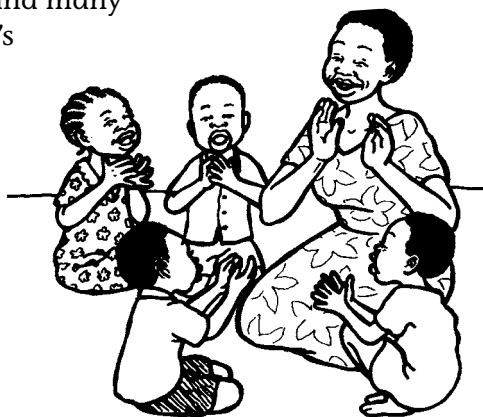




CHAPTER 14

Helping children make sense of their lives

Like a tree with strong roots, children with a strong sense of their own identity can withstand many storms in their lives. Children's sense of self — their identity — tells them who they are — what their place in the world is, and who they are related to, or where they came from. It gives their lives meaning. When children know they have a special place in the world and a special history, they not only develop their identities but also their roots in the community.



Children who feel they belong are more connected to people around them.

Shared memories, shared community celebrations, and shared histories — at family and community gatherings — serve to make children's emotional health strong. Religious and spiritual traditions often help children develop a strong sense of meaning and value in their lives. These shared memories, histories, and experiences give a child meaning and build a child's sense of who she is.

Without knowing, remembering and sharing — their own past, and the past of their families and communities — children can feel isolated, weak and as though they do not belong with the people around them.

When 5 year-old Ada opens her eyes in the morning, she sees row after row of blankets lining the ground. Nearby, men are silently huddled around small fires, trying to get warm. She has been here several months, but everything still looks strange. In her mind, she sees thick bushes and grass. Here there is only dirt and wind. In her mind, she sees the wrinkled face of her grandmother and feels her cool hands. Here there is only Elsa, who helped her run from the soldiers and brought her to this camp.



When the soldiers came to her village, everyone ran and ran. This happened several times. The last time, Ada was separated from her grandmother, who had cared for her and her 2 brothers since her parents' death. Elsa, an older girl from her village, found her lying on the ground, too weak to move. She and Elsa now live in a refugee camp, the only people from the village where they were born.

When Ada first came to the camp, her greatest need was to feel safe. When she was less frightened, she began to reach out to the people in the camp who cared for her.

As time passes, however, Ada needs more than safety and love. She wants information. And she also needs to make sense out of what had happened and to see how the pieces of her life fit together.



Why am I here? What happened to my family? My village? Why do Elsa and I look and talk differently from everyone here? What will happen to me now?

Children feel these new needs emerge when they are about 4 or 5, when their thinking skills are more developed. These older children try to make sense out of the fact that their lives have changed forever. For some, like Ada, the present is completely different than the past. For others, the present may be similar except that someone or something very important — like a caregiver, sibling, or home — is gone.

Remembering the past and understanding the present

When children are between 1 and 2 years old, they begin to remember particular events, or bits and pieces of events. But they do not yet realize that these events were real and did happen to them. Around age 3, children begin to know that these memories are about themselves and the things that happened to them. Now children can begin to talk about what happened in the past few months, and know that these memories are about themselves.

Since children have no memories of themselves in their first 3 years, they depend on caregivers to explain what happened and to help them connect the past with the present. Most families do this through telling stories about children when they were little. As a child grows and develops, these stories become an important part of his sense of himself and of his life story.

