

Sarah, Crystal, Sara

Sarah: Welcome to the SLP Happy Hour Podcast - up today talking about being SLPs without children, including the grief and loss throughout this process. I don't discuss this often on the podcast, but it's something that has been in my life for a long time.

Today Crystal, Sara and I will discuss this topic together.

If you aren't going through this particular life circumstance, please keep listening. We talk about what our culture does wrong when it comes to grief and what to do instead. Let's get started with this discussion and some intros.

Let's start with mine - I'm Sarah an SLP working in private practice, I've been trying to build a family through adoption for the last 5 years and it's been a difficult experience - full of ambiguity, grief and loss. I'm still in the process. I think a lot of people don't understand what the adoption process is like, how difficult it is to actually adopt a child, and how much grief and loss is there for parents and children. I'm still working toward adoption and I'm also working towards shifting my identity to potentially living a life without children.

Sara was on Ep 151 about specializing in the DHH populations in schools. Future Sarah here, somehow Sara's intro got lost in the editing pile. I'll go ahead and introduce Sara. Sara Serota is an SLP who works full time as a school SLP in California. She's also partnered up with a teacher. She is childfree by choice, meaning that she decided in her early 20s she did not want to have children. So now back to the original recording.

And next up is Crystal, and so Crystal, like me, you're really in the process of building a family. So rather than having an identity as childless person like Sara, you're in that hopeful kind of phase of actively trying to build a family. And so thank you also to Crystal. She sent me a lot of DMs on Instagram about the childless collective, which has been a great account for me to follow. And they have a conference coming up, which I'm going to go to as I try to be more flexible about my own identity. So, Krystal, what's your experience trying to build a family? Tell me a bit about your career and where you are now.

Crystal: Sure. So I'm Crystal, I've been an SLP for about seven years now. In the last three of those years have been or actually four years have been in early childhood intervention here in El Paso, Texas. I had my first job at a pediatric outpatient clinic, which is where I met my husband, who is an occupational therapy assistant. The first time I laid eyes on my husband was when he had a little one, you know, on a shoulder, just seeing him in and kind of that typical "dad mode" that some women play makes their ovaries explode so to say that what happened in the sensory gym, the ovaries, they were all over the place exploded when I saw my husband. We've been trying to conceive for the past four years, unsuccessfully. I think we were in denial for a bit. We waited longer than the one year recommendation mark, where it suggested that you go work with a fertility specialist. We waited up until last year and we've been working with a reproductive endocrinologist. We've done three fertility treatments back to back to back, which has been really hard for me as an adult and for my husband as a COTA, slash part time college student slash, part time mariachi rock star. It's been challenging, and we are right now in that limbo stage, uh, waiting to consult with our doctor again to see what's next for us.

Sarah: Thank you for sharing. I just also want to speak to how difficult it is to be face to face with clients and kids, where you have to kind of be in it and try to be positive and just feel so physically and emotionally drained and in pain. Let's start with the number one thing people tend to do when you share the vulnerability of how hard this process is. We have some different perspectives right here. So people have different ideas about how they handle this. But the most common thing that people tell me when I talk about trying to build a family is offering these trite euphemisms and cliches. So I've noticed this not only in my path to adoption, but I've had the death of a close family member, and these are things people have said when I've shared that vulnerability or that struggle I'm going through. So they said things like: look at all the good things that are already happening in your life. This will happen for you. Like you will have children, you will have children. It will turn out okay. Which of course they don't know. People have told me every cloud has a silver lining. Other people have told me, don't worry about children. Think of and be grateful for what you already have. When a family member passed away, people have said they're in a better place. They're happy now, and then there are some religious sayings that people use, like it will happen on God's timing or God has a reason. And I think that usually these phrases are meant well. The person wants me to feel better, but they're never helpful. They always make me feel worse, so I'm being vulnerable with them in a conversation, I'm sharing that I'm currently going through something really difficult, and what those phrases feel like is it feels like they're sweeping my emotions under the rug. They're offering toxic positivity. And really, the subtext there is that as the person that I'm listening to, you talk about your grief, I am uncomfortable with what you're sharing, and I want you to get over it and stop talking about it. What are your opinions or experiences with these cliches that people tend to share?

