



Children's Mourning and Reaction to the Death of Important Objects

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Brief Review of Literature

1. A young child always reacts strongly to separation from important object.
2. Cannot distinguish between temporary absence and permanent loss.

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Brief Review of Literature

3. Bowlby considers the reaction of infants, when separated from important objects, as identical with the adult reaction to mourning, a point of view that has been questioned by Anna Freud and others.
4. Bowlby believes that mourning (in the adult sense) is possible in infants and can be observed from the sixth month onward.

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Brief Review of Literature

5. Different authors disagree on the age at which children are capable of mourning.
6. Ten or eleven is the age at which children comprehend the concept of death.
7. Furman, thinks that mourning can be observed only from the third or fourth year of life onward.
8. Most authors believe that mourning process differs in children and adults.

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Brief Review of Literature

9. Wolfenstein thinks that mourning becomes possible only with the resolution of the adolescent phase, after the appropriate detachment from the parental figures has taken place.
10. My own view is closer to that of Wolfenstein, mourning as observed in the adult is not possible until the detachment from parental figures has taken place in adolescence.

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Death as a Developmental Interference

1. For the adult, the death of a close relative is frequently a traumatic event.
2. For the child, death can also be a traumatic event, but even more important, it constitutes a developmental interference.

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Death as a Developmental Interference

3. Children are in the middle of a multiplicity of developments that require, for their normal unfolding, the presence of the suddenly absent object.
4. The pressure of internal developmental forces interfere with the possibility of the pause that is required in mourning.

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Death as a Developmental Interference

5. When relevant objects are absent, it is in the nature of these developmental processes to re-create the objects anew, or
6. To make them come to life in fantasies, or
7. Need to ascribe such roles as the developmental stage requires to any suitable figures available in the environment.

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Death as a Developmental Interference

8. Another significant factor in children is that the same event, the same developmental interference, will influence development differently at different stages. Thus the absence of the father, for example, will acquire new meanings and be reinterpreted in phallic-oedipal terms when that phase is reached.

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Death as a Developmental Interference

9. Naturally, the child's need for the parents is quite different from one developmental stage to the next.
10. In some stages the loss of the mother is directly and immediately significant (except in first few months of life)

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Death as a Developmental Interference

11. This is not so in the case of the father except insofar as the mother's mourning and distress will affect her relationship to the baby.
12. Children react to losses with anxiety and multiple forms of regression of the drives.

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Death as a Developmental Interference

13. They give up certain ego achievements, developing abnormal forms of behavior.
14. Bonnard, described children who reacted to the parent's death with truancy and stealing.

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Object Relations and Mourning

1. To understand the reactions of children to loss we need to know the role that such objects play at different stages in the child's physical, psychological, and emotional development.
2. Some of the reactions observed in the child have to be understood as the result of the absence of one of the elements required for his normal development and not necessarily as a mourning reaction to the loss of the object (as will be the case in the adult personality).

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Object Relations and Mourning

3. Distinguish then, in the overt manifestation of the child's reactions to loss, those that are the result of the developmental disturbances introduced by the object loss and the "true mourning reactions to that loss."

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Object Relations and Mourning

4. In the adult, the role of the withdrawal of cathexis previously attached to the lost object is to free energies for the cathexis of a new object.
5. Withdrawal of cathexis from the lost object will leave the child in a “developmental vacuum” unless a suitable substitute object is readily found.

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Loss in the First Three Months of Life.

1. What “object” means to the young infant.
2. No differentiation exists as yet between self and object.
3. “Object” valued for need satisfaction functions, not per se.

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Loss in the First Three Months of Life.

4. When a substitute object takes over the mothering function, if the substitute object is appropriate, the transitory disequilibrium is restored.
5. The baby may show signs of distress with the change of object, but it seems that, at least in the first few weeks of life, a substitute is more or less readily accepted after a short time (Anna Freud 1952).

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Loss in the First Three Months of Life.

6. The baby's reaction is not based on an awareness of the mother's disappearance as an object but on the perception of a change in the quality of his sensory experiences.

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Loss After Third Month of Life

1. The object now starts gradually to be valued independently of its need-fulfilling functions, i.e., is valued per se.
2. There are different degrees of attachment until object constancy is reached by 14-18 months. (Describe imprinting).

