

Helping Grieving Children Maintain a Connection with their Deceased Parent

In her article “Children’s Construction of their Dead Parent”, Phyllis R. Silverman describes the results of two studies which looked at the ways in which children coped with the death of a parent. The first study, sponsored by Harvard Medical School’s Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital by Dr Silverman and J. William Worden (1992) looked at grief reactions of children residing in the greater Boston area. Their sample, which was comprised of children aged 6-17, was followed over a two year period after the death of a parent. To gain a cross cultural perspective, Silverman also ran a study at Haifa University in Israel.

In both studies it was demonstrated that children did maintain relationships with their dead parent rather than letting go. They found that coping does not involve resolution or closure but rather a process of adaptation and change. It is this normal process of accommodation that allows the child to go on living after the death of a parent.

They identified two aspects to the process:

1. the children learn to remember
2. they find ways to maintain a connection

Children have a set of memories, feelings and behaviors that bring them closer to their deceased parent. Silverman and Steven Nickman call these activities “constructions”.

As the child matures and the intensity of the grief lessens, the constructions change.

They identified 5 types of activities that enable children to maintain a connection or bond with the parent that died.

1. **Locating the deceased-**

- a. Most children in the studies locate the deceased either in heaven or in their grave.
- b. Children were also found to endow the deceased with concrete attributes such as the ability to “see, hear, or move”.
- c. Many differentiate between the body which has stopped working and the soul which may still possess these attributes.

*Asking the children to draw or write “where their parent is now” aids them in this process.

May also ask: what can their parent do there???*

2. **Experiencing the deceased-**

- a. Most children in the study felt “watched”. Only those who were concerned that they were being “bad” or that their dead parent would disapprove of their actions found this to be scary.
- b. Children also described feeling the presence of the parent when a phenomenon like a blinking light, a loud noise or a gust of wind occurred.
- c. Dreams – mostly experienced as comforting even though they awoke to find it was “just a dream”. The dream helped them to feel that their parent was still with them.

Asking “who feels that their parent is still with them, and when does that happen” aids them in this process. Drawing and discussion of dreams is beneficial.

3. **Reaching Out**

- a. By visiting the cemetery or talking to the deceased.
- b. Some children reported that they received answers from their parent.

*Asking “where do you go to feel close to your parent that died; have you been back to the cemetery or scattering site; or when do you talk to your parent” assists with this activity. May also ask: “what would your parent say about that ___ if they were alive or can you still hear your parents voice and what do they say to you”

4. Waking Memories

- a. Thought regularly about the parent or maintained a belief that the parent might not really be dead.

The construction is thought to “build upon” the introject of the parent which existed prior to the death.

Ask *When you think about your parent is there a specific memory/image that

comes to mind*

5. Linking Objects-

- a. term coined by Volkan (1981) to describe an object that keeps the mourner living in the past (viewed in a negative light)
- b. Winnicott’s concept of transitional object – an object that connects one realm of experience with another –provides comfort during the initial period of mourning.
- c. Most kids were found to have an object but over time its importance lessens, and it become more of a keepsake (Worden) or is given up completely.

Invite group to bring in something special to share that reminds them of their parent that died. Where to they keep it etc.

Parents contribute to the formation of a continuing inner representation by:

- Bringing parent up during family time ex. “your Dad liked that movie too”
- Giving children linking objects instead of giving away all the belongings of the deceased
- Helping children find the language to express feelings.

Based on: “Children’s Construction of their Dead Parents” by Silverman, Phyllis and Nickman, Steven. Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief (1996)

Edited by Klass, Dennis, Silverman, Phyllis, and Nickman, Steven. Taylor & Francis.

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