Developmental Effects of Parent Separation/Loss

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It is within the context of the adult-child relationship that children accomplish the various developmental tasks related to psychological maturation. Parental separation or loss will have a major impact on the child’s psychological development and possibly on his/her cognitive and physical development as well.

Although the effects of parent loss can never be totally obliterated, the negative impact can be minimized if, during the grieving process, the child lives in an environment that is supportive of reestablishing psychological equilibrium. Unfortunately, many of the children in today’s foster care/adoptive system have not received sufficient help in resolving loss issues and are, to one degree or another, psychologically “stuck” at the age of the loss of their primary attachment objects, whether those individuals were birth or foster parents.

First Year of Life

The primary tasks to be accomplished:

1. Meeting dependency needs
2. Building up feelings of trust, security and attachment
3. Beginning to sort out the significance of various external and internal stimuli

Short-term effects of parental separation/loss:

1. Regression, in terms of dependency needs
2. Undermining of the child’s sense of security and trust for adult availability
3. With the changes in daily routine that accompany changes in caretakers, there will be interruption in the acquisition of basic cause and effect.
Minimizing the effects of the loss:

The new caretakers need to be available “on demand” for the infant, once again meeting the child’s earlier developmental needs. All interactions need to be gauged by asking the question: “What will help this infant learn to trust that adults will be available?” As many routines as possible should be transferred to the post-loss family setting, thus facilitating acquisition of cause-and-effect learning. Following a consistent routine is particularly important for these infants.

Possible long-range effects of the loss:

If the infant’s dependency needs are not met, the child will grow up to be one who continues to think that life owes him; it is quite likely that he will have trouble ever meeting the dependency needs of others. Trust for others will be impaired. Learning problems, which may not become evident until fourth through sixth grades; secondary to problems with cause and effect, may occur.

Toddler Years (1 – 3 years):

The primary tasks to be accomplished:

1. Gaining autonomy—a sense of independence
2. Identity formation—sex, position in family and first name are all important factors
3. Continued growth in awareness or perceptions, both external and internal (e.g., toilet training)
4. Language becomes functional
5. Development of the social emotions (empathy, pride, shame, guilt, embarrassment)

Short-term effects of parental separation/loss:

1. The balance between age-appropriate dependency and independency will be disrupted.
2. Interference with identity. Changes in first name during this period of ego development may be particularly harmful.
3. The child’s awareness of both external and internal stimuli may be dulled, and there will likely be regression in terms of the most recently-acquired skills.
4. The normal acquisition of language may be temporarily interrupted with parent loss, especially if that parent was the child’s “interpreter”.

Minimizing the effects of the loss:

Transfer of both attachment and recent behavioral gains from one set of parents to another can do much to minimize the effects of the loss. Age-appropriate balance between dependency and independency needs to be re-achieved. Careful attention must be paid to meeting the child’s
dependence needs; while at the same time, the parents help him/her feel more adequate. If regression to earlier levels of functioning is allowed, the toddler will usually reacquire the skills within a few months. If undue pressure is put on the child to continue to function at his/her highest levels, long-range problems are more likely.

**Possible long-range effects of the loss:**

There is a possibility that the individual will permanently take on the “victim” or “victimizer” role. Long-term control issues may be prominent. A serious effect may be the disruption in ego development, with increased incidences of “borderline personality” problems. Lack of self-awareness may be ongoing. There may be long-term subtle language problems. As adults, these individuals may be rigid, inflexible and not able to deal appropriately with aggression impulses. Lack of appropriate development of the social emotions leads to long-term problems with interpersonal relationships and conscience development.

**Pre-School Years (3 – 6 years)**

**Primary tasks to be accomplished:**

1. Continued individuation, independence and proficiency in terms of self-care
2. Two major internal psychological struggles are usually resolved through the medium of play; these are the “big vs. little” conflict and the “good vs. bad” conflict.
3. An important time in terms of sexual identity (oedipal stage)

**Short-term effects of the loss:**

The most serious, immediate effect of the loss is related to the child’s egocentric magical thinking. It is important that adults work hard at identifying the preschooler’s magical thinking about the separation/loss. What does he/she think he/she did to cause the loss? What does he/she think he/she can do to remedy it?

