



Supporting Children & Youth Coping with

Unresolved Loss

What we'll be talking about

1

Understanding Ambiguous Loss

2

The Impact of Ambiguous Loss

3

Providing Support in the Face of Ambiguous Loss

Guidelines for Digital Dialogue

Please Participate

- Phone lines are muted but Q & A and chat boxes are active throughout.
- Please participate in audience polls as they come up.

Materials Will Be Available

Within a week of the Digital Dialogue, the CBLCC website will have posted:

- A recording of the session
- The slide deck

Poll:

How familiar are you with the concept of ambiguous loss?

Response Options:

- This is something I've already learned a lot about.*
- I've heard the term but haven't dug deep.*
- This is new for me.*

Presenter



Deborah
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PhD, LCSW

Founding Member, GrOW

Dr. Deborah Langosch's training and consultation on trauma, bereavement, and ambiguous loss help providers improve the quality of their work with children and kin caregivers. Dr. Langosch's doctoral work focused on grandparents raising grandchildren due to the death of the parent. She was a Senior Clinical Interventionist on a NIMH-funded research grant on childhood bereavement at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. She developed and directed the Kinship Care Program at NYC's largest social service agency for 17 years and was the Director of the Loss and Bereavement Program for Children and Teens there. Dr. Langosch is currently a co-managing editor of the GrandFamilies online journal and a founding member of the GrandFamilies Outcome Workgroup (GrOW). She serves on the Child Traumatic Loss Committee of SAMHSA's National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

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In its simplest sense,
“ambiguous loss”
refers to **loss without
closure.** ”

--Cleveland Clinic



Pauline Boss' Constructs

Physically absent /
Psychologically present

The person is not with you but is still emotionally present:

- Family separation due to foster care
- Caregiver incarceration
- Caregiver deportation
- Unaccompanied minor youth/border separations
- Divorce/parental separation
- Military duty

Physically present /
Psychologically absent

The person is with you but not available:

- Chronic medical or mental health challenges or disabilities
- Substance use
- Depression, anxiety or other mental health issues
- Dementia
- Caregiver overwhelmed

Characteristics of Ambiguous Loss

- Real losses that cause significant pain and are often unresolved. Not the same as death, which has finality.
- Can cause challenging reactions without the benefit of clear rituals or responses.
- Cause lack of clarity and considerable confusion. Not clear if they're temporary or permanent, such as when a child is separated from their parent.
- Loss can include the sense of safety, health, control, work, school, food, housing, contact with others, isolation, and usual supports and resources. **Much is left behind.**



The Challenges of Living with Ambiguous Loss

- Lack of clarity and control
- Confusion about family roles
- Secrecy, stigma and shame
- Lack of closure
 - Not here but here
 - Symbolic rituals denied
 - Loss not acknowledged or recognized
- Erosion of culture and sense of belonging



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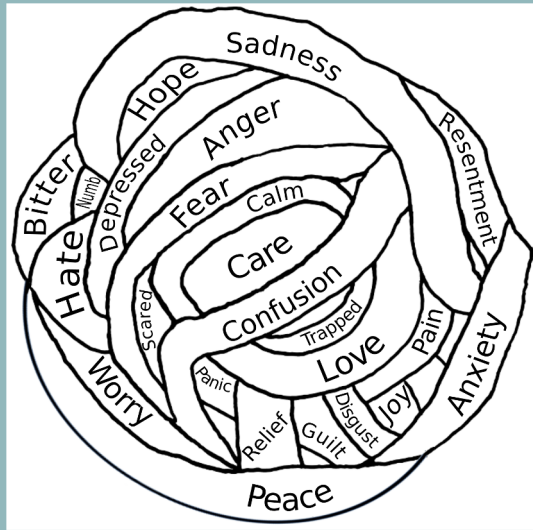
No one understood my loss and hurt. It was as if it wasn't real. I felt unseen and unheard.

”

Teen client

Tangle of Emotions





Tangle of Emotions

- Ambivalent or mixed feelings
- Chronic hope and disappointment cycle
- Wishing and yearning
- Feelings of betrayal
- Reactions may not be understood to be a result of ambiguous loss
- Can affect a child's behavior, relationships, learning, somatic and social responses

The Special Challenge of Ambiguous Loss and Kinship Care

- . Child and caregiver are both experiencing loss, but in different ways
- . Feelings about the caregiver's role can be complicated
- . Relationship with the birth parents



Responding to Children's Questions

Where are they?

How could they do this to me?

Was it my fault?

Why did this happen?

How should I behave when I see them?

Should I have done something differently?

Will they ever come back?

When will I see them again?

Why did they leave me?

