The Grieving Child: Manifest and Hidden Losses in Childhood and Adolescence

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ABSTRACT: The loss of parents through abandonment has specific traumatic features. This paper discusses the variety of losses children and adolescents may experience and the psychological implications and manifestations in relation to the loss. Specific reactions of children and suggestions for therapeutic prevention through psychotherapy are discussed.

According to Anthony (1976) temporary and permanent parent loss among those under the age of 17, through divorce, foster care placement, hospitalization, residential mobility, military service, deviant life styles, and death, has accelerated so fast that it is becoming statistically normal to undergo loss during childhood or adolescence. Wessel (1983, p. 125) reports that five percent of American children lose a parent through death before they reach the age of 18. Nationwide, the overwhelmed, crisis-ridden foster-care system has attempted permanency planning and less expensive services, by pursuit of family unity, posing questions about family preservation, and adequate protection of children in their homes. To avoid parent loss, and lengthy, often unsupervised placements, workers are keeping children in at-risk situations, as the child welfare system is increasingly besieged by the most recent demands created by the AIDS crisis, the virtual epidemic of cancer, substance abuse, and, that of urban violence, whereby loss extends beyond parents to siblings, friends and relatives murdered, and/or caught in the cross-fire of drug and urban warfare. Additionally, there are loss phenomena as consequences of a homeless

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deinstitutionalized population and the proliferation of adolescent gangs who prey on each other and random adults and children. It is clear that loss is pervasive across racial, ethnic and class lines, and bereaved and grieving children are part of every segment of society.

Much has been written about the trauma experienced by a child over a parent’s death, or, in response to divorce. Less has been researched and documented regarding parents’ abandonment, and it’s specific traumatic features. The recent crisis posed by cancer, substance abuse, AIDS and urban violence is just beginning to be examined in depth, as professionals struggle to meet the challenges posed in the here and now.

Vulnerability to Loss

If we are to examine the complex idea of vulnerability to loss and the risks open to the child as the result of it, we must be careful not to consider the concept piecemeal—in terms of a rejecting environment, or a congenital activity type, or an inclination toward a particular defense mechanism, or an especial object-orientation—yet, there are certain “organismic characteristics” or constitutional differences that do show themselves at the beginning of life in quietness, in a lack of activity, in an absence of cuddliness, in the degree of dependence on the mother, in sensitivity to her affects in terms of what Kris used to call an affective motor continuum, or in terms of particular shocking life experiences. We really do not know what happens in infants and children except by a phenomenological inference, but even this degree of inexactitude appears to lead us to the idea of a dispositional characteristic toward a loss-intolerance, an inability to remain alone for any length of time without a sustaining environment; these impressionistic children, abreact easily and disrupt under the influence of even minor environmental influences.

The vulnerable children that I have seen are thin-skinned psychologically and often sensitively-skinned physiologically. They tend to be hyper-reactive in antithesis to their inactivity and fret and cry over the least disturbance of routine or discomfort. As the children cry, the mothers begin to find the crying increasingly unbearable. These vulnerable children almost seem to develop “enemies,” within the first years of life. These “enemies” are generally people with whom the mother is uncomfortable. The stranger reaction is always intense. And even changes in mother’s hairstyle and makeup are