The developmental implications of parental loss during adolescence

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Abstract
This paper provides a comprehensive review of the literature that relates to the death of a parent and how this experience influences an adolescent. This review will answer the question of how adolescent cognitive, emotional, and social development is affected when a parent dies. After a brief definition of the words "adolescence" and "loss," the focus of this paper will be on the areas of cognitive, emotional, and social development and the effects of grief on development after a parent dies. This information can help mental health professionals and school counselors understand the impact of living through the experience of losing a parent through death during adolescence.

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF PARENTAL LOSS DURING ADOLESCENCE

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Dacni C. Jones

May 1999
This Research Paper by: Dacni C. Jones

Entitled: THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF PARENTAL LOSS DURING ADOLESCENCE

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Adolescents are not exempt from experiencing loss and grief. In fact, adolescents are probably more versed in loss today than any other era. They are losing their peers to gang violence, accidents, and diseases such as AIDS. Losing a parent to death is something some adolescents have endured through the ages, and yet it is one of the most psychologically and emotionally devastating experiences to withstand as an adolescent.

Some experts distinguish between normative and non-normative life events (Papalia & Olds, 1992). One reason this experience is so difficult to endure is that the death of a parent is a non-normative event during adolescence. Normative events are those events that most people encounter. These events can be age-related, such as puberty, or history related, such as the influence of a war. Non-normative events are those that do not happen to most people, such as the early death of a parent. Although loss is something most people experience during their lives, it is not a normative event during adolescence. The effects of this type of event depend on the situation, the developmental stage of the person, and the type of loss he or she is facing.

There are many articles and books written on grief and loss. However, much of the literature focuses on loss in adulthood and childhood. The unique perspective of grieving adolescents is often ignored (Balk, 1991; Kubler-Ross, 1969). One assumes an adolescent is psychologically and emotionally equal to either an adult or to a child. However, this is not completely accurate. Adolescence is a time of rapid cognitive, social, and emotional change. These changes make it necessary to view the effects of adolescent loss as separate, especially when the issue is parental death (Harris, 1991; Noppe & Noppe, 1991). If people working in the helping professions can understand the unique
needs of an adolescent, they may be more helpful as the adolescent moves through the devastating experience of the loss of a parent.

A review of the literature offered a useful understanding of an adolescent's development and feelings after losing a parent. First of all, the cognitive issues of separating from parents and understanding abstract ideas during adolescence become more complex when a parent dies. Secondly, the adolescent also has new emotional needs that he or she may not address. The last developmental aspect discussed in this paper is that of social development, which can be affected when a parent dies.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the literature that relates to the death of a parent and how this experience influences an adolescent. This review will answer the question of how adolescent cognitive, emotional, and social development is affected when a parent dies. After a brief definition of the words "adolescence" and "loss," the focus of this paper will be on the areas of cognitive, emotional, and social development and the effects of grief on development after a parent dies. This information can help mental health professionals and school counselors understand the impact of living through the experience of losing a parent through death during adolescence.

Definitions

Words such as "adolescence" and "loss" can hold multiple meanings. The following definitions will outline the meanings of each of these words for this paper.

Adolescence

Before a person can examine an adolescent's experience, one must have an understanding of the term adolescence. It is tempting to give age ranges to define this
stage of life. However, adolescence is more than a person's age. Adolescence is a stage in the human developmental cycle that occurs after childhood and before adulthood (Corr & Balk, 1996; Papalia & Olds, 1992). Although this is a vague definition of this term, descriptions of this stage in the life cycle help to define the term adolescence.

Adolescence, according to Corr and Balk (1996), is characterized by physical maturation as the child's body develops into an adult's body. It is also characterized by developmental tasks such as separating from one's family of origin. Vernon (1993) described adolescence as a time marked by mood swings, egocentrism, puberty, and a struggle towards autonomy. For the purpose of this paper, adolescence will be understood as the ages of 10 to 22, characterized by puberty and the cognitive, emotional, and social tasks of moving beyond the family of origin and through the process of self-definition towards adulthood.

Loss

Loss is another concept used in this paper that holds multiple meanings. General personal loss is defined in the literature as "...an event that produces persisting inaccessibility of an emotionally important figure" (Weiss, 1993, p. 272). Rosenblatt (1993) further defined loss as "Losing any person who has been important in defining self..." (p.102). According to both of these definitions, for an event to be a loss event, the person who is "lost" must be important to those left behind and be impossible to reach in any way.

