Holidays, Celebrations and Death

Children who have experienced a death may face reminders at holidays or celebrations that occur every year. Celebrations may be cultural or religious rituals. Cultural holidays may be both memorials and celebrations evoking both sad and happy memories.

It is important for adults (parents, therapists, teachers, and other adults) to identify, understand, anticipate, prepare for, and respond to these reminders. Communicate with families regarding cultural and religious observances that may elicit grief reminders.

Dia De Los Muertos

Day of the Dead/All Souls Day
Commonly observed in Hispanic and Catholic families
Observed on November 2nd each year
Celebrate the life of the deceased while mourning their passing

A day when departed souls return to earth.
A gathering of family and friends to pray for and remember those who have passed.
Gather at a home or cemetery all day and evening.
Build an altar with ofrendas for the deceased.

Photos of the deceased
*Flor De Muerto* (Flower of the Dead, Marigolds)
Favorite items (toys for children)
Candies to guide the soul to the altar
Play the favorite music of the deceased
Eat the favorite foods of the deceased
Water and drinks after the soul’s long journey
*Pan De Muerto* (Bread of the Dead)
*Calaveras* (poems about the deceased)
Rituals vs. Reminders

Rituals
- Can be religious, cultural, personal
- Have order, routine, tradition, universal

Reminders
- Private, personal
- Idiosyncratic
- Anticipated (annual, predictable)
- Unanticipated (current and future)

Caregivers and children have different responses to same event
Potential for:
1. PTSD related reactions: avoidance, re-experiencing, arousal
2. Other behaviors, reactions: irritability, sadness, anxiety

Rituals and Reminders

Formal aspect: common or prescribed
Personal aspect: how family participates, celebrates

Date, event, activities can be
- potential triggers
- comfort

Anticipation of event/date can be more difficult than actual event/date

Types
- Religious and cultural dates & practices
- Public holidays and gatherings
- School related events and activities
- Personal & family events and anniversaries

Types: Religious and Cultural

Examples
- Yartzeit (Jewish)
- All Saints/All Souls Day (Catholic/Italian)
- Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Passover, Easter, others

Obstacles & issues
- Recurring event, never ending
- Feelings about faith may have changed before or after the death
- Important to know child & families belief rather than assume and generalize
Types of Reminders: Public

Examples:
- Mother’s and Father’s Day
- Thanksgiving
- Memorial Day (can also be personal re: military specific)

Obstacles & issues
- Bombarded by popular media, culture
- Difficult to avoid
- Lack of awareness by others
- Expectations by others
- Pleasant and unpleasant memories

Types of Reminders: School Related

Curriculum related examples:
- History: Iraq and Afghanistan, 9/11
- English: Death Be Not Proud

Festive examples:
- Traditional: Father-daughter dance
- Milestones: first day of school
- Ceremonies: moving up, graduation, sports, awards

Obstacles and issues:
- Students history of death related experiences does not travel with them
- Teacher expectations and lack of information
- Students fear: being different, not completing work, pressure to “get over it”

Types of Reminders: Personal & Family

Examples:
- Anniversary of diagnosis or death
- Deceased person’s birthday
- Parent’s anniversary
- Family gatherings, vacations

Obstacles & issues
- Reminders that are not “celebrations” or holidays, but are personal and private
- Unknown to others so unacknowledged
- Yet to come: future events, e.g. buy a car, wedding, birth
How Adults Can Help

- Recognize and anticipate difficult dates
- Prepare: help children make plans for positive coping
- Permission: allow children to not celebrate and/or to cope in their own way

Recognizing Difficult Dates

- "Circle of Life": perpetual calendar to include important dates such as:
  - Child’s birthday
  - Deceased person’s birthday and date of death
  - Holidays
  - Mother’s Day/Father’s Day, other important dates
  - Examine the calendar for times of year that these dates occur together

Prepare: Help Child Make Plans to Cope

- What will make this day easier?
- How would I like to spend it?
- Who can I spend part of this day with to make it easier for me? How can I let them know what I need from them that day?
- Do I want to remember/memorialize the person who died in some way? How?
- What if the day doesn’t go as I hope? What are my Plans B, C and D?

Permission to Celebrate/Cope Differently

- Allow children not to celebrate or memorialize if they so choose.
- There is no schedule for grief
- Provide alternative activities for bereaved children who choose not to celebrate holidays as other children are celebrating—give choices about how this might be done if this is feasible.
- This does not indicate lack of respect or love for the person who died, or for the holiday.

Summary

- Holidays and many other personally meaningful dates can serve as trauma/grief reminders
- Religious and cultural rituals and celebrations as well as public holidays, school related events, and private anniversaries can be comforting or challenging
- Parents, teachers and other adults can support traumatically bereaved children in a number of important ways.
Additional Resources

- Childhood Traumatic Grief information sheets, videos, and web-based presentations available at www.nctsn.org and http://learn.nctsn.org
- Free web based training course Childhood Traumatic Grief Web (CTGWeb) available at www.musc.edu/ctg