Sara: I guess mine's a little bit different, right? So I don't know if I touched on the fact that I am childfree and it is by choice. I do not want children. I from a pretty early age, she knew that I would say like 23, 24 and my husband obviously feels the same way. I'm going to sort of frame my response to this question around advice that I get about that decision. So I get a lot of people telling me. Oh, you'll change your mind. You're so young. Children are a blessing. Your life will be incomplete in some way without children.

You know, my cultural and ethnic background is both Mexican and Jewish on each side. So those cultures have a lot of child based feelings. So the the sort of pressure that, you know, you feel as a young person to meet other people's expectations of what they want your life to be like. Oh, what about you'll never be grandparents or you'll never have this experience. And just not trusting that I knew that that experience wasn't for me, right? Like that I knew myself well enough to know that I would be content with my life, even if I didn't have this pivotal and important life experience to so many.

And then a lot of times I get advice like, but you're so good with kids. I know I'm a pediatric speech language pathologist. I hope I'm good with kids, I love kids, they bring so much light and joy to my life...when they belong to other people. I have nine nieces and nephews, so I have a lot of, you know, children in my life, and I'm really content with that decision.

But I guess for me, the grieving is more about when you go against societal norms by choice, the pushback that you get for making that choice.

And just to share, like on a personal note, even if I change my mind at this point because of some chronic health conditions, I could not conceive a child. So it really is a moot point for me. But going through like that loss process, I know a lot of people that go through that female organ based problems that I face do feel that sense of grief and loss. And to be honest with you, I just don't, because that decision had already been like, well and made for me. But I do really empathize with people that are are going through this struggle and come to the crossroads. You know, with surgical intervention that I had to and the decision I saw much more complicated for, for them. And so my heart kind of goes out to them. In terms of like the grief. I honestly wish people would kind of mind their own business about other people's childbearing choices. That is such a personal decision for an individual or a couple or whatever the family situation looks like. And I feel like everybody feels like they have an entitlement to some opinion and I'm not interested. Right? Like I'm not interested in your opinion about my reproductive decisions. I'm I'm just not. And no thank you and no thank you.

Crystal: I experienced a lot of those comments coming to me from people that are very close to me, and even people that are not that close to me, who feel like they have an opinion that needs to be shared.

They can be hurtful at times. Sometimes they feel like just generic phrases that are being pulled out of the junk drawer societal scripts that we've all learned. This is something you say to someone who's experienced a death in their family. This is someone you say to someone who's been through some kind of trauma. It just doesn't feel individualized sometimes or sensitive to the situation you're going through.

But ultimately, to just get myself through that, I try to remember that I want to say these people are well intentioned, they're trying to help. It's just not the most helpful. But the intention is good

Sarah: People have good intentions. It's really about them being uncomfortable with an uncomfortable and intense feeling. And I think those reactions are mostly about other people feeling dysregulated within themselves and not knowing how to handle grief. Because we are in a culture that sweeps grief and loss under the rug, and that people truly do not know what to do, they feel strong uncomfortable feeling and they want to move on. And that's pretty normal. So if someone's listening and you've done that, so have the three of us. We've done that too. So another common response to being vulnerable and sharing grief or loss is that people will give advice. So the challenge here is that whoever the advice giver is, they probably haven't been through the particular experiences that we've been through. So their advice is really based on false assumptions and not understanding the depth and the reality of our own situations. Can you tell me more about an instance in which you were dealing with grief or loss, and you were offered advice, and what was harmful or helpful about that?

Sara: While I haven't dealt with grief around the childbearing process, I have certainly had my fair share of grief when it comes to losing close family members. I lost both my parents by the time I was 19. I agree with Crystal that people are really well intentioned, and they don't mean to come off in a way that is hurtful, but oftentimes those platitudes really fall flat. I've also and I'd like to hear from the both of you in your child bearing journey, find that when people find out that you're going through something like that, they start to ask really personal questions. And

especially if you don't have that close personal relationship. I kind of go like, whoa, now I feel uncomfortable because I have to set this boundary that I didn't really want to set in the first place and don't want to talk about. I've actually had several people tell me that they thought that my parents died in an accident. That is not the case. They both passed several years apart from separate illnesses, but I think it's because I'm, you know, it's not like I'm talking about it that they've made these assumptions. So when I do get closer with somebody and share the manner in which my parents passed, I've had several people say to me like, oh, I thought they died in an accident. And I was like, well, I don't know why you would think that, because there's no universe where I would say that people, uh, do mean well, but most of the time they miss the mark. And going through a grieving process, what you really want to hear is that I'm here for you. You don't really want to hear like it's for the best, because you certainly don't feel that way right now.