Even after examining these definitions of loss, the concept is still broad. Mishne (1992) described the loss of parents as being either temporary or permanent. Examples of
these types of loss include divorce, substance use, or death. The effect of parental loss will differ according to the circumstances of the loss (Weiss, 1993). If the loss leaves a chance for the child to contact the parent, the feelings of loss are less intense (Weiss, 1993). Therefore, the loss of a parent because of death is different than other types of loss because there is no earthly chance of reunification (Clark, Pynoos, & Goebel, 1994; Weiss, 1993).

Often the term “loss” is used to indicate the feelings experienced after parents divorce or leave for other non-permanent reasons. For this review, loss will only refer to a permanent loss due to death, specifically the death of a parent, father or mother, occurring during adolescence. These definitions will serve as a basis for this paper. With this knowledge, it is possible to begin examining the developmental issues involved for adolescents when they experience the death of a parent.

Developmental Issues

According to the definition for this paper, adolescence is a time of rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development. The following pages will cover the areas of this development and the effects of parental death.

Cognitive Development

Understanding the cognitive developmental tasks is a way one defines adolescence. One of the hallmarks of entering adolescence is a move from concrete to abstract thinking. There are many ways adolescents show they are beginning to change the way their minds work. The following descriptions will give more specific ways this occurs. It will then be possible to examine the implications of these changes when a parent dies.
Before one can examine the effects of parental death on adolescent development, it is first necessary to understand the normative developmental events of this life stage. Adolescence is marked by cognitive change. One of the most relevant changes of this time period is the change from concrete thinking to more abstract thinking (Elkind, 1988; Papalia & Olds, 1992; Vernon, 1993). Adolescents are gradually learning to hypothesize about future events and abstractly think about the possibilities. However, it is difficult for adolescents to personalize these hypothetical situations. As they develop and move toward adulthood, it becomes easier to apply their thoughts and ideas to themselves.

One of these abstract ideas is the adolescent’s cognitive ability to understand death. Adolescents understand how to think about the future even though it is abstract. They are beginning to think about death in the future. However, it is difficult for adolescents to apply these ideas to themselves (Balk, 1991; Clark, Pynoos, & Goebel, 1994). This is very typical after understanding the cognitive development of adolescents. Although adolescents can understand that people die, it is difficult for them to understand that it could happen to someone they know (Balk, 1991).

Kandt (1994) explained why adolescents might have difficulties fully understanding death. First of all, adolescents often romanticize the idea of a death. They may think of fictional instances of death and believe that it is a sentimental, romantic notion that lacks terminality. The finality of it is not always completely understood (Kandt, 1994). If an adolescent is still grappling with these concepts, living through a death can force him or her to reach an understanding that he or she is not normally cognitively able to comprehend.
The definition of adolescence includes the second cognitive developmental task affected by the death of a parent: separation-individuation. Quintana and Kerr (1993) studied the importance of the developmental task of separating from parents. Their focus was the impact of the level of separation from parents on adolescents’ current psychological well-being.

This study was conducted by measuring adolescents’ psychological complaints, such as depression and anxiety as well as the characteristics of these adolescents’ relationships. These characteristics included supported separateness, mirroring, nurturance needs, separation and engulfment anxiety, and denial of dependency. The results indicated that staying connected yet separate in supported and nurturing relationships did not correlate with depression and anxiety. Instead, other levels of separating (such as dependence, engulfment, and separation anxiety) did seem to correlate with depression and anxiety (Quintana & Kerr, 1993).

Quintana and Kerr (1993) suggested that successful completion of the separation process during adolescence might have an effect on the future psychological well-being of a person. Separation-individuation is a normal part of this time period. It can, however, be significantly clouded when a parent dies during this separation period (Balk, 1991; Harris, 1991).

Harris (1991) conducted a study using a small sample of eleven adolescents who had lost a parent within the last year. She used semi-structured interviews and standardized measures to gather information from the adolescents, parents, and teachers. The responses indicated that the death of a parent is very stressful and affected most areas
of an adolescent’s life. One area that was affected was the adolescents’ struggle for separation. Feelings of anguish may develop as the adolescent struggles between dependency and autonomy (Balk, 1991; Harris, 1991). Adolescents may feel torn between separating from parents who they assume will always be there and wanting to be with parents they know might not always be in their lives (Harris, 1991). According to Quintana and Kerr (1993), it is important that adolescents separate successfully, but according to Harris (1991), the death of a parent may prevent successful completion of this task. The result could be negative psychological consequences (Quintana & Kerr, 1993).

