

Gone But Not Forgotten: Children's Experiences with Attachment, Separation, and Loss

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Attachment, separation, and loss are critical life events for many young children. This article discusses prevalent factors of separation and loss and their potential harmful effects on development. Also, books and resources geared for children are suggested to help early childhood professionals facilitate resolution with affected children and their families.

"Mama, Mama, it's me!" Pam's mother died three months ago, but every time she sees a blue car like her mother drove, she races over to it and bangs on the window.

Tia happened to see her mother for the first time in a month at a gas station and she had promised to be home when Tia got out of school. Tia perched by the door all evening and well past midnight. She hopped out of bed every time she heard a noise, hoping it was her mother.

Many think children are not really affected when they lose loved ones. Unfortunately, these real life examples indicate that they are. Whether it is due to a loss such as a death or a separation due to substance abuse, the severing of an attachment to someone special can impact a child. The possible harmful effects on development, attachment, separation, and loss have become major issues for young children and demand early childhood professionals to heighten awareness, discuss prevalent factors, and seek out child-friendly books and resources to help facilitate resolution with affected children and their families.

Attachment, Separation, and Loss

Concepts of attachment include social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. Attachments

are defined as close enduring bonds, especially those formed between infants and primary caregivers (Strong, DeVault, & Sayad, 1998). Attachment is viewed as a part of social relationships in which a less skilled individual relies on a more competent and stronger one for protection. Behaviors also become more complex as relationships develop and patterns of interaction are formed. Goldberg (2000) reports that children experience emotional ties and create an internal representation of a relationship; each participant engages in behaviors that maintain the relationship. Therefore, children with secure attachments show more self confidence and are less dependent than insecurely attached children.

Children generally experience distress from separation from a primary caregiver or other attached individuals. Children who have been separated from significant others in their lives, like parents, may also experience physical distress as a result. Therefore, when a separation occurs in a child's life, it is a priority that a secure attachment with another loved one is maintained because it provides a level of protection during the separation. Without this protection, the separation may cause problems for young children such as bed-wetting, depression, and constipation.

Loss due to death is a part of everyday life for children and adults. Yet, it is a topic that society as a whole tries to shield from children. Christian (1997)

reports that most professionals agree that it is healthy for children to be involved in the death and grief process. Experts in early childhood and death education provide the following suggestions to help children understand death (Charkow, 1998; Christian, 1997; Goldman, 1996; and Staley, 2000):

- 1) Keeping their developmental levels in mind, be honest with children about the death and be patient when they are processing the information.
- 2) Reassure children that the remaining adults will take care of them.
- 3) Understand that children grieve in their own way. Young children in particular may be very physical and respond to death by being angry, restless, not sleeping or eating, or experiencing separation anxiety.
- 4) Express your own feelings to children and reassure them it is okay to cry or be sad.
- 5) If children are old enough, let them decide whether they want to attend the funeral or memorial service.
- 6) Help children cope with death in concrete ways by letting them draw pictures, write letters, or make a scrapbook about the person who has died.
- 7) Be sensitive to the different ways various cultures face death.
- 8) Realize that it takes a long time for children to process a death. As they obtain new cognitive skills at different developmental stages they may need to work through their perceptions of death again. Also, new questions may arise that should be answered by comforting adults.

Prevalent Causes of Separation and Loss

It is important to consider primary factors that cause children to be separated from loved ones. For example, a large number of children experience separations due to divorce, alcoholism or substance abuse, life threatening illnesses, and incarceration.

• Divorce

Every year more than 1 million American children will experience the end of their parents' marriage (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999). For many children the stress of a divorce is comparable to that of having a parent die, making it a painful and traumatic process for children (Lilly &

Green, 2004). Some children may blame themselves for their parents' divorce. Children may also feel angry at their parents for upsetting the routines of their life and fear may set in because of the insecurity experienced (Strong, et al., 1998). Therefore, divorcing parents should be very sensitive to their children's needs. They should work through their problems apart from their children. They should also work together to help children resolve any anger and fear in order to cope with the resulting separation. Lilly and Green (2004) report that children are more resilient if there are protective factors in their lives that include good relationships with both parents, frequent visits with non-custodial parents, positive self-esteem, nurturing relatives and friends, positive role models for coping, and a supportive child-care or school atmosphere.

• Alcoholism or Substance Abuse

Due to alcoholism, cocaine addictions, methadone abuse, and over dependencies on prescription drugs, substance abusers in the lives of children have become a major issue of concern in early childhood education. Primary concerns are the physical, emotional, and social separations children endure due to substance abuse. Quite often parents are absent from the home during binges of substance abuse. These absences evoke a bevy of anxiety-provoking queries for children, "Where is mommy? When is she coming home? Is she okay? Why can't I be with her?" Even when parents binge at home, there can still be an emotional separation for children, and it may create a void in their lives that makes them wonder what is wrong: "Why is daddy so grouchy? When is daddy going to come out of his bedroom? Why won't he play with me?"

