

Without You

Children
and Young People
Growing Up with
Loss and its Effects

Tamar Granot



Without You

of related interest

**Talking with Children and Young People about Death and Dying
A Workbook**

Mary Turner, illustrated by Bob Thomas

ISBN 1 85302 563 1

Understanding Children's Experiences of Parental Bereavement

John Holland

ISBN 1 84310 016 9

The Forgotten Mourners

Guidelines for Working with Bereaved Children, Second Edition

Susan C. Smith

ISBN 1 85302 758 8

Helping Children to Manage Loss

Positive Strategies for Renewal and Growth

Brenda Mallon

ISBN 1 85302 605 0

Finding a Way Through When Someone Close has Died

What it Feels Like and What You Can Do to Help Yourself

A Workbook by Young People for Young People

Pat Mood and Lesley Whittaker

ISBN 1 85302 920 3

A Teacher's Handbook of Death

Maggie Jackson and Jim Cowell

ISBN 1 84310 015 0

Someone Very Important Has Just Died

**Immediate Help for People Caring for Children of All Ages at the Time
of a Close Bereavement**

Mary Turner, illustrated by Elaine Bailey

ISBN 1 84310 295 1

The Grief Game

Yvonne Searle and Isabelle Streng

ISBN 1 85302 333 7

Without You

Children and Young People Growing Up
with Loss and its Effects

Tamar Granot



Jessica Kingsley Publishers
London and Philadelphia

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form (including photocopying or storing it in any medium by electronic means and whether or not transiently or incidentally to some other use of this publication) without the written permission of the copyright owner except in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 or under the terms of a licence issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London, England W1T 4LP. Applications for the copyright owner's written permission to reproduce any part of this publication should be addressed to the publisher.
Warning: The doing of an unauthorised act in relation to a copyright work may result in both a civil claim for damages and criminal prosecution.

The right of Tamar Granot to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Israel in 2000 by Ministry of Defence Publishing

This edition published in 2005
by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
116 Pentonville Road
London N1 9JB, UK
and
400 Market Street, Suite 400
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

www.jkp.com

Copyright © Tamar Granot 2005

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Granot, Tamar.
[Bil'adekha. English]
Without you : children and young people growing up with loss and its effects / Tamar Granot.— 1st American pbk. ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-84310-297-8 (pbk.)
1. Loss (Psychology) in children. 2. Children and death. 3. Bereavement in children. 4. Grief in children. I. Title.
BF723.L68G7313 2005
155.9'3'0835—dc22

2004020571

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978 1 84310 297 7
ISBN-10: 1 84310 297 8
ISBN pdf eBook: 1 84642 017 2

Printed and Bound in Great Britain by
Athenaeum Press, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear

Contents

Introduction	7
<i>What this book is about</i>	7
<i>Why this book was written</i>	15
<i>Being aware of your own experiences that you bring to the book as a reader</i>	16
1 The Bereavement of Children	25
<i>Children's perception of loss</i>	25
<i>Influence of the socio-cultural environment on children's understanding of death and loss</i>	37
<i>Stages of grieving</i>	38
<i>How children grieve</i>	40
2 Reactions to Loss According to the Child's Developmental Stage	53
<i>Level of emotional and cognitive development</i>	54
<i>Separation, attachment, and loss</i>	57
<i>Responses to loss by age group</i>	62
<i>Early childhood (birth to 3 years)</i>	63
<i>The Oedipal stage (age 5 to 7)</i>	69
<i>The latency period (age 7 to 11)</i>	75
<i>Adolescence (age 12 to 18)</i>	77
<i>Early adulthood (age 18 to 30)</i>	97
<i>Summary: The intrapsychic experience of loss and its effects on personality development and pathology</i>	103
3 Additional Variables Affecting the Child's Response	109
<i>Circumstances of loss</i>	109
<i>Period of uncertainty</i>	110
<i>Foreseeable death as compared to sudden death</i>	116
<i>Suicide</i>	118
<i>Murder</i>	121
<i>Divorce</i>	122
<i>Rejection and abandonment</i>	127
<i>Previous and cumulative losses</i>	133
<i>Loss of two parents</i>	135
<i>Gender of the absent parent and the child</i>	137
<i>The relationship prior to the loss</i>	143
<i>Influence of cultural and socio-economic factors</i>	145

4	The Remaining Parent and the Family System	149
	<i>How the parent copes with the loss</i>	150
	<i>Personality of the parent and how it affects coping: implications for the child</i>	157
	<i>Coping with loss within the family</i>	162
	<i>Aspects of the family system that influence coping with loss</i>	172
	<i>Bereaved siblings</i>	180
	<i>New beginnings and other changes in life</i>	193
5	A Few More Things That One Should Know	203
	<i>Dos</i>	203
	<i>Don'ts</i>	206
	<i>A few myths about children</i>	208
	<i>How to respond: some practical suggestions</i>	209
	<i>Good signs</i>	214
	<i>Warning signs</i>	215
	<i>Psychological treatment</i>	216
	GLOSSARY	225
	RECOMMENDED READING	229
	INDEX	231

Introduction

What this book is about

Why do we need a book about the effects of loss on children?

Loss, death, and children are concepts that seem to be at odds with one another. Such things simply should not happen to children. When children suffer, we adults want to wrap them in our arms and protect them. There is also something that makes us want to distance ourselves so we don't have to meet their eyes. And what about them? For the most part, they want to get on with their lives – and be no different than other children. Yet they also want us to feel their pain. They want us intuitively to know when they need a hug from us, without having to ask.

Over the past few decades, society has exhibited a heightened consciousness and comprehension of themes related to death and loss: the effects of loss, responses to it, and factors that influence these processes. This book focuses on children who have experienced loss. It seeks to deepen the understanding of the specific effects of loss on children.

Significant losses

The most significant loss of all for a child, and the one on which this book will concentrate, is the *loss of a parent*. Children can experience loss of a parent from a variety of circumstances: most traumatic of all is the *death* of a parent – from disease, car accident, military operation, act of terrorism, suicide, or murder. There are times that loss of a parent can result from the parents' *divorce* and the pulling away by one of the parents from the rest of the family. A child can experience loss of a parent when the parent ceases to function as such, as in the case of *addiction* to alcohol or drugs, an *emotionally debilitating condition*, emotional *rejection*, or *abandonment* – physical or

mental – of the child for whatever reason. A child may also experience loss as a result of *long-term separation* from a parent who is far from home due to extended *travel*, *imprisonment*, or *hospitalization*. In certain cases, the loss of grandparents, aunts, or uncles who had filled a parental role may also constitute a traumatic experience of loss for a child.

In addition to the painful experience that results from the absence of a beloved and significant figure, such a loss also signifies a threat to the child's very being and to the continuity of his life and safety. Losing a parent means losing the figure who plays a critical role in the growing process, someone the child needs and relies upon. For the child, loss of a parent may adversely affect or undermine the basic support system he requires. It may trigger a loss of confidence – in life, in people, in the future, and in himself. It may also bring about dislocation of the bonds of love and human contact that the child needs for his continued growth and development.

There are other circumstances in which children may experience the trauma of loss. Death of a sibling constitutes a severe, traumatic loss, and I have devoted a special chapter to it. Other life experiences that may involve an acute sense of loss include *migration*, *disease*, and *disability*. Although the factors underlying the sense of loss in these instances are not the same as when a child loses a parent, the foundation of the child's existence is undermined nevertheless. These circumstances also disrupt the continuum of the child's life, adversely affecting his confidence in his very being, and have a powerful effect on his emotional state and the development of his personality. Their influences are deep, long term, and widespread into the child's life.

Effects of loss on children

For adults, the experience of loss draws its powerfulness from the past, because the adult is strongly aware of the significant role the missing person had in his life up to the time of the loss. For children, the focus is on the present and on the future. The child is very aware of what he misses now and very perturbed about how his life will continue without the missing person. Therefore, the loss experience affects the child along two planes. One has to do with the pain felt over an individual who had been a part of his life and who is no longer there; the other concerns the difficul-

ties experienced in the present and the fears and anxieties of the future. These fears are exacerbated by a sense of dependency and detachment. The child senses that he has become different in some way, and is anxious about how he will survive “on his own” from now on.

Adults usually externalize their emotions and are able to express grief and other reactions to loss. They are cognizant of the range of intense effects that loss can have on all areas of their lives, and sometimes even “devote themselves” to these effects, especially during the initial years after the event. They sometimes make significant changes in their lifestyle and behavior in the wake of the loss.

Children are almost the exact opposite. They want to resume their normal life as soon as possible, and continue to be like all the other children. Their life instinct pushes them ahead, and more often than not they prefer to distance themselves from feelings associated with the loss; they try not to give in to these feelings, and do their utmost not to let them change their lives. Furthermore, in accordance with their specific age and stage of development, children may have a limited understanding of the loss and its implications. In many instances, their behavior can deceive people around them. Since they do not usually mourn the way adults do, and since they are usually able to quickly resume functioning as they did prior to the loss, adults gain the false impression that the child has either “forgotten,” “gotten used,” or “doesn’t care.” But the opposite is the case: although the child does not always externalize his mourning, he carries a heavy emotional burden throughout his childhood. His emotions are for the most part shrouded from the eyes of the world and even from the people closest to him. The child himself is often unaware of all his emotions and feelings, and does not know how to express them. At times, he lacks the sense of support that would facilitate the expression of these feelings.

