How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play

Young children will likely process the tumultuous events of 2020 in the only way they know how—through play. Here's how adults can be supportive.

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Soon after the Oklahoma City bombing, in 1995, children in a nearby kindergarten started playing dead. Over and over, they toppled towers of blocks and lay motionless on the floor. When their teacher asked them to tell her about what was happening in their play, the students informed her that they had all been killed by terrorists.

The play continued in this vein for some time—smashed towers, splayed-out children—until their teacher asked if they might be interested in building a hospital. "She went in with stethoscopes, masks, and bandages, and helped kids move towards a phase that was focused on care and healing," says Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor emerita at

Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and an expert on the ways young children process trauma through play.
That expertly handled transition—recognizing that the children were stuck and might need a nudge—demonstrates a few important principles about play, according to Carlsson-Paige. First, the teacher did not judge the children's play or let her own anxieties about the situation seep through. For young children, she understood, play is the only way to work through everything they wrestle with, from everyday challenges to anxiety, fear, and even loss and death. Second, while the teacher left plenty of room for discovery, she stepped in when the play turned obsessive, redirecting her students in a way that was both well-timed and developmentally appropriate.

As the world confronts the novel coronavirus pandemic, an economic depression, and global protests about racism and systemic inequalities, children are being exposed to painful and often scary ideas—and their play will reflect their efforts to make sense of what they see and hear.

Why Children Play Through Grief and Loss

The late Vivian Gussin Paley, a kindergarten teacher, recipient of the MacArthur "genius" grant, and author of dozens of books on children's play lives, put it this way: "The young child wants to play. He wants to play because intuitively he understands that through play he will understand more about who he is than in any other format."
Seth Aronson, a psychologist and the Director of Curriculum, Training and Supervising Analyst at the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology in New York City, extends that line of thinking into play that involves the processing of fear, anxiety, or loss.
"One of the functions that play serves for kids is it allows them to approach something that might be frightening in a way that makes it less frightening and more understandable," he says. 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. "Whenever there's any kind of scary or traumatic situation, play really allows the child the displacement and the space to play out some of those things," he says. "If it's happening to a doll, it's not really happening to me."

In other words, imaginative play not only enables children to better understand reality—by helping them to inhabit the perspectives of, say, both a doll patient and a stuffed animal doctor—but also to quickly change the narrative when the reality becomes too much to bear. (In the past two months, I've seen this with a three-year-old I've spent a lot of time with, who repeatedly declares dolls dead before bringing them back to life.) Psychologists call these processes denial and undoing, and they're essential to maintaining a child's sense of safety and control. "Play has the power to make something un-happen, to correct something that's overwhelming," Aronson explains. For instance, a child whose grandmother recently died might say that she saw Grandma in her room, or that she played with her. "It's totally normal," Dr. Aronson says. "It's undoing the event in a way that's comforting and soothing and helps the child deal with the loss."

How Grown-ups Can Set the Stage

Erika Christakis, a former faculty member at the Yale Child Study Center and the author of *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups*, says that the play impulse is evolutionarily hardwired in humans and "can't be short-circuited." Nevertheless, she says, adults play a key role in setting the groundwork for what psychologists call "productive play"—which actively helps children process their experiences and acquire emotional and cognitive skills—while watching for signs of unproductive play, which represent and amplify feelings of distress.

The P.A.C.E. approach: Christakis says that the acronym P.A.C.E.—which stands for playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy—is a useful guide for helping adults interact with young children. Adults should recognize that children are navigating a tension within themselves: they want to feel powerful and independent, while also yearning to feel protected and cared for. Given this, adults should empower children with age-appropriate choices: asking them what song to sing, what to have for a snack—or what they want to play.

Generally speaking, adults shouldn't be overly worried that children will lead themselves down roads they aren't prepared to navigate: the very instinct to explore a subject in play likely means that the child is ready—and perhaps needs—to do so. "Children are really good at getting what they need through the tools that they have," she says. She adds, "Kids

can tolerate a lot as long as they know that their feelings are not creepy or wrong."

Don't shame: Sometimes children's play can inspire uncomfortable feelings in adults, which is perfectly fine, as long as adults don't convey to children that their play is shameful or wrong. Play is highly personal: Nancy Carlsson-Paige, the professor, says it contains "the whole child: emotions and thoughts and physical being and social self." As such, children tend to interpret criticism or dismissal of their play as criticism or dismissal of themselves.

"The healthiest, most nurturing thing we can do for children is to join them in their feelings," Christakis says. She encourages adults to communicate that "there's nothing you could say to me that would be too weird, too annoying."

Create the conditions for imaginative exploration: To encourage children to play out what's on their minds, experts recommend providing children with "multi-use" toys—generic objects like blocks and wooden dolls, onto which children can project what they need to project. When children have a Superman action figure, they tend to play out Superman storylines; but when they have a faceless figure, they engage with their own thoughts and emotions, what they find exciting, troubling, or confusing. It's these scenarios that are most conducive to productive play, which reflects some aspects of a child's experience or imagination.

Watch for unproductive play: In rare situations, play—or a lack thereof—can be a cause for concern. Generally speaking, adults should not intervene in children's play. However, "if the child's play makes the child anxious, when it's too literal for the child, or when it's obsessive and repetitive—that's a sign that the play isn't serving its purpose," says Aronson, the New York psychologist. In these situations, adults can gently introduce new elements or coax the narrative in a new direction, as the teacher in Oklahoma did when her kindergarteners repeatedly revisited the terrorist attack.

"I always look for some kind of change in play," says Carlsson-Paige. If that change doesn't occur—if the same troubling event is rehashed over and over, with the same outcome each time—intervention, or psychological attention, may be merited.

However, what may be most concerning is the absence of play. When Carlsson-Paige spent time in El Salvador in the early 1990s, during the country's civil war, the children she encountered there were so

traumatized they didn't play at all. When she returned the next year, after the war's conclusion, play had returned.

"Children need to have a certain sense of safety to go into an imaginary play zone," she asserts. Adults can provide that safe space at this tumultuous and historic moment—being careful to strike the right balance between the freedom children need to explore difficult subject matter on their own, and the periodic need to step in when kids get stuck.