LOSS OF A PARENT BY DEATH: DETERMINING STUDENT IMPACT

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Abstract. Background. The death of a parent may have a profound negative impact on student’s academic achievement, as a parent plays a large role in most children’s academic development. Purpose. The purpose of this research was to better determine what types of struggles a student faces following the loss of a parent by death. Methods and Results. Previous research was analyzed to help determine what manifestations are more significant following parental death. Results indicate the following: academic achievement is not researched enough to state whether it is specifically impacted by parental loss through death, elementary and secondary age groups are the most academically impacted, a child’s developmental level contributes to their reaction to parental death, a student’s emotional well-being is the most commonly researched manifestation, and University faculty are the most common publishers of this topic from previous research. Conclusions. Further research regarding the impact of a parental death on students is recommended.

Keywords: Parental Death, Student Outcomes, Risk Factors.

The disruption of the parent-child bond during childhood has been widely considered an important risk factor in future development (Kendler, Sheth, Gardner, & Prescott, 2002). Student academic achievement could be one area largely impacted by such risk factors. The death of a parent may have a profound negative impact on student’s academic achievement, as a parent plays a large role in most children’s academic development. Braden and Miller (2007) reported that parental involvement in a child’s education has been related to multiple positive effects in children’s school achievement. It was reported that children whose parents were involved in their education earned higher grades, had better attendance, completed more homework, and were more motivated students. The importance of family involvement in a child’s education is not

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just a recent finding. Hansen and Callender (2005) stated that up to 87% of a child’s waking hours is spent outside of school, thus indicating the large impact parents have on a child’s educational life. Hansen and Callender’s research (2005) also stated that a strong family-school partnership will improve both academic and behavioral outcomes for children.

A study completed by Steen (1998) stated that unfortunately one out of 20 American children under the age of 15 has lost either one or both of their parents to death. Research conducted by Charkow (1998) suggested that a bereaved child will often express their sense of loss while in the school setting. Being at school in a daily routine is typically a positive experience for children. An interruption in a child’s daily routine, from something as serious as death to something as small as bedtime, can cause many negative effects on the child’s school experience (Willis, 2002). Children become more irritable, upset, and have difficulty focusing when their daily schedule is changed.

Upon experiencing the death of a parent, children need to process and grieve with their own emotions and feelings in their own ways. Grief and mourning can be a long, painful process which could impact their school performance. Fiorini and Mullen (2006) report,

Childhood grief is an inevitable, never-ending process that results in a permanent or temporary disruption in a routine, a separation, or a change in a relationship that may be beyond the person’s control. This disruption, change or separation causes pain and discomfort and impacts the person’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Although loss is a universal experience, the causes and manifestations of it are unique to each individual and may change over time (pp. 10)

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2003) suggest that schools need to allow students dealing with family death adequate time to grieve. If schools pressure students to resume “normal” school activities without a chance to deal with the emotional pain they are feeling, it may prompt additional negative problems while at school. McGlauflin (1998) stated that school personnel have increasingly become concerned about children who often have difficulty coping with the school environment after a loss. Children coping with loss generally exhibit behaviors such as lack of concentration, inability to complete tasks, fatigue, excessive displays of emotion, withdrawal, and aggressiveness (McGlauflin, 1998).
Osofsky (2004) reports that the loss of a parent or primary caregiver through death constitutes a specific traumatic experience for young children because they lack the emotional and cognitive maturity to cope with a major or serious disruption to the continuity of their sense of self. Following the death of a parent a child may show mood disorders followed by prolonged grief. Osofsky (2004) also suggested that a child will react to parental death differently due to the severity of the loss, how close their relationship was to the parent who died, the circumstances of their death (such as suicide, illness, tragic), whether the child witnessed the death, and the developmental stage of the child at the time of the death. Hope and Hodge (2006) reported that children cope better with death if the death is anticipated, rather than sudden and tragic. It should also be noted that the way parents perceive death may be a factor in how their own child will perceive death. According to Eddy and Alles (1983), parents may not think rationally about death because they do not want to fully accept their own mortality.