Effects on the child’s internal world and emotional development

Loss “colors” the child’s internal world, his behavior, and even the development of his personality. The loss leaves a deep impression and will affect the way he sees and experiences the world from now on, as well as the choices and direction he will take in his life. A child who has experienced loss loses the naive trust that children have in a safe, cheerful world, in

which happy dreams and fantasies come true. His world becomes more realistic, fraught with an abiding threat of separation and pain. The effects of loss on children are profound and long term, and the process of coping with the loss continues throughout their entire early life and development. The loss is “processed” by the child throughout his childhood. He returns to it on a recurrent basis, understanding it in accordance with his developing cognitive and emotional abilities, responding to it in accordance with his development and his changing needs. Loss takes on a new “face” in accordance with changes in the child’s life. The diverse stages of his cognitive, emotional, and personality development will affect his response to the loss. Each new stage of development leads to a renewed encounter with the subject and a shift in how he processes it. The younger the child is at the time of the loss, the more vulnerable he is, as he lacks the emotional, cognitive, and mental tools to cope with such a difficult experience. As he matures, he will be able to cope with it differently, aided by the new tools at his disposal.

Effects of traumatic loss on normative developmental separation and loss

By definition, childhood is a period of growth and development. Numerous psychodynamic theories stress the importance that separation processes play in proper development and growth. Normative developmental separation and loss play an important role in formulating the child’s personality as he moves toward independence and adulthood. Conversely, when the child undergoes a traumatic separation during his childhood, it constitutes a burden that is liable to hamper performance of normative separation tasks and separation processes. The harsh memories and emotions related to his traumatic loss will probably continue to be manifested whenever the child has to cope with separation situations, putting an extra burden on the normative developmental tasks.

This book describes the reciprocal, interrelated effects that implications of the loss can have on the child’s development. The unique effects of loss at different age levels will be explained, the importance and influence of the age at which the loss occurred will be elucidated, and a differentiation will be made between short-term and long-term effects of the loss.

Adults who have experienced loss when they were children provide us with an opportunity to study the long-term effects of loss during child-

hood. Works of art, biographies, and other personal life stories and creations may shed light on the experiences of persons who suffered traumatic losses as children. They became accomplished individuals whose experiences are reflected through their creative works or accomplishments. Throughout his life, the adult continues to carry the hurt child with him. Sometimes he has a difficult time accepting the loss and living with it in peace even in later years. Still, some of these adults claim that it was this intense experience that imbued them with the added sensitivity and unique qualities that shaped the course of their development and adult life.

The need to cope with the loss and its consequences gives the child an opportunity to be strengthened and to mature early. It introduces him to emotional worlds and life-and-death issues that require advanced coping mechanisms. It develops within him a sensitivity for others. It teaches him the complexities of life. To a certain extent, anyone who experienced loss in his childhood feels “different.” Because he was exposed to a complex emotional world, he often becomes more vulnerable. He is also usually left with increased sensitivity, understanding, and empathy for other people and their emotional anguish.

Some individuals become conscious of the effects of the loss on them only midway through adulthood. At times, this belated awareness is sparked by a change in their lives, especially in the wake of a crisis during adulthood. Seemingly “trivial” issues such as vacillation over career choices, difficulties in maintaining relationships, and problems with their own children may spark a sudden awareness of the connection between present-day behavior and lifestyle and the trauma they underwent as children.

Research studies have investigated the relationship between the loss of a parent during childhood and the emotional problems and emotional pathology that are manifested during later childhood and even adulthood. While the results do not pinpoint a clear connection to pathologies, there can be no doubt that losing a parent at an early age entails added difficulties during later stages of life. This is especially true when the remaining parent raises the child in an unsatisfactory manner. The emotional damage that relates to a traumatic loss in childhood may be expressed through depression, overly rigid and inappropriate defense mechanisms, or other personality disorders.

External factors

Without a doubt, the most important external influence on the emotional state of the child and on how he copes with his loss is the parent or adult who raises him. The physical and emotional support he provides to the child constitutes the most critical factor in the child's ability to cope with the loss and resume normal life and development. The loss of a parent leaves the child feeling alone and even abandoned. This sense is intensified if and when the remaining parent is wrapped up in his own mourning and is not entirely available to the child. A considerable portion of this book is devoted to understanding the behavior and influences of the remaining parent and of the family, which are critical to the child's coping and readjustment process.

Additional external factors that influence the child's response may include the specific circumstances in which the loss occurred – sudden death as opposed to an anticipated death that was prefaced by a waiting period, suicide, murder, parental abandonment, or certain instances of divorce.

The surrounding environment in which the child grows, the community with its social, cultural, and psychological characteristics, has significant influence on the coping process of the child and therefore must be taken into consideration.

Explaining the effects of loss is a challenging, difficult task, since each life story is different, and reflects a unique combination of factors related to the individual's life and personality. Explaining the effects of loss on children is a much more complicated task because of the enormous changes that take place in the child's life as he grows. The developmental route of the child combines with the effects of the loss, generating a singular, unique combination. As already noted, the parent who continues to raise the child has a dominant effect on the child's ability to cope and on his continued growth. Adding these factors makes it even more difficult to predict the effects of the loss on the child. Nevertheless, we will attempt to describe the vast number of factors that may influence the child, and the possible combinations that may result. By necessity, we will engage in generalizations, which must always be examined against the context of each child's

individual reality. A proper understanding of each child must be based first and foremost on closely listening to his personal life story.

Normal, predictable reactions

This book is not about emotionally pathological or behaviorally aberrant children. It is about children who have lived through traumatic loss; it describes their normal, predictable reactions. For the most part, they do not behave significantly different from other “ordinary” children; they often conceal their inner experiences, to the extent that one cannot even tell they are affected by the loss. They are usually extremely “good” children, easy for the parent who raises them and the other adults in their environment. Often, they grow up to be adults who make sensitive positive contributions to their families, friends, and community. Yet it is the wish of this book to emphasize that children who have experienced traumatic loss are coping with a phenomenon that places very unique demands on them. This is the underlying theme of this book.

A significant number of research studies of children who were subjected to traumatic loss concentrated on children who were being treated for emotional problems. Much too little research and empirical documentation exists about the “silent majority,” children who suffered a traumatic loss, but were not in the care of psychologists and psychiatrists. This book describes the world of these children.

Because most children who have experienced traumatic loss do not vent their emotions through abnormal behavior, many adults may fail to acknowledge their special needs, believing that they “don’t understand,” or that they “forget” or “don’t care.” Many adults think they can hide what happened from their children, or at least postpone telling them the full truth. They prefer to believe that “death and loss are not a matter for children.” We will make it clear to what extent these matters are indeed on the child’s mind, and the extent to which the adult must take an interest in what the child is going through, and help him through it.

Death and separation are hard on adults, and even harder for children. Some parents prefer to overlook warning signs that signal when the child is experiencing difficulties. The fear of discovering that the child “isn’t okay” induces them to disregard the signs and even suppress them. Adults deny and ignore them, until the child “screams” out the signs by way of

amplified, more noticeable symptoms. It is vital to understand what the child is going through and be sensitive to the child's experience, so as to offer the child appropriate aid when he needs it. At such times, adults can have significant and even critical influence. They can help a great deal, but if they are not sensitive and available to the child they can also cause damage and harm, and exacerbate the situation.

Role of the adult

The child has developmental "tasks" into which he will entwine the unique coping demands related to the loss. Adults have the "task" of assisting the child along this route. This book is meant to guide the adult on this "journey" alongside the child who has experienced loss. A glance at the attitudes of adults toward children who have experienced loss reveals how difficult the suffering of the children is for them. Many adults are afraid of the child's response. Many adults deny the fact that the child has a mourning process of his own, that he understands or is capable of understanding the real meaning of the loss. These attitudes stem from the fear of confronting the child's state of distress, and from the adults' own helplessness with these difficult situations, in which they too often lack the requisite strengths and solutions. The difficulties of adults are evident in many of the roles involving children – in the function of parents, in the behavior of teachers and the educational system, and even in the attitudes and functioning of therapeutic practitioners.

An adult who cannot "encounter" loss and deal with it in a mature, well-adjusted manner cannot encounter the child and his needs; he cannot and will not be "available" emotionally to the child. Emotional awareness and maturity of the adults is the key that allows them to be available to children in need. For this reason, I will begin this book with comments on the difficulties that we adults face in responding to the mourning of children and their reactions to loss. I believe that greater awareness of our own difficulties and defenses will pave the way to an "open" reading of the book; one that will later enhance the capacity to really be with the child, listen to him, and find the way to give him the support he needs.