A third cognitive concept that occurs in adolescence and is influenced by parental death is that of an “imaginary audience” (Kandt, 1994). The idea of an “imaginary audience” is one that often times results in adolescents feeling very self-conscious (Elkind, 1984, 1988; Kandt, 1994; Papalia & Olds, 1992; Vernon, 1993). Adolescents are self-conscious about the changes they are experiencing and, therefore, imagine everyone is focusing on them. The last thing they want is something to set them apart from their peers or to draw attention to them. However, the death of a parent does just this. As a result, adolescents may have a very difficult time dealing with their grief because they are afraid their peers and others might be watching (Bishop, 1990 cited in Kandt, 1994). If they are not able to grieve openly, they may deny the grief and refuse to progress through the grief cycle. This causes problems for them in future development.

Lastly, adolescents often do not have the experiences of past trauma and coping mechanisms on which to reflect (Harris, 1995; Kandt, 1994). Adults have traumatic
experiences that they have survived. They can remember how they coped and know that they did survive. Adolescents do not have many, if any, of these experiences. Therefore, it is even more difficult for adolescents to feel that they can work through the grief because of their lack of previous experiences. In this case, it is the lack of cognitive development that affects the adolescents’ ability to cope with the loss of a parent.

It is clear that the death of a parent can be a very overwhelming situation for an adolescent. Some of the reasons involve the cognitive development occurring during adolescence. The concept of a possible death, especially that of an adolescent’s parent, exists in the abstract. Adolescents are only beginning to be able to think in this way. It can be very hard for them to comprehend the implications of a death based on their level of concrete thinking, the issue of separating from their parents, their egocentrism, and the fact that they do not usually have previous experience with death.

Emotional Development

Although cognitive development is occurring rapidly during adolescence, it is the emotional development that the outside world can most easily identify during this time period. During adolescence, emotional intensity increases, and this brings new challenges (Vernon, 1993). What are the effects of the death of a parent on these challenges?

The normal course of emotional development during adolescence is characterized by mood swings (Vernon, 1993). Adolescents may feel out of control and vulnerable as they experience so many changes. Adolescents frequently hide these feelings by acting out emotion-laden behaviors (Vernon, 1993). It is important to keep the usual emotional developmental tasks in mind when contemplating the effects of grief.
Adolescence is a period of time marked by strong emotions. Grief may complicate this time period (Corr & Balk, 1996). Harris (1995) examined the emotional implications of parental death. She interviewed sixty people who had lost their parents before reaching adulthood. She found that these people had to deal with a wide range of feelings including, but not limited to; guilt, shame, denial, relief, sadness, and anger. Adolescent grief is often expressed as anger (Mishne, 1992). This is consistent with typical adolescent emotional development. When emotions or situations leave adolescents feeling vulnerable, they often react with anger.

Mishne (1992) maintained that the focus of anger is actually pointed toward the deceased parent. However, to admit this would possibly cause a large amount of guilt for the adolescent. Therefore, the remaining parent often becomes the source of the adolescent's anger (Mishne, 1992). These intense feelings complicate the grief and normal development for the adolescent.

Mishne (1992) further discussed the implications for emotional development and parental death based on her research and clinical experience. She maintained that, in addition to intense anger, bereaved adolescents also experience guilt and low self-esteem as they try to move beyond the grief. If the normal course of emotional development is averted, Mishne (1992) believed emotional availability for future relationships, including levels of self-esteem and intimacy, could be hampered.

Adolescents are also dealing with a wide range of emotional change. Having the distraction of grief can complicate their emotional development to the point of lowering their self-esteem and influencing their level of intimacy in the future (Mishne, 1992).
Understanding all of these issues makes it possible to begin examining the implications for social development.

**Social Development**

Not only are adolescents experiencing emotional changes, they also experiencing social changes. Socially, adolescents are focusing more on their friends than on their families (Vernon, 1993). This is a normal part of growing up, and branching out socially is a large part of adolescents' learning about their self-identity and autonomy. Like cognitive and emotional issues, there are implications for social development when a parent dies (Harris, 1995; Mishne, 1992; Parry & Thornwall, 1992; Ross, 1988, 1989).

