
Effects of Separation and Loss on Children's Development

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It is only within the context of the adult-child relationship that children accomplish the various developmental tasks related to psychological maturation. Separation from or loss of parents due to death, divorce, incarceration or removal to foster care 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 parental separation/loss will vary from child to child and family to family, the negative impact this has can be minimized if the child can live in an environment that is supportive to the grieving process and able to offer an explanation and understanding of his life events. Unfortunately, many, many children who have suffered this trauma 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.

Separation and Loss During the First Year of Life

Short term effects:

- Regression in terms of dependency needs.
- Undermining of the child's sense of security and trust that adults will be available.
- With the changes in daily routine that accompany changes in caregivers, there will be interruption in the acquisition of sequencing and basic cause and effect.

How to Minimize the Effects of the Loss:

- The parents/caregivers 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?"
- 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 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, secondary to problems with cause and effect, may occur although they may not become evident until grades 4 – 6.

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Separation and Loss During the Toddler Years (Ages 1 – 3)

Short term effects:

- The balance between age appropriate dependency and independency will be disrupted.
- Interference with identity – with changes in family position, the child's ego development may be disrupted.
- The child's awareness of both internal and external stimuli may be dulled and there will likely be regression in terms of the most recently acquired skills.
- The normal acquisition of language may be temporarily interrupted with parental loss, especially if that parent was the child's "interpreter."

How To Minimize the Effects of the Loss:

- Careful attention must be paid to meeting the child's dependency needs while at the same time helping him feel more adequate and independent on his own terms.
- If regression to earlier levels of functioning is allowed, the toddler will usually acquire the skills within a few months time.
- If undue pressure is put on the child to continue to function at his highest levels, or to attain new skills without time for transition or reattachment, long range problems are more likely.

Possible Long Range Effects of the Loss:

There is the possibility 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 an increased incidence 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 aggressive impulses.

Separation and Loss During the Preschool Years (Ages 3 - 6)

Short term effects:

- The child's egocentric magical thinking can cause him to misunderstand the causes of the separation and loss. It is important that adults work hard to identify the child's personal magical thinking about the loss. Does he think he caused the loss? Does he think he can do something to reverse it?
- The child may display indiscriminate attachment to adults and have conflicting feelings about the "good" and "bad" traits in himself and others.

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How To Minimize the Effects of the Loss:

- Identifying, clarifying, and remedying the magical thinking (that the child is to blame) is particularly important.
- Offering the child age-appropriate explanations for the separation and loss and continuing to urge parents/caretakers to repeatedly and consistently confirm the child's place in the family.
- Adequate opportunities for play must be provided; at this age all psychological issues, including grieving, are resolved primarily through play.

Possible Long Range Effects of the Loss:

Because of the combination of magical thinking and the "good vs. bad" struggle, the preschooler may perceive himself as so "bad" that he caused the loss. Secondary to the combined effects of the magical thinking and the Oedipal conflict, the child may think the loss was related to his wanting the parent of the opposite sex all to himself. This may have long term ramifications in terms of sexual identify issues. This can be amplified in cases of sexual abuse. The magical thinking and the "big vs. little" struggle may lead the child to attribute the loss to his either being too "big" or too "little" in his family.

Separation and Loss During the Grade School Years

Short term effects:

- As the grade schooler goes through the grieving process, he will have less energy available for the usual tasks of this age.
- School-age children become acutely aware of differences between themselves and their peers and these may lead to problem behaviors with peers.

How To Minimize the Effects of the Loss:

- Provide the child with opportunities to focus on grieving so that at other times he can focus on the tasks at hand, whether they are academic or peer related.
- Help the child expand his thinking and understanding about losses with factual information.
- Disengaging work is a priority at this age. The child needs to gain permission to let go of old attachments and form new ones.
- Help the child and the family develop a "cover story."

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 may have long-term problems in either or both of these areas. There may be problems with the internalization of conscience.

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Separation and Loss During the Adolescence

Short term effects:

- In order to successfully complete the tasks of psychological separation the adolescent needs to come up against and oppose parent figures who are nonetheless consistently available and caring. Parent separation and loss will disrupt these tasks.
- Control issues will continue to impact the adolescent's behaviors, especially if he feels a large part of the decisions about his life are out of his control.

How To Minimize the Effects of the Loss:

- Adolescents need to feel they have increasing control over their own lives. Especially at times of separation and loss, adults must provide them with as many opportunities as possible to be in control of other aspects of their lives.
- They need to be an integral part of the decision making for their future.
- Adolescents need assistance in grieving the loss of early relationships in their lives. They need as much information as is available about their early history so that they can go on to identify formation and develop a sense of being worthwhile.
- Teens need help in deciding how much of their history to reveal to friends and intimates.

Possible Long Range Effects of the Loss:

If the adolescent believes he has lost all control over his life, he is likely to become either suicidal or to act out in a variety of antisocial ways.