Adults who experienced loss as children

The book also offers adults who experienced loss as children an opportunity to encounter their own experience and acknowledge the influence that the childhood loss had on their lives. Oftentimes, the effects of loss are buried deep in our psyches and personalities – so much so that we fail to recognize the connection between our feelings and behavior as adults and those childhood experiences. The encounter with them – and recognition of them – constitutes an additional opportunity for emotional processing. The better we are at identifying those experiences, the more we process them, and the better we control their effects on our lives.

Why this book was written

I have drawn most of my inspiration, and especially the motivation to write this book, from the personal and professional experience I acquired in the course of 25 years of work in the field, during which I became familiar with the life stories of numerous families – adults and children – who experienced loss, and shared thoughts and ideas with many other professionals working in this field.

This book was written for the sake of children. It is directed at adults – parents, teachers, advisers, and therapists, and anyone else who knows a child who requires understanding and a shoulder to lean on.

The book was also written for professionals in the therapeutic community, academic researchers, and instructors. Nevertheless, it avoids adopting an academic or theoretical approach, in the interest of making the subject matter accessible to all. The need to enhance the level of knowledge and understanding for the situation of the child who has experienced loss crosses all lines.

Theoretical backing

Theoretically speaking, the material presented relies on a paradigm compiled from fields of knowledge – theory and research – related to loss, separation, trauma, personality theories, psychodynamic theories, child development, and family-system theories. The amalgamation of all these sources of knowledge with experiences from the field has made it possible to illuminate this complex subject. Despite the complexity of the material,

I have made an effort to simplify things and portray them in a manner that does not require the reader to be familiar with the theories.

Appended to the book is a glossary of professional terms, for those readers who are unfamiliar with them. I have provided a list of recommended reading for those who wish to delve deeper into the subjects.

It is not an easy experience to read this book

It is sad to read about children living in a world filled with pain. It is upsetting to learn about the difficulties that stand in the way of their development, hardships they have to handle because of the loss they experienced. It is daunting to grasp the enormous responsibility placed on the shoulders of the adults who are called to help these children find their way. The “reward” will be in the better understanding the reader will gain of the child’s world, enhanced insight and sensitivity for the child’s difficulties, and the reinforced commitment to furnish the support and encouragement the child needs for a healthy upbringing, in spite of the loss that “ruined” his childhood.

Being aware of your own experiences that you bring to the book as a reader

Before we begin to understand the world of children and how they respond to loss, it would be worthwhile to explore a few aspects that may enhance the reader’s awareness of his own thoughts, emotions, and conceptions about the subject. This encounter will, it is hoped, encourage contemplation and reflection on one’s own experiences and reinforce the reader’s ability to approach these subjects. Self-awareness will help the reader to be more emotionally open and accessible to the difficult subjects presented in this book.

Experience proves that it is very difficult for adults to encounter the sad, hurting, confused, or angry child. This encounter is difficult for all adults, including parents and professionals. When things are hard for us adults to bear, we protect ourselves – and not only the children, as we imagine to be the case. We do it by means of rationalization: “the child doesn’t understand anyway”; or projection – “the child is afraid to hear about it” – even though it is really us who are afraid to hear about it or

afraid to hear the child. Adults may employ many different “techniques” so as to avoid the hard confrontation with the child. These of course not only limit the amount of help they can offer the child, but also warp their perception of what is really happening to the child.

These behaviors allow us to modify our responses to conform with our own needs, needs that do not necessarily correlate with those of the child. It is better that we enter the discussion of the world of children and their responses to loss only once we ourselves are emotionally accessible. For that to happen, we must be aware of the root cause of our own difficulties. The encounter with the child who has experienced loss draws adults into several sensitive realms.

This child is me

The encounter with the child evokes memories and fears from our own childhood, arouses memories of pain and loneliness when we were children. We are reminded of our own vulnerability as children, our feelings of helplessness or anger when adults disappointed us, did not understand our troubles, or did not support us when we needed them.

Although these are not always conscious memories, they have left their mark on us, and are “aroused” when we encounter a child in a similar situation. Within each of us, even the most mature adult, there is a hidden child – the child we once were. This “child” is threatened by the encounter with the hurt child because it identifies with him. The “child” within us always remains sensitive and vulnerable.

Every child is afraid of his mother dying, that something bad would happen to his father, that he could be left alone and defenseless. These fears remain inscribed in everyone’s emotional memory. Every adult remembers his need as a child for love, security, and care.

Defense mechanisms

Many adults, even if they have not lost a parent at a young age, have experienced “loss” through disappointment, separation, or emotional abandonment at the hands of their parents. These experiences have left painful emotional “scars” that are reopened by the suffering of the child. These scars are awakened when the adult encounters emotionally a child under-

going a similar experience. The sensitivities are liable to set various defense mechanisms into motion: the adult's strong identification with the child causes him to *project* his own sensitivities onto the child. Conversely, *denial* helps him "escape" his emotions and protect himself, but at the cost of disregarding the child's emotions.

It is likely that at such times the same defense mechanisms employed by the adult in the past will be reactivated. An adult who once coped by being strong will now try to cope in the same way, and will expect the child to be "strong." Someone who once escaped and denied his own pain will try to deny the pain suffered by the child. In these instances, the adult is incapable of fully relating to the child and helping him because he is too engrossed in himself. He translates the child's emotional needs to conform to his own world, and treats them through his own defense mechanisms. Therefore, when adults are preoccupied by their own sensitivities, it is hard for them to listen, and establish a real connection with the child, and the child is left alone, with a response that does not suit his needs.

It is therefore advisable, even before reading this book, that one should gain awareness of those childhood memories and experiences which pertain to loss and separation. Anyone who has experienced traumatic loss should recall the changes that occurred in his life as a result. Recognition of these memories – in spite of the emotional hardship – and recognition of the defenses deployed to deal with them, will help the adult to become more emotionally receptive to the child.

Do adults have to know everything?

Another burden is the belief that we adults have to know and understand everything; that we have to be able to explain the ways of the world. We feel that children expect us to guarantee a "righteous" world and we ourselves may feel that this is our job; that it is up to us to ensure a world in which children are not hurt.

It is often difficult for us to explain why a tragedy took place, why somebody left or abandoned his family, why doctors weren't able to save a patient, why somebody was run down by a car, or why there are wars. We adults have thoughts and reflections and questions, too. We also do not understand sometimes why painful things happen either and we surely want to "scream" against them. We too have a hard time coping with death,

and with all the questions that arise in connection with death – the meaning of life, questions about an afterlife, and many other thoughts and reflections.

It is difficult for us adults to admit that we too are angry, that we do not have the answers, and that we too are at times defenseless. The child grapples with questions, ruminations, and feelings similar to our own, and comes to us in the expectation of receiving answers. We, the adults, feel a need to supply them. It is difficult for us to deal with a situation in which we lack the answers and explanations, as well as the means to protect the child.

We “solve” this quandary in various ways. Sometimes we simply opt to disregard the child’s needs and questions, convincing ourselves that the child doesn’t have any problems with what had happened. At other times we volunteer answers, albeit answers that lack credibility, made-up answers that are only meant to say something – anything. Nevertheless, children are very sensitive to truth, and can tell when adults are “faking it.” That which we ourselves do not know and do not understand, we will not succeed at “explaining” in any persuasive manner. When we are not sure of ourselves, and pretend to have the situation under control, the child will almost always detect the fake.

Moreover, children can sense the feelings and fears of adults, especially those of their parents, and they act in accordance with those sensitivities, even catering to them. When the adult has a hard time accepting loss, the child will not confront him with questions or statements that will further challenge him. Therapists frequently hear children admit they would have liked to talk about a specific loss-related issue, but don’t do so because they “know” the subject is taboo even though no one has explicitly told them so. A child may want to mention his dead father or make an attempt to find out more about how he died, but won’t dare raise the subject because he “knows” his mother isn’t ready to talk about it.

Should adults show or share their emotions?

Loss confronts adults with a host of difficult emotions – pain, grief, anger, helplessness. According to one popular myth, the adult should not show children his emotions, or share his emotions with them. Such a belief puts on the adult the demand to always be strong, always be in control. Believ-

ing that the adult must always be strong means that permitting a child see his pain and sadness, and even more so his sense of helplessness and confusion, is ostensibly not performing the duties of an adult. Those of us who accept this myth mask their true emotions in the presence of children, becoming actors in a “performance” that degrades the genuineness of our relationships with the child. The price of putting on this show is that we become emotionally sterile in our child’s eyes, and emotionally inaccessible to him. We lack *emotional credibility*, and the child senses this. The child allows the adult to dictate the “performance” as it were. Both sides lose out, however, because the open line of communication, so necessary for providing support and help, is impaired.

Secrets

Frequently, loss has to do with issues that adults may consider inappropriate for children. They may believe that exposure ought to be avoided concerning the sort of secret subjects considered for adults only: “It’s better that children do not know about divorce”; or “Children don’t have to know about diseases”; or “Children don’t have to be told the details of how someone died.”

