Using Ritual With Children and Adolescents

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CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS, AND LOSS

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Foreword by Jack D. Gordon, President Hospice Foundation of America
Corrine was five years old when her father died. She wanted to go to the funeral, but her family did not allow her. They thought it would upset her.

Paul's parents go to the cemetery a few times a year to visit their daughter's grave. Though Paul and his sister were close, they never invite him to accompany them. "Why trouble him now?" they reason.

When Kenny died, the school considered having a memorial service. Many parents objected. They did not want to remind their children of the loss.

We not only protect children from death, but we also protect them from rituals about death. Such attempts are well intentioned. They seek to avoid upsetting the child or reminding them of the loss.

Yet, from time immemorial, rituals have provided a sense of comfort and support. To deprive children and adolescents of the power that rituals offer inhibits their coping adaptation to loss. Not only do they miss the benefit of the immediate ritual, they fail to learn an effective response that may assist them as they cope with future losses.

This chapter explores the role of ritual as a therapeutic tool for assisting grieving children and adolescents. It begins by defining ritual and
describing the reasons why rituals can be helpful. The chapter considers, as well, the role of funeral rituals, suggesting ways that children and adolescents can make meaningful decisions on how they wish to participate, as well as how their participation can enhance the value of the ritual for themselves and other mourners. Finally, rituals beyond the funeral, such as anniversary or holiday memorials or private acts, can be helpful to children and adolescents as they continue to struggle with the loss. Some of these may be family events, others simply private therapeutic acts. But these, too, need to be acknowledged and reviewed as well as ritual as a tool for counselors, families, and support groups.

What Is Ritual?

The term 'ritual' is used in a number of ways. One may say that an early morning walk is a daily ritual. However, the term is best reserved for those special activities that extend meaning to a set of actions. These can be public events, such as funerals where a community comes together to mark a passage from life to death, but they can be private actions as well. For example, toasting a deceased aunt during a holiday dinner invests that drink with a special meaning. It is no longer a simple drink. It is now a memorial. That, then, is what makes an act a ritual—it invests even those most common and everyday events with special, perhaps even sacred, meanings.

Why Are Rituals so Powerful?

Rituals are powerful, Gennep (1960) asserts, because they are liminal. To Gennep, liminal means that rituals lie on the threshold of consciousness, appealing to both our conscious and subconscious. Rando (1984) delineates other valuable aspects of rituals. Among them are that rituals contain events; that is, ritual allows a structure for events such as death or other rites marking a passage. A funeral offers a structured time where individuals can emotionally and physically ventilate. In the chaotic time of a loss, a funeral provides a sense of control, allowing individuals to do something in an otherwise uncontrollable situation. Rituals, too, Rando reminds, generate social support and offer opportunities to find meaning, as spiritual and philosophical understandings are applied to the loss. In summary, ritual provides a meaningful, structured activity that allows
individuals space, time and support to recognize, respond to, and absorb a significant change.

These benefits are experienced not only by adults but also by children and adolescents who are able to participate in a meaningful way. In many ways, rituals can be especially powerful for children and adolescents since they give opportunities to confront loss in nonverbal and defined ways. Moreover, participation offers children and adolescents an effective introduction to the value of ritual.

Should Children and Adolescents Go to Funerals?

Funerals are powerful rituals that help us confront loss. They are also meaningful family, religious, and cultural events. Funeral rituals bring families together, offering each other support, and they show the ways that our own cultural backgrounds and religious faiths help us address the crisis of loss.

Since funerals are so critical, once children are developmentally able to understand a funeral and sit through a ceremony, they ought to have a choice about the ways in which they wish to participate in a funeral. In order to make that choice meaningful, children need information, options, and support.

In preparing a child to make a decision on whether or not to attend a funeral, begin by explaining what the funeral is and what is likely to occur. Describe its purpose, the physical setting, the ways in which people are expected to behave, and the range of reactions that the child may observe. Tell the child that people may sob or cry because they miss the person. They may even laugh as they remember funny or happy stories about the person who died. Assure the child that any decision that the child makes is appropriate and will be understood. Patiently answer any questions. Most funeral homes will show the child the facility prior to the funeral.

If the child is really going to decide, he or she will need a viable alternative. If a younger child's only alternative is to stay home in an empty house, it won't be much of a choice. If possible, arrange for the child to stay with a sympathetic and trusted adult.

Remember, too, that funerals are, in many cultures, multifaceted events. For example, many American funerals have a visitation period, a funeral service, an interment at a cemetery, and perhaps a post-funeral
meal. One of the options for children and adolescents is to decide which events they would find most meaningful to attend.

Children and adolescents also need support. When parents are directly involved in the funeral they might not be able to provide that support. For example, when John's father died, he was both too busy at the funeral and still in too great a state of shock to look after his own children's emotional needs. It is helpful to have a supportive adult not intimately involved in the funeral who is assigned to be attentive to the child, perhaps even taking the child away if the child needs respite. With older children and adolescents it is also important to allow and encourage peer support.