I have practice with some of my friends who really intentionally kind of do some of this trauma work, and we just tell each other that we're going to hold hold space for that and hold space for them. And that's been really refreshing for me to have a way to show my empathy that isn't encroaching on anybody else's personal experience of grief.

Crystal: I really appreciate that empathy from Sara, who is childfree for someone like me and my situation, who is childless due to infertility and I'm learning so much just chatting with you gals about how there's opinions for all sorts of people who followed all sorts of categories. But as far as the advice, I feel like it comes in different categories through different avenues. I have gotten comments which I'm not sure if it's really advice, or I get that awkwardness with talking about what can be like a heavy topic. I was at a work gathering once and someone in the circle talked about their infertility. It wasn't even about me, but someone else talked about their infertility. And another response was, "well, all you need to do is get a bottle of wine to fix that." And it stung me so hard. Obviously that applies to me. I'm sitting there also being in my own infertility journey, and that was what I felt really insensitive.

As far as other people who want to help. My my circle is other really other professional women who are helpers who want to help. And sometimes you get a lot of, "oh well, my friend did this and my friend took the vitamin that my friend saw this doctor." And while again, it's well-meaning and well-intentioned, it really makes me feel like a failure because I already took that leap to work with a reproductive endocrinologist or a fertility specialist, and I'm under his care. I'm doing what my doctor's asking me to do with me, with all the different tips and advice that is thrown at me, I feel like, wow, I'm never going to be doing it all. I'm never going to be doing enough. No wonder I'm not getting pregnant. I'm not taking that weird vitamin or that strange herbal tea that someone else told me to take. And honestly, there was a point where I had to let go of that, let go of that, because it was not helping me at all. It was hurting me totally.

Sarah: I do get a lot of invasive questions about, so people have asked me about fertility treatments, and there are a lot of reasons that that's not an option for me, but it's also none of their business. Also, when I talk about adoption, people will say, oh, why don't you just have your own children? And to me that's very invasive and I won't respond. If it's set in a text, I'll ignore it. If it's in conversation, I'll walk away. I'm wondering, Crystal, could you talk a little bit

about any unwanted advice that you've experienced, how that feels to get that unwanted advice when you're going through grief and loss?

I have experienced thought as well. Yeah, I've experienced that as well. And it's so painful for someone to be like, why don't you just go to an acupuncturist, talk with my adoption people? I'll be like, why don't you just try this country or that country adoption or try this way? It's like they want to solve the problem for you, but it's so painful because it's like, I'm experiencing this. So I've researched all my options. I know more about this topic than you do, and I really don't want advice about this. And I've never been strong enough to say a really boundaried statement like, "I'm not looking for advice here." I've never actually said that, but I wish that I would have.

Crystal: Touching on the the previous question you asked me like, Sarah, um, my heritage is also very much Mexican American. I lived in El Paso where a lot of the kids they see live in El Paso, or they trickled in from Juarez, where they spent time in Mexico with their families. And it's very child driven and in this culture. And that's the first thing you're asked when you're gonna get married, you know, when are the kids coming? And if the kids haven't come after a few years and, well, where are they? When are they coming? When are they coming?

Being that it's so pervasive in our culture, at least for me, I'm asked by people who are not very close to some of the the parents I work with, some of the teachers and daycare settings that I work with. It's it's bizarre. It's bizarre how sometimes I don't know if this is just maybe the norm in our culture, but there's a lot of knowing other people's business and what's going on with you and what's happening. So I think I should work on a personal boundary statement. So I have a way to answer that is respectful to myself and also not offensive. I'm not looking to offend anyone, but I do want to protect myself.

Sarah: I'm the same way and people all have been pretty respectful. But often the first question they ask is do you have any children? And what's difficult about that for me is that I may have been matched with a child, and I may be going through the process of adoption. I may have just lost out on a child, and something else may have happened in their life. So I may not have, you know, it's like it's such a complicated answer that I just say no. But it really hurts me when it's one of the first questions people ask me. What is your thought about people asking, do you have children is one of the first questions they ask you? I wish that they wouldn't because of the pain and loss and complexity there.