Secrets between adults and children constitute a very sensitive area. Great effort is invested in maintaining these secrets. Children are told all sorts of “stories” in the hope of diverting their attention. Due to the great lengths that go into keeping secrets, the adult is liable to seal himself off from the child’s questions and queries, and – most importantly – from the child’s need to know, understand, and be a partner in the reality of his life. We may be confident that the child doesn’t know the “secrets.” Perhaps he doesn’t know the exact details, but he senses that something is going on. He picks up on various details, and responds to the sensitivities expressed by the adult in connection with the secret. The basic trust of the child in us as dependable truth-speaking adults is hampered. It might take years to rehabilitate this trust, and sometimes the child will grow up to be an ever-suspicious person.

It is important for us to remember that, in our generation, television and myriad other forms of entertainment expose children to “real-life issues,” including death, murder, suicide, conspiracy, sex, adultery, and divorce. A great deal of the information is saturated with violence and sen-

sationalism. This knowledge is gathered by the child, and will be referenced when he tries to understand what is happening in his private world. When something very serious happens in the child's life, it is preferable that he be furnished with accurate, balanced information, by an adult close to him. When the child lacks information and explanations, he is left to look for it on his own, and will rely on information that is often distorted and misconstrued. What is more, the information will "flow" to the child whether or not he wants it. Other children will tell him what they heard from their parents. He will overhear snippets of conversations from adults around him. In the absence of reliable, accurate information from people close to him, the child is incapable of filtering and classifying the distorted information that reaches him. If denied the opportunity to openly approach those closest to him for explanations and reinforcement, he is liable to be hurt by the random information. Painful as it may seem, the truth is preferable to lies, secrets, and distorted information. Factual information can strengthen the child. The bottom line is that adults must bravely provide the child with the truth.

Can adults always protect children?

Another belief is that adults are supposed to protect children. This is one of the primary roles of adults in every human society, and the primary role of every parent toward his children. When tragedy occurs, we may feel that we have failed in our duties. We are embarrassed by our *helplessness* and impotence, and feel a sense of *guilt* toward the child. Due to this helplessness and embarrassment, we sometimes prefer to disregard our own sense of "guilt" and persuade ourselves that the child does not feel or understand, and that he is unaware of the vulnerability of his situation.

We must remember that at the same time that the adult needs to attend to the child's needs he is also going through a hard time of his own, dealing with the issues of loss. He too fears death — his own death, and the death of his loved ones. He too seizes on various beliefs and nurtures them in order to stave off the threat of finality and irreversibility of death. Every adult knows that razor-sharp feeling of separation and loss, and does what he can to avoid it. Adults also employ various forms of suppression and denial to sidestep the encounter with pain. Our own hardships make it even more difficult for us to confront the hardships of our children. If we

are engrossed in our own pain, it is very difficult to contain and bear the pain of our child.

By understanding why the encounter with the child is so difficult for us, we are better equipped to relate to the child, and more apt to find ways to help him. When adults are cognizant of the difficulties that threaten to overwhelm them, and successfully deal with those difficulties, they are ready to assume their duties to the child: providing support, offering appropriate explanations, and providing a sense of protection and guidance.

The adult has a great deal of responsibility toward the child who has experienced loss. He can and should offer the child tremendous support to help him cope with the loss. The child is largely dependent on the functioning of the adult. The proper contribution by the adult is the key to the child's healthy handling of the situation.

Readers who experienced loss

For those readers who experienced loss at a young age, who lost a parent or suffered some other traumatic loss, this book will rekindle painful and difficult memories. It is not easy to re-expose oneself to this anguish. Yet it may offer another opportunity to work through these memories, maybe resolve some, and in the process you may discover the "normality" of what you experienced, and the "legitimacy" of the hardships you endured. It is possible that this book will clarify the link between something that happened in the distant past and something that happened in the present: a connection you may not have recognized or did not consider important. The reference to deep-seated emotions, the opportunity for further clarification, and the fresh understanding of what happened in the past can combine to make a significant and beneficial contribution to your present and future well-being.

Parents raising a child after loss

It is not easy for a parent to raise a child following a traumatic loss, and this book will not ease that burden. Through this book, the parents will encounter many of the difficulties they experienced in the past, as well as those that continue to threaten and frighten them. The parent may be

alarmed to read about the extent of the effects of loss on children, and the enormity of the responsibility placed on their shoulders. Yet it is my hope that this book will also persuade you how valuable and essential is your endeavor. It is daunting to think of how much the child depends on you, your actions and reactions. Yet your ability to help the child and contribute toward his continued healthy development is crucial.

The book sheds light on many common difficulties and potential setbacks, but also suggests means of coping with them. It is built upon the premise that traumatic loss leads to a series of responses that should be considered normal. Not only should they not be shunted aside or regarded as shameful or deviant, but the opposite is the case: they should be recognized as normal events in the life of a child who experienced traumatic loss. If we adults can be persuaded that these are normal and even necessary experiences, then we will be able to understand the significant role we play at the child's side, and the decisive importance of enabling him to embark on this journey – pitfalls and all.

Chapter I

The Bereavement of Children

Children's perception of loss

It should be noted at the outset that the concepts of bereavement and mourning as we will employ them are not limited to the initial mourning period; nor are they restricted exclusively to situations of mourning following death. Rather, they apply to a range of responses to the loss of any significant, beloved person. Generally, when speaking of mourning, it is customary to solely consider those events that take place during the first years following the loss. Nevertheless, we will illustrate how and why these responses continue beyond the initial period into the ensuing years.

The commonly held assumption that reaction to loss ends with the initial mourning period is untrue. What is true is that during these initial years the individual is predominantly engaged in responding to the loss. These are the years during which the "stages" of mourning and "processing" of mourning take place. Nevertheless, it must be made clear that the loss and its implications will remain with the individual throughout his life. The loss will continue to affect many aspects of life, and most certainly the emotions. Recognition of the loss and the implications thereof will lead to recurring situations that require the "mourner" to re-confront the situation, and make the requisite readjustments and adaptations.

All of this is even more true for children. As he grows up, the child will confront his loss over and over again, understanding it at new levels of comprehension, adapting himself to the loss in accordance with his changing mental abilities, emotional state, and emotional needs. Life, after all, goes on, and the child will have to repeatedly adapt and readjust himself to the effects of the loss on the contemporary realities of his life.

His life is constantly changing because of his growth and development, and due to changing circumstances – some of which are related to the loss and some of which are related to changing life circumstances in general. Many of these changes stir up themes related to the loss, and in turn stir up emotions that are part of the “bereavement” process.

When we consider the diverse responses of the child to loss, it is useful to categorize them along chronological lines. First, the responses should be classified in accordance with the amount of time that has elapsed since the loss occurred – differentiating the initial mourning period from that of later years, when the mourning is no longer “fresh.” The second division relates to the age of the child. The child’s age reflects his stage of development, with all its implications. In addition, as time passes, other changes may occur, including internal changes within the family and those that are caused by external events.

The questions that are highly relevant to understanding experience of loss among children are:

- Is the child capable of mourning, and if so, from what age?
- Does the child understand the meaning of the loss – and primarily the meaning of death – and from what age?
- Does the child mourn differently from the adult?

Even the most conservative approaches agree that from a very young age, even during the first year of life, the child already senses and reacts to the loss of a parent. The parent is the object through which the young child lives and feels his existence. The younger the child, the more the absence of a parent wreaks an existential, narcissistic wound, depriving the child of emotional “oxygen.” Lacking language and words, he can only express his response through alternate modes of expression: for the most part through bodily and sensory expression, such as fretfulness and crying, loss of appetite and failure to eat, and even moods such as sadness and even depression.

Theoreticians wonder if the response of the child could be considered “bereavement” or whether it is merely an instinctive response to perceived existential harm. There is no doubt that the child whose parent has “disappeared” from his life, whose parent no longer cares for him, nourishes him or protects him, and most of all no longer gives him love, feels the absence

of all these and suffers greatly. The emotional responses to this – anger, sadness, longing – are evident from a very young age. Even if the child does not yet have the language to put them into words, the feelings exist nevertheless. These feelings are bereavement. The older the child, the more capable he is of understanding and expressing his feelings and his bereavement.

Children begin to understand the concept of “no more” at the most basic concrete levels: a mother who is suddenly not there, a bottle or breast taken away from them. Through the concrete experience, the more abstract perception of the concept develops. Between the first and the second year the child begins to become familiar with the concept of “no more.”

Every baby “loses” or is temporarily separated from gratifying objects and situations. Feeling the presence of the parent, and “losing” him from time to time, is one of the most common yet important of these experiences. The objects of gratification constantly disappear and reappear: the breast of the mother, a toy. Through these experiences the baby learns about “there is” and “there is no more.” Through these separations, he learns to cope. Since the object that went away usually comes back, it is not a never-ending traumatic experience. It may be frustrating and upsetting at times, but gratifying at others. The baby “learns” to endure the separation, and as it develops it grasps the situation, perceptively and cognitively. These experiences are very important in building his inner world and his mental–emotional ability. They also build up his ability to cope with absence, with “no more.” When his parent is not there with him, the baby will respond to the situation. Although he may not be able to assess how long the condition lasted, or understand the cause of it, he senses and responds to the experience itself.