**Minimizing the effects of the loss:**

Identifying, clarifying and remediating the magical thinking are particularly important. Adequate opportunities for play must be provided. At this age, all psychological issues, including grieving, are primarily resolved through the medium of play.

**Possible long-term effects of the loss:**

Because of the combination of the magical thinking and the “good vs. bad” struggle, the preschooler may perceive himself/herself as so “bad” that he/she caused the loss. Secondary to the combined effects of the magical thinking and the oedipal conflict, the child may think that the loss was related to his/her wanting the parent of the opposite sex all to himself/herself. This may have long-term ramifications in terms of sexual identity issues. The magical thinking and the “big vs. little” struggle may lead the youngster to attribute the loss to his/her either being “too big” or “too little,” depending on the particulars of his/her situation.
The Grade School Years (Latency)

Primary tasks to be accomplished:

1. Master problems encountered outside the family unit:
   a. Academic learning
   b. Peer relationships
   c. Improvement in gross motor skills

2. Conscience development: This starts before this period and continues long afterwards, but there is major growth in this area during the grade-school years as the youngster moves from fear of consequences to internalized guilt and displeasure with self after doing something wrong.

3. Increased awareness of his/her own strengths and weaknesses in a variety of areas

Short-term effects of parental separation and loss:

As the grade-schooler goes through the grieving process, he/she will have less energy available for the usual tasks of his/her age.

Minimizing the effects of the loss:

Provide the youngster with opportunities to focus on grieving so that at other times he/she can focus on the tasks at hand, whether they are academic or peer related. Identify values as “this is the way we do it in our family” rather than implying that all other values are “wrong”.

Possible long-range effects of the loss:

If the child has a series of disruptions in schooling and peer relationships during this stage of development, he/she may have long-term problems with either, or both, of these areas. There may be problems with the internalization of conscience.

Adolescence

Primary tasks to be accomplished:

1. Psychological separation: Needs to answer questions of “Who am I?”, “Where do I belong?”, “What will I do (be)?” and “What do I believe in?”

2. Control issues: During times of psychological separation, control issues tend to emerge. The adult’s role is not to take control from the adolescent, but rather to create an environment in which the young person has to develop more self-control.

3. Sexual issues: Because of physical and hormonal changes, adolescents are highly sexualized (not to be confused with necessarily being sexually active) beings. They move from depending primarily on same-sex relationships to also developing opposite-sex relationships.
Short-term effects of parental separation/loss:
In order to successfully complete the tasks of psychological separation, the adolescent needs to come up against and oppose parental figures who are consistent in their availability and behaviors; therefore, parent separation or loss may interrupt these tasks.

Minimizing the effects of the loss:
Adolescents need to feel that they have increasing control over their own lives; therefore, at the time of separations or losses (over which they probably have no control), we must provide numerous opportunities for them to be in control of other aspects of their lives. They need to be an integral part of decision making for their futures.

Possible long-range effects of the loss:
If the adolescent believes that he/she has lost all control over his/her life, he/she is likely to either become suicidal or to act out in a variety of antisocial ways.

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Exploring the Effects of Abuse and Neglect on School-Aged Children

Question 1
How might a chaotic, unpredictable or explosive environment in an abusive family, or the absence of structure in a neglectful family affect the behavior and development of a school-aged child?

Question 2
How might maltreatment affect the child’s relationship with his/her parents and with other adults?

Question 3
How might maltreatment affect the child’s relationships with peers?
Question 4
How might a history of maltreatment affect the child’s ability to be self-directed and competent? Describe the characteristics of the child who fails to develop industriousness.

Question 5
How might the child’s school performance be affected?

Question 6
How might a child’s self-esteem be affected by maltreatment? In what ways is a child at risk of developing emotional disturbance?