Crystal: Yeah, I agree with you 100%. Nowadays there's just so many different situations that people might find themselves in. I'm here to share my perspective as someone who is in their early 30s I'm 32 years old in a partnership, I'm married to my husband, and that's our situation. But there's people who are single and childless. There's people who are married in child free or single and child free. There's just so many different combinations of people and lifestyle preferences and circumstances. It's just really not fair to ask that. And I've also been asked, you know, as one of the first question, when someone gets to know me or meet me is, do you have children? And I'm still conflicted about what to say. Usually I say no. And what gets me is that the next question can often be, and what I perceive to be kind of snarky or or snappy way. That is "why - you don't want any?" And even if I did it, it's not anyone else's business. I have no clue why people feel they can argue about that.

Sarah: I don't get that. I live in a fairly like liberal area, I would say. But people ask, do I have children? And when I say no, they just move on. Thankfully, there are no follow up questions, but those follow up questions are, I don't know. I want to like, be aware and be like, that's inadmissible in court. Like boom and boom, I gavel it. That's not that's not an okay question to ask Sarah. What is your experience when one of the first questions people ask you is, do you have children?

Sara: I, I think there's kind of a difference between, like when I'm asked in my professional life versus when I'm asked in my personal life. So I'll start with professional life because I think my feelings about that are a little bit more evolved. I'll say sometimes it does feel like people asking me that question might be looking to discredit what I have to say, because I am giving advice about parenting through the lens of speech and language development. But I am not a parent. And so that's a that's a tough stack of cards to kind of go against. And I just kind of come by it humbly. And I just said, look, I do not have children, but I have been doing this job a long time and I know what I'm talking about. You know, you can take or leave my advice at any time, but I would not let the fact that I'm childfree be the deciding factor in whether or not you know, you think my advice is relevant.

And then in my personal life, like I said, mind your beeswax. I don't owe an explanation to the activities of my uterus to anyone. It's really off putting to me when that is one of the first questions that people ask. And at this point, my personality is pretty blunt, like I'm a very direct communicator, so I have pretty strong verbal boundaries with people. I try to do it in a way that is kind and respectful, and I've spent time thoughtfully crafting responses that conveyed what I wanted to say in a way that was going to indicate that I don't want to talk about this. I don't appreciate you asking me about it, but I'm also trying to not be rude. Like Crystal said, I'm not trying to offend anyone. Culturally, there's a lot of stuff there and then I don't really want to tangle with, and I'd rather just end this conversation and set that boundary. So one of the things I'll say is, yep, I'm childfree by choice and have been for a long time.

(Midroll) Thank you for listening to this episode, and thank you to Crystal and Sarah for having this conversation with me. We'll be back to the conversation in a moment. But first, are you an SLP who's starting a private practice or even thinking about it? Even if you're not sure if you want to begin, if you'd like to talk to an SLP who has been there and has an established private practice, I am available for coaching sessions. We can talk out your clinic and discuss things like should you be a brick and mortar? Travel to student's homes. We can talk about the pros and cons of insurance billing and more. You can ask me anything you'd like about private practice, and we can talk through if private practice is right for you, or if you've already got one, how to problem solve something difficult. It's hard being a solopreneur, and sometimes having a discussion with someone who has experience is so helpful. I'm Sarah, I'm an SLP and clinic owner for about eight years now and I can help. So go to www.slphappyhour.com/coach to find out more. There's no expensive packages. You can just get one one on one session and with it gain some clarity. Remember, strong people ask for help. Now back to the show.

Sarah: I have had this imposter syndrome. When I share things with parents. And what I say is, I'm an expert on language development, and you're an expert on your child, so you get to

decide what to do with this information. But this information is accurate and it's my job to give accurate information. So there's two things that I'm hearing. One is what do we do when we're coaching families when we're not also parents? The second piece is people are assuming we're not as good as what we do because we're not parents. I know I'm good at what I do, like I doubt myself every day, don't get me wrong, I get imposter syndrome. I have hard sessions where I cry, or I have certain kids that I think about when I go home like, oh my gosh, what what am I doing with this child? Or what approach do I want to use?