A young child who has the traumatic experience in which the parent is totally “no more” – in other words, when the parent does not just temporarily disappear – suffers a tremendous blow to the process he recently began of believing and trusting that good things do return. The total loss leaves the child in a void. He not only leaves the child alone and helpless, but also leaves him with the “lesson” that relationships with people are not a safe zone that merits trust. His perception of “no more” is tainted.

By the age of four or five, children can grasp the idea of “no more” with their intellect. They understand a situation in which “Father isn’t here,” and they also understand that he can return later on. They are already familiar with the concrete aspects of death. They have come across death among animals, they’ve heard of someone in their social or familial environment – a grandparent, perhaps – that died. They are exposed to the concept of death through stories, movies, and television. They are also exposed to news in the media, where they hear about death resulting from wars and terrorist attacks, traffic accidents, murders, and natural disasters. Comprehension of the significance of “no more” and death continues to develop until they reach perception–comprehension maturity at adolescence.

Death

Death is a difficult concept to grasp because it requires understanding of concrete and abstract dimensions, as well as spiritual aspects relating to the essence of life. Along with his intellectual and emotional development, the child develops an ability to conceptualize at the abstract level. The comprehension and conceptualization of death has to include four primary elements: its irreversibility, its finality, its universality, and its causality.

IRREVERSIBILITY OF DEATH

Understanding that the dead person will not come back, that death is irreversible, that even if the child asks very nicely and promises to be good, he won’t be able to restore his dead mother to life. The child who does not understand this concept continues to search and does what he can to restore the situation to its previous state – through prayers, promises, or various ceremonies and rituals.

Even when children understand the concept of irreversibility at the intellectual level, there remains the issue of its acceptance at the emotional level. This, we must emphasize, is a problem for adults as well. Acceptance of the idea of irreversibility is a constituent element of bereavement work. Factual understanding is the foundation on which emotional acceptance will be built. The understanding of irreversibility includes the understanding and acceptance of our own limitations.

Adults frequently leave children in a “fog,” and avoid having to explain that the loss is irreversible. They too have a hard time accepting it. If it has not been made clear to the child that the situation cannot be rectified one should not be surprised when the child will search for ways to “correct” the loss or expect the dead to come back.

FINALITY OF DEATH

The concept of finality emphasizes that the nonexistence is absolute: the dead person no longer has human characteristics; no parts of the dead person remain alive; he doesn't feel anything, doesn't feel cold, can't see or hear. A child who believes that his dead father still feels the cold cannot sleep on rainy nights because “Father is wet and cold in his grave.” A child who is told “Mother is looking down on you from heaven” may feel her sheltering as well as scrutinizing eyes following him wherever he goes. Sensations and thoughts of this sort are emotionally burdensome, as they prevent the child from internalizing the finality of the situation and, as such, prevent emotional adjustment to the finality of the loss.

UNIVERSALITY OF DEATH

Every living thing is destined to die. Death is not a punishment imposed on anybody, but a trait that is common to all living things. Death is the unavoidable end, sooner or later, of every living thing and of every human being. In order to develop a mature understanding of death, children must understand these three concepts.

CAUSALITY OF DEATH

In addition, it is critically important to help the child understand the causality of the death and explain the circumstances of the death and why it could not be prevented. Young children tend to classify events as bad or good, as punishment or prize. In the child's perception, death is a punishment. In order that the child not fear that he might be punished in the same manner, the causes of the death must be made clear.

If the mother's death was the result of a disease, the death should not be described with superficial descriptions that seem less painful, such as “Mother was sleeping, and then she died.” The child is liable to be afraid to go to sleep lest he too die while asleep. If the person died in a car accident, it is best to describe the circumstances of the accident so that the child can

differentiate between driving on a road and safely reaching one's destination, and the specific conditions in which a fatal accident is liable to occur.

When the circumstances of death are especially violent, such as suicide or murder, there is a tendency to conceal the facts from the children and invent a "cover story." The negative effects of concealing the truth from the child will be discussed at a later stage. At this point, however, we will suffice by stressing the importance of presenting the true facts – difficult as they may be to bear – since they serve the child as a basis for understanding the death.

It is not easy for adults to conceptualize the meaning of death, and explaining this to a child is harder yet. For adults, this difficulty does not stem from an inability to understand, but from the emotional hardship that hinders the ability to accept.

The use of language

The use of language – the choice of words and concepts – reflects the manner in which society copes with the subject. The words and concepts that are used to describe the condition of death often reflect the difficulty we have in accepting the irreversibility and finality of death. They contribute to an atmosphere of obscurity and ambiguity, and nurture illusions as well. The dead person "passed away," "is no longer with us," "went to another world," "left us," or is "somewhere up there," "in paradise," "with the angels," "has gone to a better place," or is "looking down on us from above." All of these terms serve the purpose of blunting the painful encounter with death. By using these terms, adults prevent the child from gaining full exposure to the facts, and thereby prevent him or her from fully coping with this difficult experience.

The child's cultural background should be taken into account vis-à-vis language use. Certain concepts take on specific meanings in the particular subculture in which the child grew up, and he learns to recognize the hidden meanings behind the words. Concepts like "rests in peace" or "the deceased" serve as familiar codes in certain cultures for denoting the dead person. Children learn to recognize these codes.

Even when the child already understands the concepts of nonexistence and death and their constituent elements, he is still likely to react in irrational, "childish" ways at times, creating the impression that he does not

understand. Children may resort to magical thinking in the hope of fixing the situation: "If I'll be a good boy, Mother will come back to life." Small children anthropomorphize death, transmuting it into a figure they can fight or run away from. They fantasize that they are superheroes who fight death, which is represented by another "bad" figure. Their victory over the figure that represents death will correct the bad that happened to them.

Although they may seem to be irrational and "childish," these responses actually indicate that the child senses and realizes what happened. He summons up defense mechanisms from his world of concepts, in the hope of rectifying the damage. Magical thoughts, unrealistic imaginary powers, denial – all of these are mechanisms suited to the way children think, and are invoked as defense mechanisms at times of distress. When a child employs such mechanisms, it should be viewed as a warning sign, an indicator that the child needs assistance and support to cope with the threatening reality.

The child's readiness to understand the loss is conditional upon his age – his emotional and intellectual development. In order to boost his level of comprehension, the child needs clarifications and explanations from adults. The adult should offer these explanations at the child's level of understanding, and use concepts and examples drawn from the world of the child. By borrowing from a world with which the child is most familiar, the adult will be more successful at getting across these difficult concepts.

It is important to repeatedly describe the facts of what took place, and talk about every facet of the event, its circumstances and its causes, while at the same time emphasizing the irreversibility, finality, and universality. Repeated discussion alongside with explanations should take place not only during the initial period after the event but years later, as well. As the years pass and the child grows up, his ability to comprehend will continue to develop. The adult should allow the child to ask questions at all times, and make sure he receives the information that will help him understand and internalize what happened. The child will repeat this exercise on a recurrent basis, in accordance with his changing levels of development and maturity and his changing needs.

The requisite conditions for acceptance of death as described here are in many cases equally applicable to the child's comprehension of other

losses. Every loss has elements of irreversibility and finality, and only when these are clearly understood can one begin the process of emotional acceptance. This is equally true for divorce of parents, or illnesses that lead to disability, abandonment, and other traumatic losses. The child needs to understand that the situation is irreversible, and cannot be restored to its previous state. On the basis of this realization, he will have to accept the loss and the new situation and adapt.

A child must know that his parents are divorced, as opposed to separated or angry with one another after a fight, and understand the concrete meaning of divorce. It is natural for him to have a hard time accepting the situation as irreversible, and he will therefore search for ways to “repair” the break-up of the family. Precisely because of this difficulty, he has to fully understand and recognize the fact that his parents are divorced, that they are no longer the family they were before, that they will no longer live together. Only when the child understands the irreversibility of the situation can he be helped to stop trying to rectify the circumstances, and stop seizing on hopes of reuniting the family.

Cultural and religious frameworks

Every religion and every culture deals with the theme of death, with the question of life after death. Religions try to explain why good and bad things happen in people’s lives, and offer answers to questions about the meaning of life. The child absorbs the beliefs of the culture in which he is raised, and usually accepts the answers it provides. This cultural and religious framework of beliefs helps adults offer answers to the difficult questions with which children, as well as adults, grapple in the aftermath of a loss. Just as the beliefs can comfort the adults, they can also provide comfort to the child.

Numerous faiths speak of an afterlife, of reincarnation, of a continuation of life after this world. On the face of it, these beliefs are incompatible with the concepts of irreversibility and finality. But in actuality, there need not be contradiction between them. They can even be complementary provided that the child fully understands the distinction between reality and faith.