Adolescence is a time when peer relationships become extremely important (Vernon, 1993). In younger adolescence, peers become more important than parents and siblings. As a result, young adolescents fear being rejected by their peers. This social development can be affected when a parent dies.

Mishne (1992) indicated that grieving adolescents are not likely to talk to their peers about their grief because they do not want to appear different. A central part of the social development of an adolescent is the ability to "fit in." Anything that causes a peer to feel abnormal or is a source of possible rejection is usually avoided. Grieving adolescents may also hide their grief because they are fearful of overwhelming peers (Harris, 1991; Mishne, 1992; Ross, 1988). Adolescents may withdraw from socializing with their peers altogether. Because younger adolescents are so fearful of being rejected by their peers, it is possible that they will withdraw and stay closer to their families. This is a reaction that is atypical of the normative early adolescent social development.
The outcome is sometimes different with older adolescents because their social tendencies are different (Parry & Thornwall, 1992). Older adolescents are more developed cognitively and emotionally than younger adolescents (Vernon, 1993). Therefore, their peer relationships are based on different needs. Older adolescents are not as concerned about being rejected by their peers. As a result, they may deal with the grief of losing a parent by escaping from their grieving families by turning to their peers (Parry & Thornwall, 1992).

Parry and Thornwell (1992) found that some adolescents do respond to their grief in the typical older adolescent way by turning to their peers. Gray (1988, 1989) also studied social support after the loss of a parent in relation to typical adolescent social development. He wanted to understand who was most helpful to these adolescents and how they were helpful. Gray used standardized tests, including the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, 1967), the Imaginary Audience Scale (Elkind & Bowen, 1979), and the Differential Diagnostic Technique (Weininger, 1986), and semi-structured interviews to determine the most effective support group for these adolescents. After studying which group was most helpful and how they were helpful, Gray (1988, 1989) then studied a peer support group for grieving adolescents.

The results of this study indicated that most of the time peers were the most helpful group to support grieving adolescents. Other times, the grieving adolescent was too afraid of being isolated and rejected to talk about the grief with a peer. Adolescents who were involved in a peer support group felt that peers in the group were very helpful to them as the grieved.
Gray (1988, 1989) found that peers who had been through similar experiences and close friends were the most helpful to these adolescents. He found that family members were listed next as most helpful, although this was based on mixed results. This also seemed to be consistent with adolescents who are still struggling with separation-individuation. These results are congruent with normative developmental needs of early and later adolescents.

This study allowed Gray (1988, 1989) to determine that talking about the loss was helpful to adolescents. Adolescents who had been able to talk about their loss, specifically in the peer support groups, had lower depression ratings. Talking about their losses seemed to help adolescents use what comes naturally to them, talking to their peers, to work through the grief process.

Gray's studies indicated that grieving adolescents could emotionally move away from their families toward their peers. But not all adolescents are willing or able to continue their natural tendencies to move from the family and parents toward peers after parental loss (Kandt, 1994). Some adolescents actually move away from peers, either by necessity or choice. As these adolescents withdraw from their peer circle and back to their families, many grieving adolescents try to step into the deceased parent's role (Kandt, 1994). Socially, these adolescents are spending time with adults instead of other adolescents. This does not allow them to complete the social developmental tasks of developing identity and autonomy, because they are still very involved in their family. For these reasons, it is clear that the death of a parent can have different effects on an adolescent's social development.
Summary

The focus of this paper has been on parental death during adolescence. The following section will summarize and synthesize the articles.

Those who thought that development would be affected predicted that cognitive development might be one area influenced (Balk, 1991; Clark, Pynoos, & Goebel, 1994; Harris, 1991; Harris, 1995; Kandt, 1994). The natural course of cognitive adolescent development is to move from concrete to abstract thinking. Death is rather abstract, in the future, and somewhat of a romantic notion to adolescents. Adolescents are grappling with the idea of death but still have a difficult time understanding it. Other experts feel that if adolescents do have the cognitive abilities to understand death, but they have a very difficult time applying it to their own lives (Balk, 1991; Clark, Pynoos, & Goebel, 1994). It is hard for them to imagine that someone they know, most of all a parent, could actually die.

When a death of a parent does occur during this developmental stage, adolescents are forced to bring death from an abstract notion to reality much more quickly than they would if they had not experienced this traumatic event. Experts seem to agree that adolescents will be able to apply these abstract experiences to themselves, but it is certainly not the ideal way to develop these cognitive abilities.

