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 and 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.
Therefore, to ameliorate concerns that deals with the passing of a children learning to betrayal, variety of developmentally appropriate activities help children work playground whispers about his father’s “mysterious death” and the parents’ divorce. Emotionally a preschooler may be whiney tearful, safety. Physically, a first grader formerly known as a finicky Early childhood educators must be aware of the comprehensive Implications for educational practices experience separations due to divorce, alcoholism or substance abuse, life threatening illnesses, and incarceration.

**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 and 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 and 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 and 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 whiny 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 (Jaonga, 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

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- 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 below can help children resolve issues with loved ones related to attachment, separation, and loss.

### Attachment to loved ones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Illustrator</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curtis, J. L. (1996)</td>
<td><em>Tell me again about the night I was born</em></td>
<td>Cornell, Laura</td>
<td>Harpertrophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steptoe, J. (2005)</td>
<td><em>Sweet, sweet baby!</em></td>
<td>By the author</td>
<td>Cartwheel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Separation from loved ones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Illustrator</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spinelli, E. (2004)</td>
<td><em>While you are away</em></td>
<td>Graef, Renee</td>
<td>Hyperion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodson, J. (2002)</td>
<td><em>Visiting day</em></td>
<td>Ransome, James</td>
<td>Scholastic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Loss of loved ones


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.


Resources to assist with attachment, separation, and loss issues


Dougy Center (Eds.). (1999). *35 ways to help a grieving child.* The Dougy Center for Grieving Child.


References


But, for most children, separation means suddenly dealing with change and experience unexpected losses. Unfortunately, families are under greater financial strain when there are two households. Mothers may need to go to work or work longer hours to help pay the bills. The family home may have to be sold to divide the property as a joint asset. Reclaiming Children and Youth: The Journal of Strength-based Interventions, v16 n3 p41-45 Fall 2007. 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.
A significant separation or loss definitely is the child’s business and needs to be explained as thoroughly as possible to help avoid serious repercussions later. If the questions are too personal to handle or if the separation hinges on sexual or financial matters inappropriate for discussion with children, you might say, “That’s an OK question, but I feel private about the answer, and I really don’t want to talk about it.” What can I do to make the adjustment easier? Helping Children Say Good-bye. Unfortunately in these days of fast food and instant gratification, many adults as well as children have had little experience with tolerating discomfort patiently. Children should be reassured that they will feel better eventually, although they may not believe it.