At the concrete, factual level, the child should have a clear understanding of irreversibility and finality. The dead person will not come back to

live with us here, in our lives, and he is not a partner in our lives: he does not see, hear, or know what is happening to us. On the other hand, these beliefs can be presented as a means of understanding death at the abstract level; as a spiritual answer to questions about the meaning of life.

It is important to stress to the child that the dead person lives on in our hearts; his enduring image gives us comfort and strength. When the concept of the deceased person's continued "existence" is presented in tandem with a no-nonsense explanation about finality and irreversibility, the explanations can soothe the child and give him something to cling to.

It is vital to make the child clearly aware of the difference between beliefs and reality. If this is not made clear, especially to children who are too young to differentiate between reality and imagination, the children are liable to take things out of context and mix between the realities of their life and their wishful thinking and imagination – now fed by fears and hopes relating to the loss.

When the child is presented with the idea of a world to come, the difference between this world and the next has to be made clear. It must be emphasized that the other world cannot suddenly penetrate into his life, nor will he suddenly "roll out" into that world. Alongside the idea of the "soul" which "lives" beyond this world must come a clear explanation that the soul has no human characteristics: the soul does not feel pain or cold, nor can it interfere in his life on this world.

In this regard, the age of the child is extremely important. As mentioned before, the younger the child, and the more limited his ability to comprehend abstract concepts, the more important it is to explain the spiritual concepts in such a way that they should not blur his perception of the irreversibility, finality, and causality of the death. Adults often prefer to use obscure spiritual concepts so as to avoid giving the child straightforward explanations. They too sometimes prefer to escape to these beliefs rather than accepting the loss and all its harsh implications. Adults should avoid employing terminology drawn from the world of beliefs, which can obscure these concepts, sow confusion, and hinder the process of understanding and acceptance of the loss.

The child depends on the adult to help him understand the facts of life. Based on his age, he may lack the appropriate cognitive capacity, know-how, and information to understand what happened. Anything that is not

explained or clarified will leave a void which the child will fill with the help of his imagination, and with the help of information to which he is randomly exposed. If the child is not offered explanations, he will invent them. The younger the child, the greater the chance that he will invoke his imagination as a defense mechanism. Even when explanations are offered, the child is still liable to escape to an imaginary world, one that offers comfort and a less painful reality. This is all the more true when explanations and information are not provided.

Regression

A temporary emotional regression is a normal response to loss, and may be part of the mourning reaction. This is the case for adults as well as children. Regression is a healthy defense mechanism that is employed by the ego to protect and maintain the vulnerable and hurt psyche. Among children, regression is usually reflected by reverting to a more childish state. Small children will revert to bedwetting, thumb sucking, and crying, and will want to spend a great deal of time with the remaining parent. Older children will revert to stronger emotional dependence on the remaining parent, childish moods, outbursts and fits of anger, and childish demands.

Because children are emotionally spontaneous, they are very susceptible to being overcome by sadness, and feel the loneliness and helplessness immediately. They must protect themselves from these distressing sensations, so they “escape” into denial and avoidance. They soon begin to search for “soothing” alternatives. Young children will quickly begin to look for an alternative parent figure. They feel comforted when offered ice cream or a favorite candy. Gifts give the child a feeling of receiving love, thereby dulling the sense of abandonment.

Difficult questions

As the child matures, more thoughts and questions form in his mind regarding the loss. He develops the capacity for philosophical thought, and attempts to comprehend the essence of life, raising some hard questions along the way. Why do things turn out the way they do? What is the meaning of life? Why did it happen to me? These questions sound as if they belong to the adult world, but the child who has experienced a trau-

matic loss that significantly affects his life is already grappling with these questions at a young age.

All children are preoccupied by existential questions – questions about the essence and nature of life. But for a child who has experienced loss, these issues are more threatening and emotionally charged, and more personal. Will I die, too? Do tragedies have “laws,” and can they be anticipated? These questions undermine the child’s existential confidence. He is liable to feel that all sorts of dangers constantly hover above and threaten him: the unexpected becomes expected. He worries about the death of another person who is dear to him, dreads the loss of the remaining parent, is afraid of harm coming to his siblings or close friends. He fears that hardships will continue to befall him. He often lives in fear and anxiety over situations he feels incapable of anticipating or controlling.

In order to help the child cope with these feelings, he has to be provided with soothing and ensuring messages along with facts and information to understand what is happening in his life. The adult must make an effort to mitigate and allay what might seem like an all-encompassing threat over which the child has no control. By gaining an understanding of the issues, the child will be able to set up “boundaries” that will stave off the threat of future dangers, and develop the cognitive insight to compartmentalize the trauma and create an unthreatening safe zone.

Securing trust in adults

Responses of adults to the anxieties of children often have two components: denial of what is worrying the child; a desire to protect him by offering promises and assurances that cannot be backed up. The guarantee that “No one else is going to die,” or that “Mother will never leave you,” may buy peace and quiet in the short term, but cannot withstand the test of reality. When the child encounters a reality different than that which he has been promised, his anxieties will only increase. Worse yet, his faith in adults will be undermined. Trust in adults is one of the child’s most important sources of support; through it he derives his sense of existential confidence. For a child who has experienced traumatic loss, this is critical. Therefore, answers that embellish reality not only might end up proven untrustworthy and therefore trust destroying, but might also prevent the child from being able to express his doubts and anxieties. The net result is

that he feels very much alone, and the threatening thoughts and fantasies are left to fester.

It is important to understand that all children are occupied by the subject of death and loss. They are exposed to deaths and losses that occur in their immediate environment: a grandfather who dies; a neighborhood dog run over by a car; a friend's parents who divorced. Children hear about things happening around them, even if adults think they are successful at shielding some of it from them. The subject of death is of great concern to children because it is part and parcel of the process of development and the encounter with life. It preoccupies children from a very young age. Their preoccupation with death varies in accordance with each child's emotional and cognitive development, and developmental needs. While young, it interests them at the concrete level: how people die; what happens to the body after death; and other aspects that drive home the reality of the event. As they get older, it occupies them at the philosophical, abstract, and spiritual levels as well.

The child's preoccupation with death, loss, and other traumatic and existence-threatening losses will increase in relation to the frequency that such events occur in his environment. The frequency of car accidents, wars, and acts of violence in society, the incidence of divorce and separation in families – all of these will result in the child being concerned even if he has not been personally affected. These issues are even more emotionally threatening to the child who has already experienced loss, because he relates to them in terms of his own personal experiences. For him, they are not only potential threats, but also emotional stimuli that remind him of his personal experiences. When a child who has experienced traumatic loss hears of a tragedy, even if it happened to someone else, he is bewildered and flooded with emotions, since the event not only reminds him of his experience, but it once again underscores the fact that there is no security, and that something bad can happen to him again.

It is customary to use the terms of "loss" and "separation," but it is important that it be made clear that for everyone, children included, the person that is no longer here has not "been lost." Neither are we "separating" from that person in the sense that he will no longer have internal meaning for us, or play a role in our life. Separation does not mean forgetting or expunging the memory of the person who is no longer here. We do

not “leave” or end the “connection” with the person. Someone who played an important role in the child’s life, especially a parent, will continue to be a significant figure; a figure that continues to live within the inner entity of the child. That person will continue to be there with him and, it is hoped, for him throughout his childhood, and for the rest of his life.

Influence of the socio-cultural environment on children’s understanding of death and loss

The child’s attitude to the subject of death is related, *inter alia*, to the cultural and socioeconomic environment in which he is raised. Twentieth-century western culture has largely removed death from the context of home and family. Children are not exposed to many of the life passages, primarily those that pertain to sickness, old age, and death. The elderly no longer live with their families, and usually die in old-age homes or hospitals. Terminally ill patients are often not cared for at home, and the child does not have a chance to witness the approach of death. Funerals, which at one time set out from the home of the deceased, are now held at funeral homes and cemeteries, far from the child’s eyes.

In stories, movies, and video games, death is represented as the end that lies in store for the “bad guys.” The good, powerful hero always wins, never dies. In science fiction, whenever a hero dies, he comes back to life after some sleight of hand. As such, works of science fiction and virtual reality serve to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, genuine and simulated. No matter how dire the situation, invariably it can be controlled and “won.” In popular lore, reality can be controlled by man, through science, computers, or advanced technology.

On the other hand, television presents family life, and especially the more painful family issues, in an extreme, distorted manner that is replete with violence, backhanded scheming and conspiracy, separation, and divorce. Soap operas depict distressful personal and family situations. The media expose and bring into every home disasters, wars, violence, traffic accidents, and other dramatic events that result in loss. These subjects constitute topics of everyday conversation. The young child is exposed to all this information and stimuli from a very early age, yet the exposure does not necessarily prepare him for better coping, or make him any more insightful. The child receives a dual message: on the one hand, he learns

that the world is full of violence and danger; on the other, he is led to believe that modern man has nearly absolute control over his life and world.

Conversely, in regions beset by natural disasters, epidemics, wars, and terrorism, or in societies in which violence and drug use is rife, loss and death are part of the ordinary lives of children, from early childhood onward. There are many societies where violence, hunger and disease, wars and terrorism, natural disasters, domestic violence, and domestic separations cause much suffering and loss. In these circumstances children have an intimate knowledge of “loss realities” from a very young age. They “prepare” themselves for them long before they understand them. To children who live in these societies, loss and death are burdens they shoulder from early childhood.

