

Coping with Unconfirmed Death for Forcibly Displaced Children and Families: Tips for Caregivers



1

What is an unconfirmed death?

Unconfirmed death refers to a situation in which you are unsure if a family member or important person, such as a teacher, friend, or community member, has died. This may also be referred to as **unresolved, unknown, or ambiguous loss**. The unconfirmed loss may relate to persons missing inside the U.S. (such as undocumented individuals or those experiencing homelessness) or, for those who have been forcibly displaced, persons missing in countries of origin.

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How does unconfirmed death relate to forced displacement?

Forced displacement refers to anyone who is forced to flee their home to escape war, conflict, persecution, or natural or human-made disasters. Often, children and families who experience forced displacement resettle to another country under immigration statuses like refugee, asylee, special immigrant visa holder, or humanitarian parolee. Displacement is often accompanied by a loss of community and sense of belonging, especially in the initial months and years of integrating in new communities.

An unconfirmed death can happen before and during displacement when people may be separated or missing due to conflict, disaster, or violence. It can also happen after displacement if contact with family or loved ones is lost with no clear way of confirming the person's status and whether they are still alive. This can be especially challenging when a crisis or conflict has not been resolved.

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Why is unconfirmed death traumatic for children?




Unconfirmed death for displaced children can be traumatic due to:

- Uncertainty about the well-being of the missing person. If the person died, not being able to get information about how they died.
- Feeling powerless to help or change the situation.
- Additional stress caused by the experience of being in unsafe situations from which they had to flee and then having to adjust to new environments.
- Ongoing worry and concern about an unresolved conflict or violence and how this will interfere with finding answers about those who are missing or may have died.
- Perceived or direct lack of safety for the child, family or other loved ones and significant people. For example, for those with uncertain or temporary immigration statuses, fear of being deported back to the source of danger they fled in the first place.
- Loss of support systems and familiar resources that would normally help families and youth cope with their uncertainty.
- Triggers and reminders of people, places, and things related to their losses and experiences of tragedy. For example, seeing someone who looks like the person who is missing/has died, or hearing a voice that sounds like the person.

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How might children respond to an unconfirmed death?

Each child will react and respond differently to experiences of unconfirmed death. Below are some common reactions children may experience. It's important to note that children can show similar signs of distress in different situations. For example, some children might react similarly when adjusting to their new lives after displacement as well as when they are struggling with unconfirmed loss. To help support your child, pay attention to when any signs start and whether they change in intensity or frequency. Remember children's responses will vary by age.

RESPONSE	EXAMPLES
<p>BEHAVIORS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has difficulty adjusting to changes in their life and family, such as attending school or daycare Avoiding activities that remind them of their missing loved one Being less involved with or isolated from people or events happening around them Becoming more clingy or dependent on their caregivers Showing aggressive, angry, or irritable behavior For older children, engaging in risky or harmful behavior to themselves or others
<p>THOUGHTS & FEELINGS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refusing to consider the possibility that the person has died Feeling unsafe and having fears of encountering dangerous situations For older children, losing their belief in religion or other belief systems Continuing to hope, imagine, or plan for the person's return Feeling guilty or disloyal, especially when engaging in rituals such as celebrating holidays without the person Feeling sad or numb most of the time Having nightmares and flashbacks of previous difficult events
<p>PHYSICAL RESPONSE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having headaches or stomachaches in the absence of an illness Experiencing changes in appetite; eating more or less than usual Having trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much Being easily startled, more jumpy Increased crying Losing abilities previously mastered, such as bed-wetting

How can I help a child cope with unconfirmed death?

To help a child cope with these complex reactions, consider supporting your child in the following ways:

CHILD LEVEL	FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEVEL	ENVIRONMENT, BELIEFS, AND CULTURE
<p>Maintain a sense of connection to the person. It's okay to talk about the missing person and share stories and fond memories. Some children may want to remember their loved one by carrying a meaningful item, symbol, photograph, or a drawing the child created of that person in the absence of any tangible items.</p> <p>Validate the child's feelings. Family members may process and express emotion about an unconfirmed death in different ways, and feelings may change over time. Your child may feel guilty for not being able to help and for being safe. While it's understandable and natural to have these feelings, they can feel very painful.</p> <p>Encourage the honoring and remembrance of the missing person. Children may not have any belongings left from their loved one(s) but can be encouraged to find objects or engage in rituals that remind them of the person. For example, children can make favorite foods, go to places of significance such as places of worship, or engage in activities that were done previously with their loved one.</p>	<p>Engage in open and age-appropriate communication that addresses the loss of the person, their community, and their homeland. Younger children have more difficulty processing the concept that someone is missing and won't come back, or that they cannot return to their home. Older children and teens may need help coping with the uncertainty and may be angry at adults for not providing clear answers or doing more to help the loved one.</p> <p>Create new routines. Children may struggle to feel safe due to the traumatic and uncertain nature of the loss, the difficult situation they left, and the adjustment to a new environment. Creating new routines that incorporate familiar practices from their previous home and features of their new location can increase a child's feelings of control and well-being.</p> <p>Increase connections. Look for ways to connect with friends and family from your home country and seek out ways to connect with people locally. Inviting children to draw pictures or write letters to loved ones they may be separated from can help them feel connected from afar. Seek out supports such as teachers, coaches, or faith leaders that can help children adjust to their new community and the local customs as well as form new friendships.</p> <p>Take time to engage in activities you and your child enjoy such as playing with friends, sharing food, playing sports or games, reading, or singing and dancing. Engaging in activities they used to enjoy may be comforting and a good reminder of positive times before the loss.</p> <p>Take care of yourself. The stress of unconfirmed death is not limited to children. Coping with your own feelings related to uncertainty will strengthen your ability to care for and support your child. For example, find time to connect with a friend, engage in an activity you enjoy, or speak to a counselor or trusted advisor.</p>	<p>Limit children's exposure to media reports related to the loss (such as TV news, social media, newspaper stories, etc.) as it can be confusing and upsetting, especially for young children. For older children, media coverage and reports should be discussed together when they are consuming or exposed to them. For loss occurring outside the U.S., sometimes media exposure may be one of the only ways to gain information about loved ones, and this can make limiting media exposure more difficult. With this in mind, access media that is from a reputable source. Please see the resource list below for finding information about people missing outside the U.S.</p> <p>Use caution when discussing the loss with other adults. Children are naturally curious and want to listen to adults' conversations. Keep in mind that your child may overhear distressing things or not fully understand what is being said.</p> <p>Make meaning of the possible death, including coming to an understanding of why the person died or what might have happened. Engaging in prayer and rituals can allow you and your family to share feelings with others, even when the death is not confirmed. For example, many religions believe in an afterlife and a connection with people who have passed away.</p> <p>Connecting with community, cultural, or religious community supports may provide comfort, connection, and meaning. Some examples include connecting with a school counselor or finding local cultural, faith, or community-based agencies.</p>

If you notice your child is having increased reactions, not doing well in school, having trouble making or keeping friends, or not sleeping or eating well, please seek professional support from a counselor or mental health professional, faith-based support, support from community leaders or other resources in your network. For information on how to find support, see

Table 1: Additional Resources

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Organization	Contact Information
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Multilingual resources https://www.unhcr.org/us/
Dougy Center	Multilingual resources (Chinese, English, Korean, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Vietnamese) https://www.dougy.org/#
National Alliance for Children’s Grief	Multilingual resources (Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, English) https://nacg.org/
National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)	https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/nctsn-resources The NCTSN offers extensive and comprehensive resources on child traumatic grief and PTSD.
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center	https://findtreatment.gov/ 800-789-2647 Link to state-by-state Mental Health Services Locator map and further links to other resources Español 繁體中文 Tieng Viet 한국어 Tagalog Русский ئىيبرعلا Kreyòl Ayisyen Français Polski Português Italiano Deutsch 日本語 ىسراف English

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

Suggested Citation: Obaid, S., Zahra, L., Dalpe, J., Riveria, S., Goodman, R., Epstein, C., Brymer, M., & Cohen, J. (2024). Coping with Unconfirmed Death for Forcibly Displaced Children and Families: Tips for Caregivers. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

Special thanks to those that provided additional contributions to this resource: Marisol Acosta, Rocio Chang, Hector Chaidez Ruacho, Jenna Salek, & Kristine Louie.