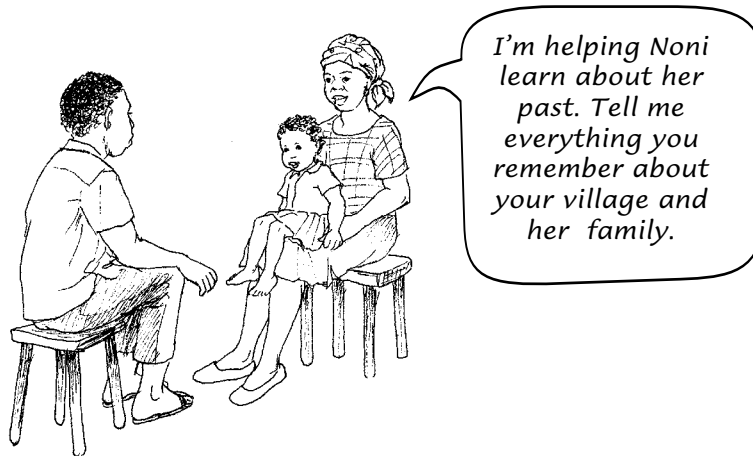


Young children's memories tend to fade over time. Even if you know very little about a child, you can help by working with the child to preserve his link to the past by creating his life story and rituals honoring his past — and also explaining the little you know about the child's past. (See the chapter on "Methods for communicating with young children.")

LIFE STORIES

Ask others

To begin helping a child create his or her life story, try to find out as much information as possible about the child's past. Ask people who knew the child or the child's family — even if just by sight. If you cannot find anyone who actually knew his family, try to find someone who knows about the circumstances they lived through — for example, someone from a neighboring area who knows why everyone left the village and whose cultures and traditions would be similar to X's village. Record everything you find out, either by writing it down or drawing pictures.



Some camps or other agencies have a formal plan for finding out about the families of unaccompanied children. Try to work together to best meet a child's needs.



When you ask questions, remember that children understand the world through their senses. Details you may find unimportant — like what a family member or a child's village looked like — are very important to young children. Imagine that you are trying to create pictures of children's past in their minds, and this will help you know what questions to ask. The box on page XX also gives suggestions.

To locate families of children who are alone, some refugee camps ask the same questions. Although these questions focus on information that can help locate families, they can also be used to help create a life story. Such questions can include questions a child would want to know.

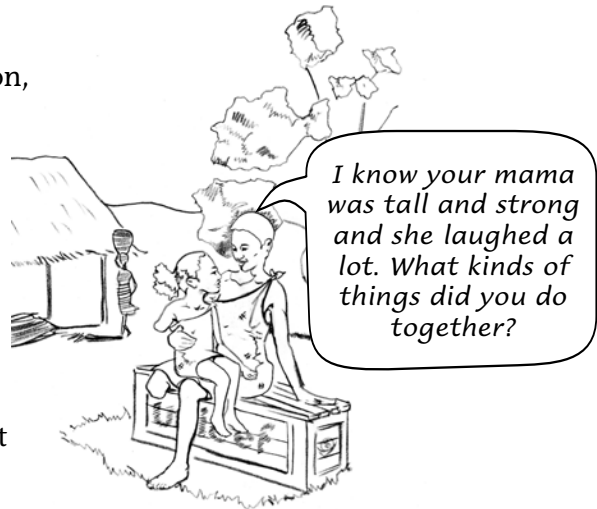
Where did I live before I came here? What did it look like? Who took care of me? What did they look like?



What happened to them? What did I like to do when I was little?

Ask the child

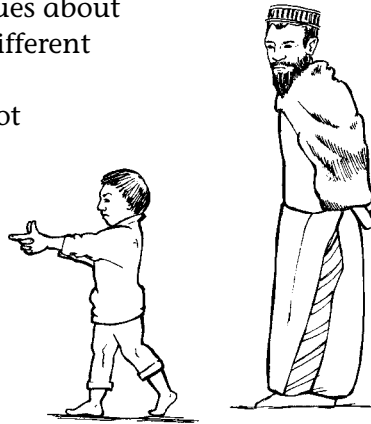
While gathering information, ask children to tell you what they remember. You could use information gathered from others to stimulate a child's memory of things he experienced. Children's memories of events they experienced contain valuable information about their life stories. They may soon lose these memories if they are not recorded. If children have trouble putting memories into words, have them act them out, or draw a picture about them and talk about it.