In modern western societies, children are not given a chance to take active part in the natural cycle of death and loss, as is the case in traditional and “primitive” societies. On the other hand, wars, acts of terrorism, car accidents, and violence are part of daily life, the subjects of everyday life, and children are therefore aware of them. In such social circumstances, for example in the case of Israeli and Palestinian children, the children are very much aware of death and loss, and are worried that they or someone close to them could be affected. One might say that the child is cognizant of the danger, and “prepares” for it through the fear that he too will be a victim.

Stages of grieving

The grieving process is often described through “stages.” We shall describe the major three stages, and then address the question of whether children go through the same stages as adults.

First stage: Shock

The predominant feature of this initial stage is numbness. After the loss occurs, and especially if it happened in a sudden way, there is no real assimilation or internalization of what happened. All of the responses, even when sharply pronounced, are “external.” They range from unresponsiveness to emotional turmoil, from an inability to function to overreacting. In most instances, the person’s behavior corresponds with what has

happened, and it may therefore seem as if he “understands” and has internalized what happened. Nevertheless, this generally reflects a very “external” understanding, and the response is not the product of insight or emotional awareness. At this stage, strong defense mechanisms are activated, protecting the individual from the full impact of the bleak reality.

Strange phenomena may occur at this stage, such as “forgetting” that the dead person is no longer there, and thinking of him as if nothing has happened. The person may hear his voice or footsteps, or even see him. These hallucinations do not stem from an emotional disorder; they are evidence of the mental difficulty to grasp what has happened. This stage is frequently accompanied by physiological symptoms, such as loss of appetite or obsessive eating, respiratory distress, digestive problems, a strong need to sleep, or an inability to sleep.

Second stage: Intensified response and internalization

During this stage, the individual begins to comprehend the emotional reality of the loss, and to respond to it by grieving and mourning. The response becomes more and more intense and is expressed through a wide range of emotions: anger, accusation, guilt feelings, depression, intense sorrow and sadness, pain, fits of crying and longing, nightmares. The responses increase in intensity as the individual continues to take in what has happened.

Concurrent with the more intense emotions, cognitive comprehension becomes more distinct, and the individual gains a more profound understanding of the significance and implications of the loss. In combination with the stronger emotional “grip” on the new reality, a process of internalization is initiated. The mourner experiences periodic “encounters” with the loss; with the fact that there is a void, that there is “no more.” These encounters add new layers of emotions, insight, and response. This stage is very important in terms of the “grief work.” Articulation and processing of emotions is at the heart of this process. The loss is taking its place in one’s being. Its painful significance is fully expressed and clarified. This painful process enables the individual to move on to the third stage.

Third stage: Acceptance and readjustment

In this stage, the person understands that the loss is part of the reality of his or her life, and begins the process of adaptation to this new and painful reality. This readjustment reflects acceptance of the loss – accepting its emotional significance and understanding its implications. “Acceptance” should not be interpreted as acquiescence or forgetting what happened. Nor does it mean that the mourner no longer feels sorrow, pain, or other emotions that are related to the loss. Acceptance refers to adaptation to the changed reality: adjustment to the new situation, resumption of a life that is not engulfed and overwhelmed by the loss and its repercussions, but leaves room for other areas of interest and activity. This readjustment is expressed through large as well as small events, as the individual searches for the right way to integrate the new reality into his or her life.

Although it is convenient to describe the grieving process as this three-stage progression, in fact we are speaking of three different types of response, which weave in and out of one another, at times succeeding one another, at times intertwined. There may be some realms in which the mourner is still in shock, while he may have already readjusted in other realms. In other words, we are not speaking of one-dimensional or one-directional behavior, but a combination of behavioral and emotional responses. The general “direction” is transition from the state of shock and emotional upheaval during the initial period – which may last several months or even a year – to a state of readjustment that is characterized by greater control of one’s emotions and actions that reflect internalization of the changed reality and acceptance of the loss.

How children grieve

The process of grieving is more complex for children. Their responses and stages of grieving are closely linked to age and stage of development. The ability of teenage boys and girls to grieve and the stages they go through are similar to those of adults, but the younger the children, the more their behavior differs from that of adults. We will now describe the unique characteristics of the grieving process of children, especially the younger ones.

Shock

In the first stage – the shock stage – some children barely respond to what has happened. Their state of “non-response” is not the same as the state of “shock” we find among adults. These children are either not reacting or reacting in minimalist fashion because they are not yet fully aware of what happened and surely do not fully understand. Especially at the initial period, the first days, when the adults themselves are still confused, overwhelmed, and do not fully grasp what happened, they prefer to keep the kids in the dark. The kids usually receive minimal information and explanation from the adults, who are “pleased” that the child does not understand. The children sense that this is a difficult time for the adults and therefore usually don’t ask too many questions. Some children sense that the news is hurtful and prefer not to know. Whatever the reason, the child sometimes seems not to understand and not to care; a response that suits the adults who do not have the needed extra energy to handle the child’s response to the loss.

Expression of emotions

When the painful facts do begin to emerge, children sometimes activate “childish” *denial mechanisms*: “It’s not true, he’s not dead, you’re just saying that to scare me.” They refuse to hear what is being said to them, countering that the grown-ups “are lying.” Occasionally, children ignore the facts that were presented to them, and act as if nothing happened. “I’m waiting up for Dad, and when he comes home I’ll go to bed.” During the shock stage, adults also have moments in which their contact with reality is distorted and they “forget” what happened. This scenario is even more common for the child for whom imagination is part of his world, and who frequently “decides” that reality is whatever he wants it to be. Children use a much less rigid test of reality. Denial of bitter news is an intuitive mechanism through which the child protects himself. At times, the denial is more of an external act, like an experiment or ritual in which the child imagines carrying out some sort of magic trick. The child hopes or even fantasizes that if he refuses to accept the bitter news, it may simply disappear. Precisely because he understands that the news is so bleak and bitter, he wishes to strike it out of his life. Children use *magical thinking* in an attempt to negotiate with fate, conducting a give and take that goes something like

this: If I am a good boy, then maybe he'll come back, maybe the loss will be undone.

Children see and sense the gloomy response of the adults around them, and are *frightened*. They prefer to escape into their own worlds rather than join in with the adults in this horrifying reality.

Like the adults, children can develop *physiological responses* such as stomach aches, diarrhea, vomiting, loss of appetite, insomnia, headaches, breathing difficulties, and skin rashes. These responses are an indication of the children's discomfiture with the loss. They may also be an unconscious way to draw the attention of adults back to themselves. It may be the child's way of "demanding" the parental investment he so greatly needs, especially after the loss when the child senses the threat to his well-being. Adults who are mired in the initial stage of bereavement are very much pre-occupied with themselves and their grieving. The child must sometimes send out strong distress signals to make it clear that he needs their attention and support.

The child's capacity to grieve is qualified by his level of awareness and understanding of what happened. It also depends on the "permission" he is given to openly express his feelings and whether he feels there will be somebody to support him when he does. Children's feelings are similar to those of adults: sadness and pain, helplessness, anger, accusation, and guilt.

A typical response is being *angry and accusatory* toward the parents – the one lost and the remaining one – and other adults the child holds responsible: Why didn't they notice and do something to prevent it? Why didn't the doctor give proper treatment? How could God do such a thing?! This accusatory position expresses the child's disappointment in adults. He trusted in them, believed that they would protect him, and they didn't. He is afraid of what will happen next. What will happen to him?

Many children experience feelings of *guilt*, fearing that they brought on the loss. These thoughts are profoundly upsetting and frightening to them. The younger the child, the less he knows and understands the facts that caused the loss, and the more he is prone to mix in his imaginary world and think that he had the power to cause the loss or at least to prevent it. In general, children are spontaneous, venting their emotions, unless they are made to feel that the expression of these emotions is "forbidden."

At this stage, children are beset by fears and anxiety regarding the future. They sense that the loss has disrupted the order of their world, and they are uncertain who will look after them and how their world will be secured from now on. This is usually a period during which adults are unavailable for soothing conversations that may allay their worries, and the child finds himself very much alone with his fears.

Mourning

When children realize that there is no way to change what happened, when they understand the implications of the loss and feel its effects in their everyday lives – Dad will not be coming home; Mom is no longer around, and won't be reading any more bedtime stories – they enter a period of intense *mourning*. During this period, some children respond like adults, with strong, turbulent responses. They stop eating, cry a great deal, have a hard time falling asleep, and even display signs of depression. Some children refrain from ordinary activities, such as playing with friends.

As the child repeatedly "encounters" the absence of his loved one, the full significance of the loss begins to seep in, and the emotional responses of sadness, longing, and pain flood over him. Adults have a hard time finding the words to express the depth of the pain and the essence of their emotions. Children have an even harder time, because they still lack the words and the concepts, and are inexperienced at expressing emotions and thoughts through words. They express them through everyday behavior and in games. The adult has to know how to "read" these expressions and help the child find the words for them.