Funeral rituals are most effective when they are personal and participatory. Here, too, children and adolescents can contribute. Their ideas may be solicited on how the ritual is planned and conducted. To this day, Daryl takes great comfort in the fact that his mother allowed him to select his Dad's casket even though he was only twelve at the time. "It made me feel special. I felt I was doing one last thing for him."

They can participate, too. One of the most meaningful funeral rituals I ever attended was for an adolescent killed in a bicycling accident. Her friends participated fully in the service—singing, reading, and ushering. Not only did that participation help them say good-bye to a friend, it reminded her parents of how much their daughter's friends cared.

Even young children can participate. A woman once shared that one of the special memories of her husband's funeral was watching her somber four-year-old great-grandson hand out flowers at the graveside.

Participation does not have to be public. Adolescents and children can be invited to write letters, draw pictures, or offer objects that can be placed in the casket. They can help in selecting photographs to be displayed at the funeral. They can contribute a videotaped tribute. All these actions, whether private or public, make them participants rather than observers. And all serve to make the ritual meaningful.

**Developing Rituals as a Therapeutic Tool**

Since rituals are therapeutic, they can be developed and used throughout the grieving process. Sometimes children and adolescents may have the opportunity to plan and to participate in public rituals that mark points in the grieving process. For example, Judaism recognizes many of these
points—a month, the one-year anniversary. In Catholicism, individuals may mark anniversaries with a mass. Other spiritual traditions have similar rituals. These rituals are valued since they reinforce the memories and validate grief normally experienced at these times. Again, such benefits are not limited to adults alone.

In addition to ongoing public rituals, both families and caregivers can develop and utilize other rituals to assist grieving children and adolescents. Such rituals can have many roles. Drawing from the work of Gennep (1960), Rando (1993), and Martin and Doka (1999), we can delineate four distinct types of rituals. It is critical in designing rituals to be clear about the message the ritual conveys.

Rituals of continuity emphasize the continuing bond with the deceased. For example, after Sari's grandmother died, Sari and her mother designed a quilt representing their memories of her. While the exercise itself was therapeutic, they show the quilt at times such as birthdays and holidays as a representation of Sari's grandmother's continued presence in their lives. Similarly, every Christmas when Kevin decorates his tree, he somberly places a decoration that is a memorial to his father. Kevin and his mother place another similar decoration on a “Tree of Life” organized by a local hospice and funeral home.

Rituals of transition offer a different message. Here the goal of the ritual is to mark a passage from one phase to another. A funeral is such a ritual. But other rituals may be developed as well. When Joey's parents divorced, he found it helpful to remove a plaque he had given to his father. The plaque, made in technology class, read “Daddy's Garage.” In removing it he commented to his mother, “It is no longer Daddy's garage.” The action was his way of acknowledging that his father would not be returning. Many support groups use rituals of transition to mark their closing session. A common ritual is to give each child a bag of stones, some polished, others rough. The polished stones represent the progress made in the group, while the rough stones represent grief issues still to be addressed. During the ritual, participants name their stones, marking accomplishments and issues still to be reviewed.

Rituals of reconciliation are designed to finish business. They allow individuals to accept or to extend forgiveness to complete a necessary act. Tanya had highly ambivalent feelings toward her mom, an IV drug user who eventually died of complications related to AIDS. When asked where
her mother was, the nine-year-old girl said she was a ghost. Queried, Tanya said that if you were good you became an angel. If you were bad, you went to hell and burned to a skeleton. In between you become a ghost. As she worked through her ambivalence, she announced that her mother could now become an angel. We developed a ritual whereby she gave her mother angel wings. Other rituals of reconciliation can be as simple as writing a note to the deceased.

*Rituals of affirmation* complement rituals of reconciliation. Instead of repairing or completing a relationship, rituals of affirmation simply offer thanks for a relationship, affirming the individual who died. Though her husband died a decade ago, every year on her son's birthday, Magna lights a candle in his memory, thanking him for the gift of their son.

In developing these rituals, a few principles are key. First, the audience, message, and actions must derive from the story. Rituals cannot be imposed; they need to be invited, fashioned as the individual's story of loss is shared. Second, effective rituals usually involve objects—a candle, letter, or picture for example—that also have symbolic value. Third, rituals have to be planned and processed. A counselor needs to make sure all the implications of the ritual are thought out. And, once the ritual has ended, it is useful to share what has occurred and process thoughts and feelings.

It is important to observe these same principles when working with children and adolescents. Rituals need to be planned with, not imposed upon, children and adolescents. Naturally these rituals will reflect the developmental level of the child or adolescent. It is their meanings and symbols that will be reflected in the ritual.

**Conclusion**

Even before humans could write, they devised rituals that helped them as they faced the vicissitudes of life. They invested actions with symbolism and meaning as ways to cope with their world. When we fail to use ritual effectively or do not allow children and adolescents the opportunities to participate, we deprive them of the therapeutic power as old and strong as humanity itself.
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