I know your mama was tall and strong and she laughed a lot. What kinds of things did you do together?

You can also watch children's play for clues about what they have experienced. People in different places have different ways to cope with difficult situations. Some people prefer not to talk about them or if they do talk about them, they may use stories to talk about the problems they faced.

It is better not to ask children who have seen very bad things such as murder, rape, or torture to remember and talk about these sad memories. Watch for times when they themselves may express these memories.



Ali's play about soldiers gives Hamid some ideas about Ali's past. Hamid knows that play can give clues but does not tell him exactly what happened.

CREATE A LIFE STORY

When you have as much information as you can find, put the details together into a story. Here are some guidelines that can help:

Include as much detail as possible. When the details are violent, decide ahead of time what and how much to say. Decide what should be saved for later when a child is older. Also, be sensitive to details that may cause the child to feel the distress he experienced and to remember the violence. Watch for the child's reactions to help you judge when to stop. But be sure to record everything, so a child has a more complete story as he grows up.



*I must stop now.
Paulo gets angry
each time I try to
talk about his uncle
getting drunk.*

Nevertheless, the decision about how to tell the story will be yours. If the child begins to react badly, stop immediately. But record everything so a child has a more complete story as he grows up.

Maintain the distinction between what you know for sure and what you think is the case. If you are not sure of some details, always use words like “probably” or “maybe.” At this age, a child may not have a clear idea of the difference between knowing something for sure and guessing. But as he grows older, the distinction will be important.

Create a form in which the story can be passed on. You could write it down or draw pictures for each part of the story. Writing or drawing is important since you may not always be with the child and will give the child one clear story instead of being confused by different stories. You can also use symbols, rituals, and memory boxes to help pass the story on (see the sections below).



SYMBOLS AND RITUALS

Symbols


Often children who have fled their homes or live with new caregivers have kept something from the past. Even if it is very small — like a piece of cloth, a doll, or even a stone — it is very important to them because it is all they have.

These objects become symbols of the past that was left behind, a way for a child to connect the past and present. If children have several objects, they may want to put them together in a memory box. (For more information on memory boxes, see the section below “Remembering someone who has died.”)

Ways to remember the past

A child feels connected to different parts of his life if there are rituals to remember the past. Rituals are best used if they are used in the community already. For example:

When Mutambo was 5 his grandmother could no longer care for him. His parents had died of HIV/AIDS. His grandmother, a widow, had 18 other grandchildren to care for since their parents had also died.



Always remember I love you.

Since Mutambo was the oldest, he had to leave the house and make his own way. His grandmother hugged him, gave him some food and a blanket, and sent him out the door. Mutambo found himself on the streets with children who shared the same sad story. Time passed. Mutambo was a smart little boy who begged for a piece of bread from passing strangers. Frequently, he stole from the bakery or from the Mamas in the market.

One day, a kind lady saw him. He liked her and began to follow her everywhere she went. Occasionally, she'd buy a beignet and hand it to Mutambo. Weeks passed and one day she said to him, "Would you like to come to my house and take a bath?" Mutambo thought this was a wonderful idea since he hadn't had a bath in months. As time went by, the woman and her husband decided to 'adopt' Mutambo. She asked him his full name, where he was from, and why he was not at home with his family. Mutambo told her as much as he remembered. Especially, he remembered his grandmother's words, "Remember I love you." The lady and her husband searched high and low for the village, the grandmother or any other relatives they could find. Unable to find anyone, the two adults went to the government office and offered to adopt Mutambo. By this time, Mutambo was living in their home as their son. Finally, the government gave permission for Mutambo to be adopted.

The kind woman and her husband encouraged Mutambo to talk about his grandmother and his other relatives. He remembers them once a year, the day he was adopted. His new family celebrates with a cake and a big dinner. This celebration helps Mutambo remember his family.