As compared to adults, children can shift from one emotional state to another in a very brief period of time. They can quickly swing from a low mood to a cheerful one, shifting from the issue of loss to other matters of interest. The *detachment* they are capable of making does not mean they have forgotten or finished their grieving. They will repeatedly come back to the emotions of grieving at other times. But for children, unlike adults, it is easier to detach from a harsh emotion and move on to another. It is difficult for children to sustain harsh, threatening emotions over an extended period.

Since children have an instinctive need to continue their normal life, it is not rare to see a child express very strong emotions of sadness or anger

and then go back to watching television or go outside to play with friends. The younger the child, the more one can expect these sort of *sharp transitions*. Because of these rapid transitions, adults often think that the child “has already forgotten,” “doesn’t care,” or “doesn’t even understand what happened.” Children do not forget, and do not stop hurting from the loss any easier than adults, but they resume life faster than adults, and do not generally allow these emotions to break up their routine.

Integrating the loss

Children also have to pass through the “third stage,” in which they accept the loss and the ensuing readjustment. They must integrate the loss and the new realities of their life – with all that entails – into their lives. Their lives change immensely after the loss. For children, readjustment is not simply a stage. It is a process that the child will continue to work on, again and again, for years. The child grows up and matures, his perspective and understanding of the world changes, and the loss takes on new meanings, wears a different “face.” Many changes will occur during the child’s lifetime, and each of these will necessitate further readjustment, whereby he will assimilate the meaning and influences of the loss.

For some adults, the transition to the readjustment stage is exacerbated by an inhibition. They are apt to feel that by readjusting successfully they accept the loss. They are not prepared to admit that they accept this reality. Children readjust and resume their lives more spontaneously than do adults, and exhibit less opposition to this stage. Young children do not usually exhibit emotional inhibitions. They do not generally worry about social conventions. They do not consider the resumption of one’s routine as having betrayed the memory of their loved one. In those instances that young children exhibit a sense of guilt regarding the resumption of everyday activities, they are apparently reacting to messages transmitted by parents and other adults.

The reticence of children to resume regular life may result from other factors. They may feel ashamed and “different.” A child of kindergarten age may think that his father’s death means that something is intrinsically wrong with him. He feels and understands that he is different from other children and may be ashamed of it. He is also afraid of the reactions of his kindergarten friends. He remembers how they reacted on previous occa-

sions – how they rejected a child who was different from them and laughed at him. He is afraid of being given the same reception when he returns to kindergarten.

The older the child, the more hesitant he will be to resume life because, like the adults, he becomes aware and sensitive to “what will people say.” Older children are sensitive to stigmatizing and confusing social messages. Although they may not want to be different, they sense that society expects them to behave “differently.” They are unsure how to behave in their new situation and how to fill their new role. They may also respond to their parents’ latent expectations and messages, which hint that they should suspend their ordinary life and devote themselves to grieving, as their parent is doing. These messages make it difficult for children to consciously choose to resume normal life. No matter what their ages, children must confront the difficulty of assimilating their new status into their everyday lives:

- How is a girl supposed to act when the teacher asks the class which mother can bake a cake for the class party?
- Should a boy attend a soccer game shortly after his brother’s death?
- Should he tell the new Scout leader he can’t go on the outing because he has to visit his father, who now lives in a different city?
- Do they want to join their friends and go to a party?
- When asked on a questionnaire for the name of his father, should the boy mention the fact that his father is dead?
- After the divorce, which home address should a girl give at school – that of her mother or of her father?

After the loss, reality confronts children with many unfamiliar, difficult, and confusing situations. They face difficulties for which they have no familiar response, complex situations with which they are not accustomed. They don’t know what is expected of them, and most of all they are very confused regarding their expectations of themselves in the new situation. They may want to be like everyone else, but want special treatment, as well. They don’t want to be pitied, but feel vulnerable, and want special consid-

eration. They want to be invited to parties, but are afraid of what everyone will say if they come, and how they themselves will feel. These are emotionally wrenching situations, and the solutions to them are complicated. The child needs an older partner with whom he can share his quandaries and questions, and explore possible solutions. He very much needs a guiding hand to encourage and bolster him.

The child's readjustment is highly influenced by how the parent copes and readjusts. It is difficult for the child to readjust and resume normal life if his parent is not yet at that level of readjustment, and especially if his parent has not given the child his unspoken "permission" to do so. The child may be ready to accept his father's leaving home, and is prepared to accept the new arrangement through which he can continue to see his father. However, if his mother is still beset by anger, accusation, and non-acceptance of the separation, it will be much more difficult for the child to accept and readjust to the new terms of the relationship with his father.

In spite of all the difficulties, children generally readjust faster than adults. They make a rather rapid transition, and soon focus their attentions and energies back to the present and the future.

Dissociation and separation

Despite what is often presented in theoretical literature, "dissociation and separation" from the absent person is not a welcome result of a person's readjustment and resumption of life after the loss. Separation does not mean absolute emotional dissociation from that which is no longer there. The image of the missing person continues to be part of the inner world of the mourner. He thinks about what would have happened if that person were here; he draws energy and strength from his memories and from the spiritual image. It is an *internal object*, a figure that becomes part of the inner self.

It is therefore important to know that children do not disengage, do not separate, and do not end their "connection" with the person who is no longer here, nor are they supposed to do so. The image of the dead or missing parent is very important to the child and will constitute an important source of psychological and spiritual energy in the child's growth process. The child's memories of the parent are vital for the parent's continued presence as an internal object. In the child's perception, the image

of the missing person evolves – “growing” apace with his own development and changing needs.

It is important to point out that the younger the child at the time of the loss, the more inclined he will be to postpone some of the “tasks” from the second and third stages of grieving. The child will take up these tasks at a later time, when he is intellectually and mentally ready to carry them out. This means that tasks from the second stage – expression of emotions – and the third stage – readjustment – will gradually be completed in the course of childhood and adulthood.

Dysfunction

Adults who have a hard time making the transition to the third stage, who are still mired in their grieving process, usually exhibit a depressive state that might signal the beginning of pathological grieving, which is characterized by a failure to resume full functioning. When children have a hard time working their way through the acceptance and readjustment stage, it usually stems from different reasons. Depression and non-resumption of normative functioning usually result from the child’s difficulty in reestablishing a *behavioral norm* that is appropriate to the new situation; the new reality exposes the child to unfamiliar, embarrassing, complicated situations, and he may lack the tools and resources to handle them. The child may feel he is in a “no way out” situation that leads him into a state of depression and/or dysfunction. If this is the case, it means that the child needs someone with whom he can share his difficulties and from whom he can seek advice and support.

If a child whose father died exhibits reluctance to go to school, it may be because he is unsure how to handle his new status with his peers. When a youngster is reluctant to go to kindergarten, it may be because he feels that he is being excluded by his friends. Older kids may feel they are having a hard time concentrating on their studies, and may be afraid that the teachers will not understand or be considerate of their situation.

Sometimes the child is deterred from certain situations, preferring to stay away from people or situations that remind him of the new, difficult reality. He may avoid the basketball court where he used to play with his father, or may refuse to meet with his aunt because she looks like his late mother.

It is harder for children to find the words to describe and explain their difficulties. Their behavior may seem strange and inappropriate. An adult may not necessarily understand the connotation a certain situation may have for the child. Asking the child to logically explain himself and behave rationally is usually of no help, and he will remain in this state of limbo until he can achieve some emotional relief. The adult's role is to help the child identify his emotions and difficulties, help him define and isolate the problem, and work together to find an appropriate solution. As a rule, one should bear in mind that a child generally wants to return to a normal level of function, and if he does not, there must be a good reason for it.

Children often communicate their distress through *acting out*, *regressive behavior*, or other *extreme behavior* that reflects their state of turmoil. With young children, it is not rare to find regression to childish or babyish behavior: incessant crying, recurrence of bedwetting, fears of sleeping alone, and a desire to sleep in the parent's bed. The distress of older children is expressed through inappropriate behavior at home or at school, such as failure to do homework, obnoxious or provocative behavior, withdrawal, or an aggressive and impatient temperament. When these forms of behavior occur during the period immediately after the loss, they should be considered normal expressions of grief and should be handled within this context.

As opposed to those children who express their grieving in extreme, regressive ways, there are also the "good kids." They sense that it is a difficult time for the adults, and adjust their behavior so as not to disturb or be a burden. They try to be quiet, they do their homework, they do their best to be "good," they don't make excessive demands and don't seek attention. The older and more mature children may even care for the remaining parent and for their younger siblings, offering concrete help and emotional support. They willingly place themselves at their family's disposal. It is these children we must be especially concerned about, since they forego their own emotional needs in favor of helping the parent. This represents a reversal of roles, and the child is left emotionally neglected. Not only do the adults not look after him and help him through his mourning, but the child ignores himself and his own needs, relinquishing the right to express his own grief and distress.