• Life-threatening Illnesses

Most people have experienced illnesses that kept them in bed for a few days, but when the illness becomes life threatening, it will more than likely cause great stress on the family as a whole, especially children (Strong, DeVault, & Sayad, 1998). For instance, when children have parents who have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness like Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), they may feel betrayed or frightened. Children may also be confused because they do not understand what is happening to their loved ones. Seemingly, one minute the parent is in good

health and the next minute the parent may be fighting for his or her life. Hence, children may feel sad, hurt, and sometimes angry because the parent is not able to do as he or she did in the past. Changes of this sort also equate a loss of lifestyle and nurturing routines for children due to changes in their daily living patterns.

- **Incarceration**

It is estimated that 1,498,800 children in the United States have an incarcerated parent (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Due to the prison population increasing by 6.5% yearly, the number of children with parents in prison is also likely to increase. The number of women incarcerated has tripled since 1985. Among those entering prison, 6% are pregnant (Seymour, 1998). Very young children may have a hard time understanding why the parent left and why he or she does not visit or return. Furthermore, half of all imprisoned parents do not receive visits from their children, and the rest receive infrequent visits, which makes it extremely difficult to maintain ongoing relationships (Snell, 1994). In school or child care, children with parents in prison may be very guarded against peers finding out about their parents' imprisonment. They may also experience learning difficulties and act out inappropriately.

Implications for Educational Practices

Early childhood educators must be aware of the comprehensive considerations in all domains. To illustrate, cognitively, a second grader with a mother who is drug-addicted may find it difficult to really concentrate on phonics if he is constantly wondering about his mother's safety. Physically, a first grader formerly known as a finicky eater may suddenly develop a hearty appetite via "comfort foods" after his parents' divorce. Emotionally, a preschooler may be whiney, tearful, and fretful due to an extended separation from a parent, and this "anxious" behavior may continue off and on for days or even for weeks. Socially, a third grader may have a hard time trying to ignore the playground whispers about his father's "mysterious death" and the frantic shrieks when he tries to sit near classmates during lunch. A variety of developmentally appropriate activities help children work through commonly experienced emotions like anger, anxiety, betrayal,

confusion, depression, frustration, loneliness, and withdrawal (Brinson, 2000). Namely, books model coping strategies for children learning to deal with powerful emotions. Books also provide information and help address questions (Jalonga, 2004). For example, young children's emotional issues can be eased with helpful books like *The Day I saw My Father Cry* by Bill Cosby (2000). It deals with the passing of a loved one in a warm, nurturing manner that reassures children it is okay to express grief (Brinson, 2002). Therefore, to ameliorate concerns that may impede the overall progress of affected children, early childhood educators should:

- Realize emotional bonds are formed between children and primary caregivers very early in life
- Understand the magnitude of bonds children and their primary caregivers share
- Recognize the turmoil children may experience due to severed attachments from loved ones
- Be apprised of critical factors that cause separation and loss
- Never overlook children's concerns or take them lightly when they try to talk about loved ones they are separated from or have lost
- Encourage children to express their feelings about a separation or loss through supportive avenues
- Create an extensive resource library with theme-based children's books
- Tailor interventions to the individualized needs of children
- Adhere to the importance of children being actively involved in the healing process
- Be adept at providing families with resources to help them work through issues of attachment, separation, and loss

A growing number of children are experiencing separations from or loss of loved ones. Early childhood educators can work with children in safe, nurturing environments to facilitate their engagement in the process of healing. Also, theme-related children's books and resources like the ones profiled on pages 44-45 can help children resolve issues with loved ones related to attachment, separation, and loss.

Attachment to Loved Ones

- Buehner, C. (2001). *I want to say I love you*. Illus. Jacqueline Rogers. Phyliss Fogelman Books.
- Curtis, J. L. (1996). *Tell me again about the night I was born*. Illus. Laura Cornell. Harpertrophy.
- Duncan, A. F. (2005). *Honey baby sugar child*. Illus. Susan Keeter. Simon & Schuster.
- Hooks, B. (2003). *Homemade love*. Illus. Shane W. Evans. Jump-at-the-Sun.
- Jordan, D., & Jordan, R. M. (2004). *Did I tell you I love you today?* Illus. Shane W. Evans. Simon & Schuster.
- Martin, B., & Archambault, J. (1997). *Knots on a counting rope*. Illus. Ted Rand. Henry Holt and Co.
- Mora, P. (2001). *Love to mama: A tribute to mothers*. Illus. Paula S. Barragan. Lee & Low Books.
- Smith, W. (2001). *Just the two of us*. Illus. Kadir Nelson. Scholastic.
- Step toe, J. (2005). *Sweet, sweet baby!* Illus. By the author. Cartwheel.
- Tsubakiyama, M. H. (1999). *Mei-Mei loves the morning*. Illus. Cornelius Van Wright & Ying-Hwa Hu. Albert Whitman & Company.