Suggestions for when you know little or nothing about a child's past

If you know little about the child's past, record what you know. For example, Dina could find only that Hamid lived in a village that was destroyed by soldiers. Dina may later meet someone who, seeing the pictures, can tell him more. And even these few pictures help Hamid know he has a past and how that past connects to the present.



If you know nothing at all about a child's past, consider these suggestions:

- Create a story about the child as a baby, without including specific details about where he lived or his caregivers. In doing this, you can use details you know to be generally true about the area you live — for example, if all mothers carry their babies on their backs. If you use words like “I imagine your mother carried you on her back while she worked and you cried to let her know you were hungry,” you have given a child a picture of himself as a baby who was cared for, while still letting him know you do not know these details for sure.
- Create symbols for a child's primary caregivers and his home. For example, you could help a child collect a group of stones that stand for the family members he might have had, or for him at different ages. These symbols can give comfort when a child is distressed. They can also help a child play out some of the feelings and fears he has inside.

*Mama, I'm
scared.
There's no
one to take
care of me.*



- If you are a child's new caregiver, you can create a story of how the child's childhood would have been if the child had lived with you. This kind of story can help the bond between you grow and help the child feel more like a part of your family.

Jawara, if you had lived with us when you were a little baby, you would be carried on Gemma's back, just like Jean is.



Ila helps Jawara feel part of the community by telling him what life is like for children in her village.

Remembering someone who has died

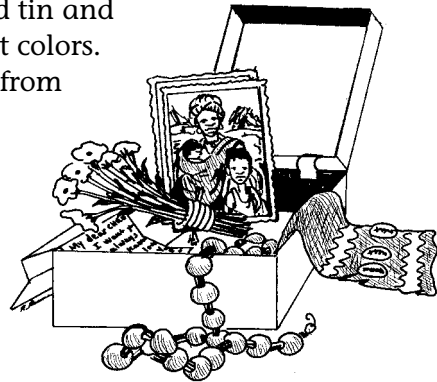
Beatrice, a young woman in northern Uganda, is dying of AIDS. Her husband died of the disease just 6 months ago, and since then she has been worrying constantly about her 3 young children and how to prepare them for her death. More than anything, she wants them to know she loves them and wants to see them grow up. But also, knowing that the children will live with distant relatives in another part of the country, she wants the children to remember their family history, their village, and their culture.



What will happen to them when I am gone? How will they remember me?

When the health worker last visited Beatrice at home, she told Beatrice about a group of HIV-positive women in the city who were making memory boxes for their children. Inside the boxes, they put photographs or drawings of the family, the family and the clan's history, sacred objects or symbols of special times together. They also wrote letters to their children's new caregivers, telling them how they wanted their children to be raised. The best thing about the boxes, the women had told the health worker, was that it gave them a chance to talk openly with their children about what was going to happen and the children's future.

Beatrice began making her memory box that night. She took an old tin and painted it in her favorite bright colors. Then she gathered some cloth from her husband's burial, some flowers that grew around the village, and a piece of her wedding dress. All night she worked, and in the morning she had a box full of memories and love. The work had been healing. She felt better than she had in months. But now the hard part would begin. She would use this box to talk with her children about her death.



🔍 **Ways to use memory boxes**

One of the most common uses of memory boxes is when caregivers, like Beatrice, know they are going to die or be permanently separated from their children. If this is your situation, you can begin thinking about what you most want your child to know about you — and what will best prepare him for the future without you.

A second use of memory boxes is to collect memories about someone who has already died. If you are caring for children who have lost caregivers or other important people, try making a memory box for each child. If a child is too young to help show you what is important to put in the box, try putting yourself in a child's shoes. What would you most want to know about someone who had died — someone whose memories may be rapidly fading as the child grows up?