Another cognitive task that may be affected by a parent’s death during adolescence is the task of autonomy (Balk, 1991; Harris, 1991). The death of a parent can hinder this task, according to these researchers. When a parent dies, it is very difficult for the adolescent to complete this journey because the parent is already gone. This task has
been completed in one way for the adolescent because the parent is physically not present. Furthermore, if the adolescent is trying to move away from the parent and yet the family is watching the parent suffer and die, this can be especially confusing for the developing adolescent. This adolescent will either continue through development and risk dealing with feelings of guilt and possibly risking future problems, or this adolescent will ignore the natural tendency to reach autonomy and stay close to the parents. Either way, according to the literature reviewed for this paper, this cognitive task of separation will be affected by a parent’s death.

One cognitive area that is not usually changed but has implications is that of the imaginary audience (Kandt, 1994). The cognitive phenomena of the imaginary audience is not interrupted, however, it is magnified. Grieving adolescents are dealing with many new emotions and thoughts. This is certainly not a time when they want people looking at them. Although this cognitive task is still present, it is worse during this kind of crisis.

Like cognitive development, the death of a parent during adolescence has an effect on emotional development. The normal developmental course for adolescents is to become rather moody, with emotions that include anger and sadness (Vernon, 1993). They also tend to feel very vulnerable and self-conscious, especially those in early adolescence.

When a parent dies, adolescents must contend with the usual emotional changes and in addition, begin grieving. The feelings of vulnerability are also magnified. It seems to be clear from the literature that the natural emotional turmoil of simply being an adolescent does not stop when a parent dies, it just becomes worse and more difficult to manage. Grief, which Kubler-Ross (1969) outlined as the stages of denial, anger,
bargaining, depression, and acceptance, plays out with mostly anger, even rage, when it occurs during adolescence (Mishoe, 1992). According to this author, this is a normal grief reaction for this age group considering the emotional turbulence already present.

In the social developmental area, the articles read for this paper were not consistent. Some researchers found that adolescents continue with their natural reactions to confide more in their peers than their parents (Gray, 1988, 1989). Adolescents in these studies rated their peers as most helpful, more so than their families. Another article reported that older adolescents usually turned to their peers during this time of need (Parry & Thornwall, 1992). The results of this research are congruent with the adolescent’s developing social trend to rely more on their peers than their family.

Another expert did not find this to be true (Kandt, 1994). She found that the some adolescents were too worried about being rejected to confide in their peers. This author suggested that younger adolescents did not grieve openly with their peers. Instead, they found support in their families and halted their natural tendencies to pull away, or they postponed their grief tasks. This kind of coping also placed a great strain on the normal course of development.

The experts on this topic generally agree that losing a parent during adolescence is a traumatic event that can have implications for development. The implications, however, vary according to the type and level of development.
Conclusion

What are the implications for adolescent cognitive, emotional, and social development when a parent dies during this time period? This was the question to be answered by reviewing this literature. Some authors found that development could be interrupted or the natural course changed by such a traumatic event (Balk, 1991; Clark, Pynoos, & Goebel, 1994; Harris, 1991; Harris, 1995; Kandt, 1994; Mishne, 1992). Other studies and reviews indicated that development would still proceed (Parry & Thornwall, 1992; Gray, 1988, 1989). Following the expected course of development could, however, cause the adolescent to grieve and react in ways that one may not think are typical grief reactions.

This literature review provided a background on normative development as individuals proceed through adolescence. It is clear from reviewing the normative stages of adolescent development that adolescents are developing new cognitive structures, emotional coping skills, and social behaviors. It is a period of time marked by complexities and conflict because people develop further and more quickly during adolescence than at almost any other stage in life. The findings showed that this is a difficult period of time even if there are no traumatic events in the family. Once a traumatic event is added to the picture, the situation is even more complicated. With an understanding of normative development, one can understand and explore risk and resiliency factors in dealing with the death of a parent.

Adolescents can move through their development and grieve without having any major complications. However, interruptions in development can sometimes have lasting
effects. Once adolescents are viewed as separate from children and adults, people who are trying to help them can understand their unique grieving needs so that adolescents can move through the developmental areas of cognition, emotions, and socialization and thus continue to mature as they grieve.
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