Charkow (1998) indicated that an important factor that impacts children’s grief is chronological age and developmental level. Children of different ages conceptualize death and grief in various ways depending mainly on their cognitive functioning. Research also suggests that there are three clear stages based on age that examine a child’s understanding of death (Nagy, 1948). During ages three to five years a child believes death involves a person leaving for a while, or has moved away; but is always going to return. At ages five to nine years old, a child believes that death can be completely avoided and will not happen. At the final stage, ages nine and 10 years old, a child begins to understand that death is permanent and can happen at any time to anyone. Although children’s understanding of death may be different, it is likely that the loss of a parent through death will impact the children’s educational performance as a person will be “missing” from their everyday life. The impact of the loss of a parent by death may also carry into adulthood as adolescents who experience bereavement may lack the proper development of emotion for entry into adulthood (Herlihy & Moore, 1993).

Lawhon (2004) stated that at any given time in the average classroom, there are at least two children who are experiencing grief from the death of someone close to them. When the death of a parent happens at the elementary school aged level, children may not be prepared
developmentally. This experience will most likely impact their academics in a negative way, as they will likely be focusing on understanding where their parents have gone and why they will not be coming back.

The loss of a parent by death often leads to elimination of parental involvement in academics which may cause a student’s achievement to decline. Following the death of an immediate family member, a child’s self-confidence will lower, resulting in a self-struggle with school work (Lawhon, 2004). Children contemplate their own deaths, encounter deaths of others, and react to death issues in developmentally unique ways, although there is a striking lack of empirical research on this topic (Noppe & Noppe, 1997). According to previous research, parentally bereaved children are at a higher risk for mental health problems, with females as an even higher target (Sandler et al. 2003). Barrett (1995) stated that the trauma of a significant loss for a child takes time and requires patience and understanding especially from significant adults (such as teachers and school staff).

Lawhon (2004) suggested that teachers who are helping a student coping with parental death do the following: help keep their memory alive, help the child to understand what death is, and to accept the child’s reactions to death. For children and teachers to comfortably grieve in the school community, McGlauflin (1998) suggested that staff educate themselves on the grieving process to better help the child who is grieving. Research also suggested that educators let the children express their thoughts and feelings about death while at school (McGlauflin, 1998). Allowing children to discuss how they feel and express their emotions while at school may increase their emotional and cognitive ability to complete their academic work.

Realistically, in today’s society and culture it has become more difficult for children to effectively cope with their emotions surrounding death (Willis, 2002). Willis (2002) also stated that American children are being raised in a culture that avoids grief and denies the inevitability of death. After experiencing a loss through death, children tend to mourn according to their current developmental level. Children may even withhold their grief until they have reached an appropriate developmental level to do so (Eppler, 2008). Fleming and Adolph (1986) have suggested that developmental tasks associated with death may differ depending on age and developmental level of the child. The purpose of this research
was to investigate how a child reacts to the loss of a parent by death while in elementary school, with association to the child’s developmental level. It also evaluated if experiencing parental death while in elementary school adversely impacted academic achievement. Considering the lack of research in the area of student’s academic achievement after experiencing parental death, the specific research questions are as follows:

1. Is an elementary school student’s academic achievement impacted after experiencing loss of a parent by death?
2. Is academic achievement adversely impacted following parental death at an elementary school age more than a secondary school age?
3. Does a child’s developmental level determine their reaction to parental death?
4. Is there more coverage on the impact of parental loss by death on the academic aspect compared with behavioral, emotional, and social?
5. Are more of the articles published by university faculty compared with counselors, teachers, social workers, and parents?

**METHOD**

**Materials**

Materials used for this study were research-based articles and published books. The research-based articles were all peer-reviewed and full text articles. The articles were obtained from books, online journals, and the National Association of School Psychologists. Information for this study was also obtained from published books. Twenty-one different articles and books were obtained for review.