Crystal: Kind of that bias, I feel that is against me personally. But I related to what you mentioned, being a professional who, as you mentioned, is giving strategies, recommendations about parenting through our particular lens. As someone who doesn't have children, it totally exists. And it's it's an area that I feel that I have to kind of push through and work through and prove myself through.

I had a friend, one of my best friends from grad school, she did her school rotation and her onsite supervisor told our clinical supervisor from from the university that, yeah, you know, she she's young, she's pretty green. You know, she doesn't have children. So when she has kids, she'll get it. And this onsite supervisor really stuck her foot in it because our university supervisor also did not have children. And she was, you know, an older lady, a seasoned SLP, but oh my gosh, I'm so glad that that onsite supervisor said, whoa, you know, you cannot generalize and speak to that because that's really not fair. So I think that bias exists.

Sarah: Yeah. I want to add on to what you're saying, Crystal, because in my I'm in my early 40s now, when I was in my 20s and early 30s, if I would go out for dinner and not order a drink, people would assume it was because I was pregnant. If I complained of a stomachache or I would have uterine cramps, people would imagine that I was pregnant, and it was really painful for me because I was not able to become pregnant. And I wanted to say, I'll never get pregnant. I am not pregnant now, nor will I ever be able to be pregnant and. It was really painful. And now that I am older, people certainly ask less.

Crystal: You know, before I used to work in a clinic setting, so the model was that the parents would wait in the lobby and I would work with the child and then debrief them afterwards. Uh, my world was turned upside down when I changed jobs and started working in early childhood intervention, because it is all parent coaching, 100% parent coaching. When I first started my career, I was 24 years old and I looked younger. I had less gray hairs on my head, and I would get asked a lot if I was a mother and when I would say no from from the parent, I feel like I would get a little "uuugh." But thankfully we would build rapport and they would learn to trust me and that relationship would be built.

As I'm aging, I feel that people kind of assume I'm a mother now because I'm quote unquote old enough to be a mother. I look like I could be a mother, and I feel like I get asked less because of my age. But when I do get asked and I tell people that I don't have children, I feel like I have to again build that relationship like anyone would have to with their client and their family. But just with the little extra to prove myself that yes, I'm not a parent, but yes, I do know my job. Exactly what you said and that phrase used a bunch of times we used that in our ECIE training in Texas is that, you know, we're the quote unquote expert in child development. We're gonna bring that

to the table. But, you know, your child best. You're an expert on your child. Please bring back to the table and we'll meet each other halfway and kind of tailor our strategies and our plan according to that. So maybe ECI can be really hard for me sometimes, but in that aspect I'm able to just say, hey, bring what you know about your kid to the table, and that kind of takes the pressure off me a little bit.

Sara: So I totally agree on the front side. And you know, I brought that up that I get that question a lot. And I kind of want to be like, what does that matter? But you can't, you know, because we have to get the parents to buy in and we want their buy in and we want to build these relationships. So I get that you can't right off the bat, the defensive, although I sometimes wish maybe that I could be, I, I won't be. That's not really my personality. And like I said, I'm kind of an open book. But this side of it is hard. Being childless or child free is hard. And you face the bias from parents or people that think you may not know as much as you do because you have not had this life experience, but in in sort of thinking about what my friends with who our parents tell me and, and taking into consideration that our field is predominantly women. Right. Like we predominantly women, like over 90%. Thinking about the judgment that parents also face, about every decision they make for their kid, specifically children who are not typically developing in some way. Right? They have a speech or language delay. They have maybe some gross or fine motor delays. They are autistic. They're neurodivergent in some other fashion. They have a developmental disability of some kind, a genetic component. All of the possible things that could happen with a child that are outside of our control, that parents still feel the societal blame for. They're doing. All this, like genomic sequencing, to find the root cause of autism. And is it genetic? And I think that that is something that's important to know, but knowledge is power in a lot of different ways, because I think ultimately sometimes, especially mothers will internalize that as like, I carry this gene, so I pass this on to my child or, you know, this is somehow my fault. And that goes for just even autism is a one extreme example, but maybe just some behavior difficulty that a parent is struggling and maybe it's due to communication challenges. Right? We see that often go hand in hand. And so the parent takes on a lot of that that blame. You know I also feel for parents. So one of the reasons that I'm, I'm childfree by choice is because I have the utmost respect for parents. And I think it is the hardest job I could ever imagine doing. And most parents, when I say say that to them, like agree in some way, but don't and others, and that's fine. They're like, "well, you know, it just never ends." I was at Thanksgiving and I was I was talking to some acquaintances and I was like, yeah, being a parent is really tough. And, you know, I value all the parents in society because it's hard. Ooof. It's real tough and it's not something that I was cut out to do. They're like, well, you know, it's I love it. I love everything about being a parent. But it just it's never ending. Parents' experiences run the gamut. You know, some people feel that way. Some people don't. Some people feel like, yes, it is really hard. I think different seasons and parenthood can also bring, you know, different challenges based on, you know, my experience with children and in this role and personally, we just can't win. We're questioned as professionals if we have children or question as professionals, if we don't have children, we're questioned as women in the same fashion. Sometimes it's just really tough to be a woman. I feel like a lot of these questions feed into that piece.

