



## **FAST FACTS: Parenting a Child Experiencing Ambiguous Loss**

Ambiguous loss encompasses feelings of grief and distress that are associated with any loss and is combined with confusion about the lost relationship or person. With adoption, ambiguous losses are inevitable, impact all parties, and should be addressed along with other grief and loss processing.

With ambiguous loss there can be a physical absence and psychological presence (such as awareness of, but lack of relationship with the biological parents). Or there can be a physical presence but psychological absence (such as a parent who is ill or struggling with chemical dependency who might be physically present but not psychologically available). Children might experience ambiguous loss around an unknown parent, personal and cultural identity, siblings, and sense of familial cohesion.

Often, children are the primary consideration when addressing grief and loss related to adoption, however this type of loss also applies to parents. Parents may experience ambiguous loss related to fertility, acceptance from relatives and the community, loss of the unknown or 'dream' child, etc. Birth parents also experience the loss of their child and the related circumstances.

### **What is 'normal'?**

It is important to know that children display a range of behaviors, and there are no set rules about what constitutes 'normal'. It should also be remembered that parents as well as children experience ambiguous loss. Children may experience intense symptoms and behaviors such as difficulty with changes and transitions - even ones that seem minor, trouble making decisions and overwhelm when pressured to do so, problems coping with routine childhood or adolescent losses, depression, anxiety, and feelings of guilt.

Examples of difficult questions related to ambiguous losses might be: "why did my parents give me up?", "what would my life have been like if I wasn't adopted?", or "is there something wrong with me that I was put up for adoption?". Parents may wonder "what would my biological child have been like?", "what would it have been like if my adopted child did not have special needs?", "how would this be different if my other family was more accepting?".

Examples of ambiguous loss triggers for adopted children: a child has a difficult time on the last day of school. While other children might be rejoicing, the adopted child might struggle with change and fear the loss of connections, a child struggles around their birthday, feels conflicted missing and loving a parent they barely knew or remember, while also loving their adoptive family.



## What is 'abnormal'?

While it is to be expected that children experience some mental health or behavioral struggles related to ambiguous loss, significant impact on a child's ability to function in their family life, at school, or in the community may indicate more complicated symptoms and require bigger interventions. Unresolved and complex grief prolongs suffering, interrupts normal activities, or prevents life from being lived to the fullest. If your child is experiencing one or more these or other disruptive or unsafe symptoms it is recommended to reach out for professional help and support.

Examples of unhealthy behaviors include violence towards self or others, suicidal ideation, extreme interruptions to feeding and sleeping routines, sustained decrease in academic performance, sustained regression of developmental milestones (toilet training, babble talk), prolonged avoidance behaviors, feeling of numbness, spacey or dissociative behaviors, frequent nightmares/night terrors

## The following resources provide additional information about understanding grief:

[https://www.mdedge.com/internalmedicine/article/19087/adolescent-medicine/adopted-children-can-feel-loss-](https://www.mdedge.com/internalmedicine/article/19087/adolescent-medicine/adopted-children-can-feel-loss)  
<https://www.griefrecoverymethod.com/blog/2017/10/grief-adopted-children>

## Tips for supporting children and the family system experiencing ambiguous loss

Ambiguous loss can deal with difficult topics, dynamics, and considerations. Preparation for ambiguous loss, creating an open and supportive environment and pursuing support in the community can aid in healthy coping and processing for both parents and children. Acknowledgement of ambiguous loss and the recognition that these losses can be integrated, but do not "go away", is essential.

Keep expectations at a reasonable level. Anyone's need to grieve over ambiguous losses will never fully be cured, fixed, or resolved in any predetermined time frame, if ever. Allow you and your child to know that feelings related to these losses will come and go at different times in life. It is important to have a safe place to express those feelings.

Engage in activities with children that support healthy processing of grief. It is also helpful to model dialectical thinking and a nonjudgmental stance. For example: we can love and miss our biological family and feel hurt and betrayed by them too.

As a parent or caregiver, it is important to explore your own losses and complex feelings you might have towards the adoption circumstances. Adoption competent therapy, family therapy, and adoption support groups can provide healthy processing of ambiguous losses.

## Sources and Resources on Ambiguous Loss:

<https://adoption.com/5-ways-to-help-your-child-process-adoption-loss>  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/helping/>  
<https://www.pactadopt.org/app/servlet/documentapp.DisplayDocument?DocID=56>  
<https://www.nacac.org/?s=grief+and+loss>  
<https://www.nacac.org/connect/support-for-minnesota-adoptive-families/>

## Information presented by:



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