▲ *Ways of remembering those who die*

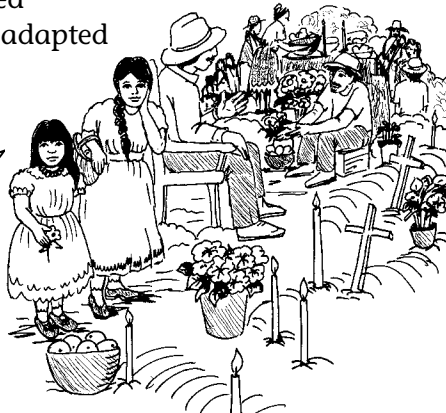
People all over the world have traditions and rituals that are part of their expression of faith and culture. Rituals can be healing and they reinforce community traditions. They are also a way to bring new people into a community. Sometimes people make shrines, or give offerings, or wear a charm to ward off evil spirits that are believed to contribute to a crisis or disaster. Sometimes things used in a ritual stay with a family to represent the spirit of the loved one. Here is a tradition from Mexico to remember loved ones who have died.

On the Day of the Dead, people in Mexico remember people who have died, and rejoice for those still living. They welcome the spirits of those who have passed away back into their homes, by making altars decorated with the things the dead people enjoyed most in life such as flowers, candles and incense, photographs of the departed, some of their favorite foods, or toys and sweets for children. On these altars are tiny model skeletons made to look like deceased family members, doing what they most enjoyed in life. These are always funny and cheerful, never frightening.



Later, everyone in the village goes to the cemetery to visit the graves of close relatives, and eat special foods, some of which are prepared only for this celebration. In places where communities have experienced violence, this ritual has been adapted to respond to traumatic grief.

We keep watch over the graves until midnight. The spirits go back home when the bells ring at midnight.



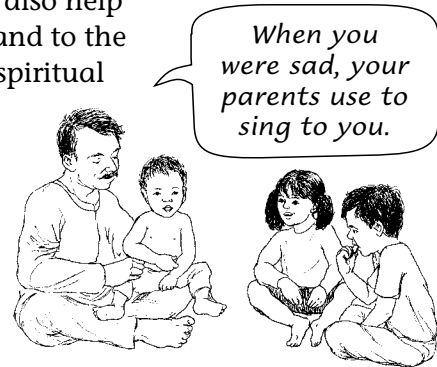
Building hope for the future

Like all children, those in difficult circumstances need to know they can be successful despite the difficulties they have lived through. Telling stories or creating rituals about children who have encountered difficulties and learned to cope with them can give children a model or road map to follow. You can also use a child's pretend play to give a sense of hope.

STORIES

Think about the stories commonly told in your community about people coping with difficulty. Then adapt them to your children's circumstances and retell them often. These stories can also help connect children to the spiritual world and to the strength their community gets from its spiritual traditions.

Make up your own story about children who have overcome similar circumstances. Be sure to include the child's struggles and setbacks in the story, so the children listening feel they have something in common with the characters in the story.



PRETEND PLAY

Children use pretend play to work out painful feelings — and they often need to play out similar scenes over and over again before the feelings become less strong. But when this has happened, play can begin to give a child hope for the future as well. Sometimes this happens naturally, as a child begins to include new characters and scenes that have a sense of hope. But you can also introduce new characters and scenes yourself. For example:

Wah...wah. The babies are crying because they are all alone.



Ratna's caregiver is dying of cancer. Ratna has played out her fear that she and her sister will be left alone over and over again as if it is happening to someone else.

Anju knows that Ratna's mother has been talking to her about having new foster parents. Anju includes this in Ratna's play to help her begin looking toward the future.



It is important to be realistic in the hopes you create, even though you are playing. Remember, children do not separate play and reality but rather use play to understand what is happening. But if you include realistic characters and scenes in a positive way, you can help a child gather strength to face the future and the changes it will bring.

Becoming part of the community's story

When whole communities have been through difficult circumstances — like war, political repression, or natural disasters — they often create stories and rituals to commemorate these events and give people the strength to carry on. It is important to include children in these rituals as much as possible. Even if a child does not understand what is going on, he can get strength and comfort from being part of the group, and from the support he feels people giving one another. As a child gets older, try to find ways for him to actively participate in the rituals himself.