And it really speaks to something Crystal said earlier about all of the advice that she's given to conceive a child. Take this, do that. And and I honestly, I'm glad she brought it up because I realize I've been guilty of this, and I want to take that step back and reflect on that and think about ways that I could show up for my loved ones that are going through this process without offering advice, or maybe making sure that I ask them first if they want the advice as a way to sort of pave that road to communication, but just the amount of guilt and and blame and responsibility that you might take on, because you can't possibly follow all of the advice that you're given and some of it, however valid it may be, doesn't fit into your treatment plan that was with your doctor, or you're just at your bandwidth, or for whatever reason, you can't or don't want to go down that road. And I just feel like, wow, what an emotional journey to have to also like, internalize that it's your fault that you can't get pregnant. If that's something that you're wishing for.

Sarah: Sara, I think it's the, you know, damned if you do, damned if you don't. Right? If you have children, but they're not, quote unquote, well-behaved. If you are Crystal, if you're doing, you know, IUI or IVF, people are like, why don't you just adopt? And there is people who are just adopting like me and we're like, hey, this is really complicated. And if I could tell people one thing as we wrap up, it would be think about the person going through the experience. So my adoption experience has been I've wanted to adopt for ten years. I've been actively trying to adopt for five years. I promise you, I know more information about adoption than you do within the past, you know, ten years of research. If you're just a friend or an acquaintance or a colleague and we're talking about it. There are people who have adopted like ten years ago, and the the world is very different now. So just honor that person's knowledge and experience by not giving advice.

Crystal: I think what I would like to add is that infertility is hard for anybody experiencing it. It's universally difficult, but I think everyone on this walk had their own unique mini challenges to it. For me, a mini challenge has been in being a pediatric SLP, expected to coach parents on how to raise their children when I'm not a mother myself. But there is something also beautiful that I've been able to gain from this and that. I think sometimes I'm surprised that people ask me if I have children and why not. And the conversation keeps going, and I come to find out that their mother, who had been through their own infertility journeys and who never got to talk to someone about it and process that, and sometimes mothers are just dying to share their stories with me, and I'm really surprised to learn how many of my clients are IUI babies or IVF babies, or rainbow babies, or just babies that took a long time to come to this earth, even though their parents desired them for so long. And that's that's what I want to take from this experience for myself, is that there can be good for me. I know that's not everyone's case, but for me, I'm just trying to lean on that and grow from that. And I appreciate being able to see these parents through that and that I have someone who's able to see me as well.

Sarah: And that's it for today's episode. Thank you so much for listening. And thank you to Crystal and Sarah for sharing their experiences. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider sharing it with a friend, especially one who may be supporting someone or may be someone who is childless or child free. And if you love the podcast, please take a moment to rate and

review the SLP Happy Hour podcast wherever you're listening, so that like-minded grad students SLP and SLP can find us.

I also send out a monthly or so newsletter that includes lesson plans, well, more like tips and ideas for your lessons, and you can sign up for that at [SLP Happy hour.com/newsletter](https://slphappyhour.com/newsletter).

I hope you enjoyed the show as much as I did, and I am still thinking about this conversation and learning from it as I relisten.

Thank you for listening to this episode, and I hope it was a little slice of an SLP happy hour for you until next time.