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Other Relevant Factors

1. The child's low capacity for the tolerance of acute pain.
2. The short sadness span, which is usual in children.

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Other Relevant Factors

3. Children from latency to adolescence cannot tolerate intense distress for long, and quickly bring forward opposite thoughts and feelings.
(reversal of affects)
4. They are not able to sustain the process of protracted mourning that we know in adults.

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Other Relevant Factors

5. Helene Deutsch, long ago remarked on “the phenomenon of indifference which children so frequently display following the death of a loved person.”
6. They cannot keep up with the process of protracted (and sustained) mourning as we now it in adults.

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Other Relevant Factors

7. The adult cannot understand the seeming lack of feeling on the part of the child.
8. Explain the role of object loss plus separation from other familiar objects and surroundings.

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Other Relevant Factors

9. I believe that we tend to underestimate the tremendous importance of perceptual and environmental constancy for the human being and especially the child. Examples.
10. Denial (in words, actions, and fantasy, or of making the mourning process of the child somewhat different from that of the adult.

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Other Relevant Factors

11. Reality testing, reality awareness, reality adaptation, and reaction to loss in children and adults.
12. Up to the third year of life, many children are not yet able to distinguish between dream and reality. Dreams are treated as pieces of reality.

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Other Relevant Factors

13. The lost mother reappears in children's dream life.
14. Concept of death is partially understood only.

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Other Relevant Factors

15. Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), refers to the remark of a highly intelligent boy of ten after the sudden death of his father: “I know father’s dead, but what I can’t understand is why he doesn’t come home to supper.”

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Other Relevant Factors

16. A four-year-old girl's reaction to the sudden death of her father, several months later, on her birthday was to be extremely disappointed because her father had not come to her party or sent her any presents.

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What to Say to the Child

1. We know that excessive information in certain areas, for example, sexual sphere, or information conveyed in terms that are beyond the ego's ability to grasp, or not yet a part of their experiences are ignored, or occasionally, have a traumatic effect on the child.

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What to Say to the Child

2. Information should be conveyed truthfully, in terms familiar to child.
3. Talking about death is difficult for mourning relatives, but the child's many questions must be answered.

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What to Say to the Child

4. The questions children ask will tend to reappear in different contexts and at different developmental stages.

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What to Say to the Child

5. Barnes (1964), showed a four-year-old girl's concrete thought processes and their influence on her reaction. The child objected to wearing a dress which she had previously liked after her little cousins insisted that her dead mother was now an angel in heaven. The dress had been bought by the mother and was the type known commercially as an "angel costume."

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What to Say to the Child

6. Children process information according to their experience. Example: “We have to wait until after the war, then God can put people together again.”

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Loss in the Latency Period

1. Latency children deal with serious losses, including death, with massive denial, including not infrequently reversal of affect.

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Loss in the Latency Period

- 2. The evidence points to the fact that the latency child strongly cathects a fantasy life where the lost object may be seen as alive and at times as ideal. This fantasy relationship to the lost object is kept secret by the latency child and interferes with decathexis of objects.**

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Loss in the Latency Period

3. Evidence too shows how simultaneously the child makes attempts to cathect certain objects in reality and to give them the mother's role (for example, teachers, other members of the family and, in the case of children in psychotherapy, their therapists).

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Loss in the Latency Period

4. Often, in this age group, an immediate and short lived sadness reaction is occasionally seen, yet no apparent grief or sadness is seen shortly after the event.
5. Remember that reversal of affect is common.

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Loss During Adolescence

1. Adolescent's ego development is such that he can understand the full implications and finality of death. Reality testing is firmly established.
2. Nevertheless adolescents shy away from the type of mourning that we know from adults.

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Loss During Adolescence

3. Adolescents are greatly affected by the loss and react in strong and specific adaptive ways of their own.
4. As with the younger child, the sudden loss of an object through death creates the same situation of developmental stress that we described earlier as a developmental interference.

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Loss During Adolescence

5. Adolescents need their objects and recreate them.
6. Mourning is not totally possible until the adolescent had detached from the parents.

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Summary

1. The short sadness span.
2. The incapacity to sustain mourning.
3. The massive use of denial and reversal of affect.
4. The inability to grasp the reality of death, the totality of it.

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Summary

5. The search for substitutes (before the event, if the child was aware of the oncoming death, and after, if he was not).
6. The simultaneous (overt or insidious) symptom formation and the creeping character distortions.
7. The fear of “contamination” causing their own death, often side by side with fantasies of reunion.