly said.

'Yes, it does,' said Billy. 'But I don't know how to tell people about those other feelings below the ice,' he said. 'They just see me being angry and run away from me, and I don't want them to,' he said.

'I understand that, Billy, and to help you get started I'm giving you three blank cards. When you are feeling overwhelmed and seeing red, I want you to hold up one of the cards and show your teacher,' she said. 'This is your tool for letting her know what you are feeling below your iceberg. She will then be able to suggest that you take some time out and go to your play box,' she said. 'Playing there for half an hour will help you to calm your iceberg down,' she said.

Billy suddenly felt better than he had done in ages. Someone had heard him! He liked the sound of the play box and took the cards from Dilly and put them in his pocket.

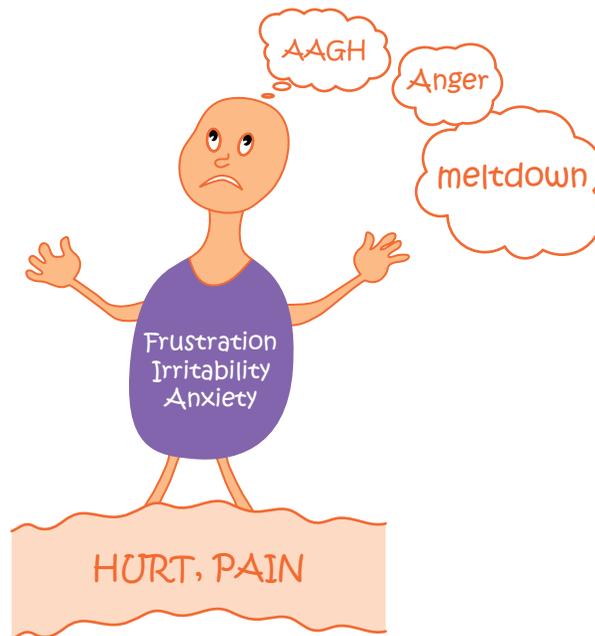
'Keep those cards safe, Billy, they are your ticket to melting your iceberg,' she said.

Billy nodded. 'Thank you, Dilly' he said. He got up to go back to class and as he turned around to say goodbye to Dilly he noticed that all the leaves had turned green and were gently swaying in the breeze.

Billy touched the cards in his pocket and felt happy knowing they were safe and that he had more colours and words for expressing his feelings. Maybe he would add a fourth card and colour this green, and always keep this in his pocket to remind him of Dilly. Billy looked up at the tree and thought he could see the leaves smiling at him.

What can I do to help?

One way we can support children who are angry and acting out is to explain to them that anger has its origin in several other emotions that are felt long before anger is expressed. Anger is so powerful that it often overwhelms these ‘first emotions’ (D. Sims Darcie, *Anger and Grief in Children*). There is a hierarchy to anger:



Underneath anger is frustration and at the bottom is hurt. If this hurt goes unacknowledged, that produces frustration, which can quickly turn into anger. I see children whose angry behaviour escalates at school for no apparent rational reason. Usually the escalation is produced by the children feeling their concerns are not being acknowledged. I explain to parents and teachers that it is common for children who feel this frustration to ratchet up their behaviour as a way of getting someone’s attention. The children’s inner narrative will go something like this: ‘If only you understood how frustrated I felt.’ Often, underneath the frustration is a sense of helplessness. A sudden death can produce a sense of helplessness. No one likes to feel helpless, so that feeling can be quickly converted into anger. Helplessness is a weak feeling; one without controls or power. Sometimes children feeling helpless can become overly controlling in other areas of their life, as a way of dialling back their sense of helplessness.

- If a child or young person's anger is causing them to hurt themselves or others explain to them that it is OK to feel angry but not OK to hurt themselves or other people. This may be the point at which to seek external intervention and assessment.
- Encourage the child or young person to vent their anger towards a pillow or to go for a run; any physical activity that will enable them to push the stress out of their body should be helpful. Anything that will allow the child or young person to channel their anger in a safe way can be used.
- Reassure the child or young person that it is OK to feel anger towards the person who has died and that this is a natural response and not something they should feel guilty about.
- If the child or young person's anger is directed towards you, try not to take it personally. Often children and young people will direct their anger at the person they feel closest to. By remaining constant and not getting upset by the child or young person's anger you are reinforcing the fact that you will be there for them no matter what.
- **Model appropriate ways to express frustration.** For example, if you are having trouble with putting something together, or, if you spill something, take time to explain what you are finding frustrating.
- **Anticipate difficulties.** Notice when children are losing interest or tiring of an activity, and ask them what else they would prefer to do instead.

Questions to ask

- What colours would you choose if you were feeling angry?
- In which part of your body do you feel angry?

Key messages

- **The denial message:** You have lots of other friends to play with (this closes the issue down).
- **The resilient message:** The death of a friend is equivalent to the loss of a limb – German proverb. What would help you to remember your friend? (this opens up the chance for expression and healing).

Classroom activity

Appetizer: Pound out your frustration!

A small play dough or clay table is a great place for a child to go and 'pound out' her frustrations. Add to this a small box, shoe box size, to contain whatever object the child makes in the play dough or clay. Inside the box place a pack of six coloured blank cards. After the child has finished making a clay object, invite them to write down any words to describe their feelings towards the clay object. The child can either take the object home with them, or keep

it inside the box which you could then store safely in the classroom. The advantage of doing this is that if you do need to repeat this exercise, the child can add objects to the box. Be sure to explain that once the box is full, the exercise will stop. This creates a useful boundary for the child.

Main course: Four-part pizza