Separation from Loved Ones

- Lansky, V. (1998). *It's not your fault, Koko bear*. Illus. Jane Prince. Book Peddles.
- Masurel, C. (2003). *Two houses*. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. Candlewick Press.
- McCormick, W. (2002). *Daddy, will you miss me?* Illus. Jennifer Eachus. Aladdin.
- Ransom, J. F. (2000). *I don't want to talk about it*. Illus. Kathryn Kunz Finney. Magination Press.
- Spinelli, E. (2004). *While you are away*. Illus. Renee Graef. Hyperion.
- Tompert, A. (1992). *Will you come back for me?* Illus. Robin Kramer. Albert Whitman & Company.
- Weninger, B. (1995). *Good-bye daddy*. Illus. Alan Marks. Michael Neugebauer Books.
- Woodson, J. (2002). *Visiting day*. Illus. James Ransome. Scholastic.
- Woodson, J. (2002). *Our Gracie aunt*. Illus. Jon J. Muth. Jump-at-the-Sun.
- Woodson, J. (2004). *Coming on home soon*. Illus. E. B. Lewis. Putnam Juvenile Books.

Loss of Loved Ones

- Barron, T. (2000). *Where is grandpa?* Illus. Chris Soenpiet. Philomel.
- Fifth Grade Students of Smith Road Elementary School in Temperance, Michigan. (2000). *Angel in blue (The story of Ashley Martin)*. Illus. By the authors. Scholastic.
- Hermes, P. (1982). *You shouldn't have to say good-bye*. Illus. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Jukes, M. (1985). *Blackberries in the dark*. Illus. Thomas B. Allen. Random House, Inc.
- Mathis, S. B. (1986). *The hundred penny box*. Illus. Leo & Diane Dillon. Puffin Books.
- Nodar, C. S. (1992). *Abuelita's paradise*. Illus. Diane Paterson. Albert Whitman & Company.
- Puttock, S. (2001). *A story for hippo: A book about loss*. Illus. A. Bartlett. Scholastic.
- Schweibert, P., & Deklyen, C. (2001). *Tear soup: A recipe for healing after loss*. Illus. Taylor Bills. Grief Watch.
- Smith, P. (2003). *Janna and the kings*. Illus. Aaron Boyd. Lee & Low Books.
- Woodson, J. (2000). *Sweet, sweet memory*. Illus. Floyd Cooper. Jump-at-the-Sun.

Resources to Assist with Attachment, Separation, and Loss Issues

- Black, C. (1997). *My dad loves me, my dad has a disease—A child's view: Living with addiction*. 3rd ed. Mac Publishing.
- Brown, L., & Brown, M. (1996). *When dinosaurs die: A guide to understanding death*. Illus. By the authors. Marc Brown.
- Brown, M. (1998). *Dinosaurs divorce: A guide for changing families*. Illus. Laurene Krasny Brown. Little, Brown, and Company.
- Bryant-Mole, K. (1999). *Talking about death*. Raintree/Steck Vaughn.
- Dougy Center (Eds.). (1999). *35 ways to help a grieving child*. The Dougy Center for Grieving Child.
- Franklin, N. B. (Ed.). (1995). *Children, families, and HIV/AIDS: Psychological and therapeutic issues*. Guilford Press.
- Gardner, R. A. (1975). *The talking, feeling, and doing game*. Childsworld/Childsplay.
- Grollman, E. A. (1996). *Bereaved children and teens: A support guide for parents and professionals*. Beacon Press.
- Hall, L., & Cohn, L. (1988). *Dear kids of alcoholics*. Illus. Rosemary E. Lingenfelter. Gurze Books.
- Heegard, M. (1988). *When someone very special dies children can learn to cope with grief*. To be illustrated by Children. Woodland Press.
- Hickman, W. M. (1990). *When Andy's father went to prison*. Illus. Larry Raymond. Albert Whitman & Company.
- Lansky, V. (2000). *Vicki Lansky's divorce book for parents*. Book Peddlers.
- Lowry, D. (2001). *What can I do? A book for children of divorce*. Illus. Bonnie J. Matthews. Magination Press.
- Moe, J., & Pohlman, D. (1989). *Kid's power: Healing games for children of alcoholics*. ImaginWorks.
- Mundy, M. (1998). *Sad isn't bad: A good-grief guide book for kids dealing with loss*. Illus. R. W. Alley. Abbey Press.
- Sederman, M., & Epstein, S. (2002). *The magic box: When parents can't be there to tuck you in*. Illus. Karen Stormer Brooks. Magination Press.
- Silverman, J. (1999). *Help me say goodbye: Activities for helping kids cope when a special person dies*. Illus. by the author. Fairview Press.
- Typpo, H. M., & Hastings, M. J. (1994). *An elephant in the living room: A leader's guide for helping children of alcoholics*. Hazeldon.
- Yaffe, M. R., & Haade, F. L. (2000). *When a parent goes to jail: A comprehensive guide for counseling children of incarcerated parents*. Illus. Barbara S. Moody. Rayve Productions.

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