

# A LINE ON LIFE

2/4/91

## Children and Untimely Parental Death \*

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The possible death of young parents is rarely considered. However, with the war in the Middle East, this likelihood intrudes on our awareness. How do children adjust to untimely parental deaths?

Previous studies have limitations of (1) memory distortions of adults recalling deaths of parents or (2) dealing only with children who had relatively severe problems related to parental deaths. However, in 1987, psychologist J. William Worden and social work researcher Phyllis Silverman began a study of children who had just experienced a parental death.

By contacting local funeral home directors, they found 125 children in 70 families who were willing to participate in their study. Since the study was in Boston, half of the families were Catholic, with the remainder being Protestant and Jewish. Although contacted, no black families responded, so the sample is limited to Caucasians.

Ranging in age from 6-17, three-quarters of the children had lost a father, and the rest had lost a mother. Most of the fathers had died suddenly from heart attacks or car accidents. However, almost half of the mothers died after long illnesses like cancer.

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***"Many of the children went to bed with an intact family and woke up orphaned."***

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Worden and Silverman conducted interviews with parents and children at four months, one year and two years after the death. At the same time, they followed a control group of two-parent families to see if responses were due to bereavement or just normal development.

In dealing with grieving, some people think *"it's like having the flu and you get over it and you're going to be the same as before."* Unfortunately, any crisis situation – especially the death of a loved one – has lifelong effects. The researchers observed three different types of behavior in bereaved children:

- **emotional responses** – crying, impaired concentration, and sleep disorders
- **trying to hold on to the deceased** – dreaming of the parent, talking about heaven and feeling watched over by the parent

- **Coping through their social network** – family, other adults, friends and classmates.

Between four months and a year, most children were crying less and sleeping and concentrating better. In contrast – from parental interviews during that period – their children seemed to show more fear for the safety of the remaining parent. However, this observation may also mean that the parents were more in touch with their children's feelings than a few months after the death, when they were more absorbed with their own mourning.

At both four months and one year, there was an increase in **health problems** among the bereaved children but not among the control group children. Bereaved children suffered more from headaches, stomachaches and other physical complaints.

Although considered taboo by some, maintaining a connection to the departed is part of the mourning process. The bereaved children talked a great deal about heaven, reported talking to their deceased parent and felt that the parent was watching over them – not only to protect them but also to discipline them. Some children kept a personal object of the parent with them. However, they tended to let go of these objects over time, putting them on shelves or in closets rather than taking them to bed.

Researchers believe an important predictor of adjustment is the **social support** they receive within and outside of the family. Although not all of their data is in yet, Worden and Silverman found that children – who go through fewer changes in their daily routine – are able to deal with their loss better. Unfortunately, the death of the mother – assuming that the father has *not* previously been responsible for routine childcare – results in more of these small, but stressful changes.

Another factor seems to be crucial. The children need to be allowed – but not forced – to take part in **mourning customs** such as the funeral. Sharing mourning with extended family members might also help. Describing dreams about her father, one 9-year-old reported, *"I tell my grandma my dreams about my daddy, and she tells me hers."*

Although the social norms for mourning vary, children will tend to adjust to parental death better if –

1. most of their life routines are maintained,
2. they are not excluded from the social supports of the mourning process, and
3. they are allowed to reminisce about their life with the deceased parent.

Nobody wants this type of tragedy to occur. However, if it does, you will know how to deal with this crisis more effectively.

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\* Adapted from Susan Moses' article, "Children can overcome untimely death of parents," [\*APA Monitor\*](#), January 1991, pages 6-7.