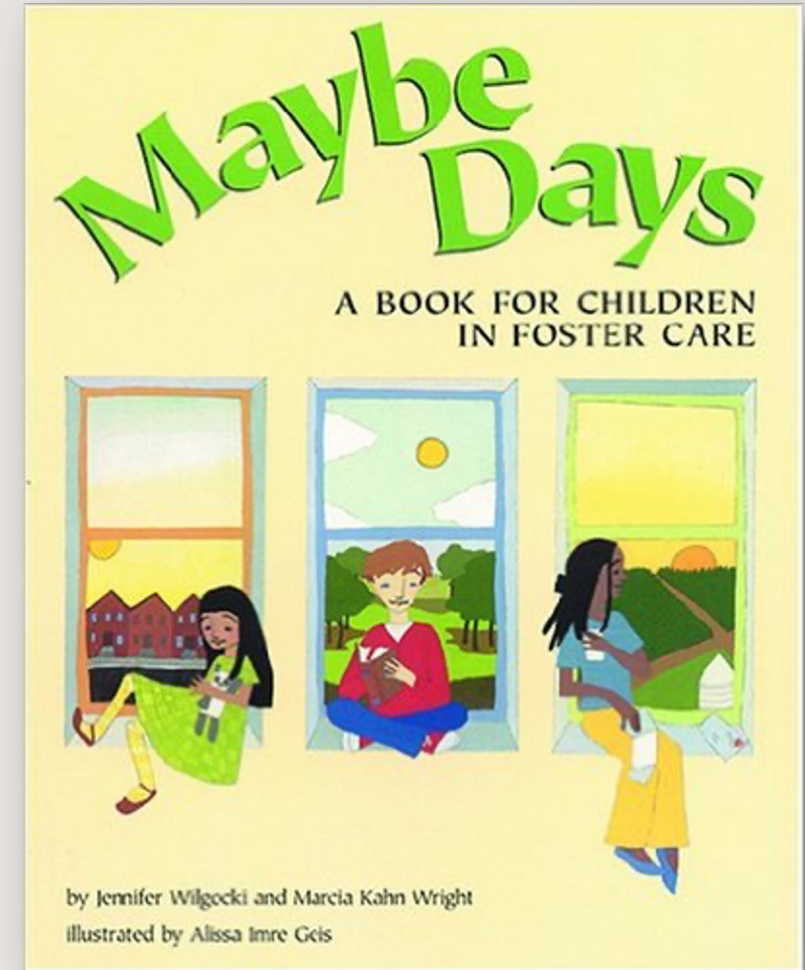
What do I tell others?

Do they still love me?



Talking About Ambiguous Loss with Children

- Explanations
 - Psychoeducation
 - Fortification of caregivers with tools
- Level of readiness of child and caregiver
- Age-appropriate language
- Answering questions
- Cultural context
- Normalizing with books and stories
- Use of expressive arts – creating a loss and/or found or belonging box



What Can Help

- Name, acknowledge, and recognize the loss
- Help identify what's been lost and what's still the same
- Create space to grieve and express ambivalence
- Promote a sense of safety and stability
- Provide consistency
- Find other ways to understand the situation to reduce shame and guilt
- Normalize ambivalent and contradictory feelings
- Honor cultural perspectives
- Adapt new family traditions
- Find strategies for coping
- Identify supports
- Make meaning when possible



How Providers and Programs Can Help

Consider how to:

- Create an environment of acceptance and acknowledgment of ambiguous loss
- Build ways to enhance a sense of connection and belonging
- Rebuild trust after repeated disrupted attachments
- Highlight the child or family's strengths, resiliency, and protective factors for effective coping
- Provide opportunities within the family to openly and safely discuss their grief experiences
- Find ways to destigmatize these losses in the context of culture, race, and diversity
- Increase connections through relational and supportive networks
- Build linkages for the provision of quality, culturally informed services that address ambiguous loss
- Recognize how unresolved losses and grief can profoundly affect youth, especially in the child welfare system, as they face new situations

References

- Boss, Pauline. (1999) *Ambiguous Loss*, Harvard University Press
- [Complex Loss in a Complex System: Ambiguous Loss in Child Welfare – CWLA](#)
- [HANDOUT #3: AMBIGUOUS LOSS HAUNTS FOSTER AND ADOPTION CHILDREN \(mo.gov\)](#)
- Mitchell, Monique, [The Family Dance: Ambiguous Loss, Meaning Making, and the Psychological Family in Foster Care 2016 - Journal of Family Theory & Review - Wiley Online Library](#)



Q&A

Please type your questions into the Q&A box.

Dr. Deborah Langosch



grandfamilieswork.org



[GrandFamilies: The Contemporary Journal of Research](#)



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Thank you for joining us!

