Child and Adolescent Bereavement

Helen Rosen

ABSTRACT: Clinical social workers in non-medical settings often are presented with child and adolescent clients who are bereaved, or with adults who experienced the loss of a significant other in childhood or adolescence. This article attempts to pull together the most relevant and significant issues relating to loss in childhood and adolescence. It provides an overview of the theoretical and treatment issues that inform practice with clients who have sustained a significant loss during the pre-adult years. Case material provides an illustration of some of the issues as they appear in clinical practice.

It is common experience in almost any setting to encounter either children and/or adolescents who have sustained a significant loss, or to be working with adults who experienced a significant bereavement during their pre-adult years. There is today a diverse body of knowledge pertaining to child and adolescent bereavement that has developed as a result of research and clinical observation having to do with a range of bereavement and other closely related experiences (i.e. chronic illness). Investigations into the effects of parental (Ragan and McGlashan, 1986; Furman, 1986; Rando, 1986) and sibling loss (Pollock, 1982; Mufson, 1985; Rosen, 1986), the development of a child’s understanding of death (Bluebond-Langner, 1977; Lonetto, 1980; Koocher, 1981), the impact of chronic illness on families (Lavigne and Ryan, 1979; Feeman and Hagen, 1990; Bendor, 1990), the impact of loss on the mastery of developmental tasks (Nagera, 1970; Balk, 1983), the impact of a “protective” stance towards dying children (Vernick and Karon, 1965; Spinetta, 1974; Bluebond-Langer, 1978), and more have all contributed to an understanding of child and adolescent bereavement that provides the clinician with a conceptual
foundation for intervention. This paper raises six important issues pertaining to child and adolescent loss and bereavement.

**Overview of Factors Influencing Loss in Children and Adolescents**

While there are numerous factors that can play a role in determining a child or adolescent’s reaction to loss, there are six factors I have isolated as having a particular bearing on grief reactions in this age group. The six factors (not presented in order of importance) consist of the relationship of the child to the deceased and the availability of a substitute object, how the surviving family members respond to the loss, the developmental level of the child, the child’s understanding of death, ambivalence, and how children mourn. In contrast to the early theories which strongly suggested that loss and separation in childhood (especially from mother) were invariably pathogenic, current research stresses the importance of context and individual styles of coping in determining the effects of loss on children (Wolkind and Rutter, 1985). For example, Bowlby (1980), Furman (1988) and others believe that external factors, in particular the reactions of family members to the loss, play an especially prominent role in children’s grief reactions. When mourning fails, a range of pathological outcomes may ensue, including a persistence of anxiety, hopes of reunion with the deceased, guilt, aggression, etc. (Bowlby, 1980). Whether a child’s response to loss results in a “healthy” or “pathological” outcome will depend in large part upon the interaction of the following six factors and upon the weight of the child’s experience being favorable to mourning. Essential to understanding these factors is an awareness of the process and time sequence necessary for mourning, though current findings suggest that clearcut stages of mourning are not necessarily observed (Osterweis et al, 1984). There is considerable individual variation in the style and pace with which individuals grieve, although most authors tend to concur that the one year marker is significant for many who have sustained a loss.

**Relationship to the Deceased and Availability of Substitute Objects**

First, of course, *who* it is that has died, and the role that he or she has played in the child’s life, is an important factor in loss. Generally, the death of a parent, especially for the young child, creates fears of *survival* that are less intense or of a different nature in other kinds of