**Instrumentation**

The researcher created a data recording form (Microsoft Excel) to compile and analyze the data to complete this study. The data recording sheet organized research based on the title of the article or book, the demographics of the article or books, author, the age of the children being discussed and/or researched in the article/book, and the type of manifestation being discussed (e.g. behavioral, academic). The final category lists what type of relation the child had to the person who died (e.g. parent, sibling).
Procedure

To determine whether an elementary school student’s academic achievement is impacted after experiencing loss of a parent by death, the researcher gathered peer-reviewed, full-text articles and information in books and journals discussing the topic of how children react after the death of a parent, family member, or anyone close to them. The information was obtained by accessing the University of Nebraska at Kearney’s internet library database. Once logged into the database, information was obtained by entering information under Articles & E-Resources and Journal Finder. Articles selected came from the following databases: Academic OneFile, Academic Search Premier, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO. A variety of “key words” were utilized to locate articles. Words that were considered “key words” include the following: parent death, adolescent, bereavement, preschool, academic, parental death, death in family, academic achievement, elementary age, school age, death at school, grieving process in children, children reacting to death, parental loss, death of a parent, secondary, grades, coping with loss, death perceptions, children’s reactions to death, and loss by death. Full-text and peer-reviewed articles were selected to be printed or requested.

A search for information regarding parental death and its effects on achievement was also conducted at Traverse City Public Library, in Traverse City, Michigan. This was done by obtaining a library card and accessing their online database. In a basic search engine, the previous noted “key words” were typed in. All books relating to this topic were then checked out to the researcher and reviewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The search and examination of scholarly journal articles and published books regarding the combination of parental death and its effects on an elementary student’s academic achievement revealed that the amount of published information in this area is limited (see Table 1 and Table 2). Research journal articles and books based on academics and the impact of a close death indicated a lack of traceable information. The most commonly found information on parentally bereaved children described their emotional well-being, rather than their academic
successes or failures. Most scholarly articles and books were written by University faculty/staff (67%). The ages of children studied were mainly elementary age, which would include Kindergarten to fifth grade (81%). Secondary school age children, grades seven through twelve, were similarly researched (71%). Previous studies lack research on parentally bereaved children who are infants through preschool age.

Previous research has primarily focused on children’s emotional well-being. Of the articles used in this study, 95% of them discussed children’s emotional states following the loss of a parent through death. It has been found that children have difficulty expressing their emotions regarding death at school. Research has shown that children emotionally handle their feelings and grief with death based on their developmental level. Therefore, their understanding of death is impacted by their current developmental level. Research also shows that secondary age children are more likely to get into trouble (e.g., externalizing behavior problems such as stealing), compared to elementary age children who have difficulty grasping the true impact of death.

Another manifestation most commonly seen in previous research involves a child’s social well-being. Of the articles researched, 29% of them discuss the impact death has on the children’s social well-being. Children experiencing a death in their life become more withdrawn from their family, friends, school work, jobs, and extra-curricular activities. Socially, children at the secondary level are more impacted by death; they struggle developmentally with handling death in an effective way, often causing them to become more socially withdrawn. Children at the infant, preschool, and elementary age have limited information regarding their social futures.

A child’s academic achievement was hypothesized to be strongly affected by parental death. Although it may be true, research has little data supporting this hypothesis (29%). Most articles pertaining to parental death and academics give suggestions as to how teachers and school staff can be a strong support system to help the student properly grieve. It was also found that most children grieving from the loss of a parent find school as an outlet. They are able to leave their home and forget about their loss for a few hours each day. Research also stated that children who do need to grieve in a school setting find it difficult due to societal restrictions (e.g., not expressing feelings in public).
Table 1. Summary Table of Reviewed Articles/Books on Children and Loss of Significant Others- Showing Certain Main themes covered Such as Age of Child, Problem Manifested, and Significant Other Loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
<th>Demographics of Author</th>
<th>Age of Child</th>
<th>Manifestation</th>
<th>Loss of Who</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little, et al. (2009)</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ens &amp; Bond (2005)</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Grand parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynolds &amp; Richmond (1997)</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASP (2003)</td>
<td>University Preschool</td>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASP (2010)</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLeod (1991)</td>
<td>University Childhood</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willis (2002)</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howarth (2011)</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eppler (2008)</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardy (2006)</td>
<td>University Counselor</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charkow (1998)</td>
<td>University Counselor</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope &amp; Hodge (2006)</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGlauflin (1998)</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Under “Loss of Who” subheading, “Other” is categorized as any person the child may know (family, friend, classmate, neighbor, etc.).
The last manifestation reviewed was the way a child behaves following a death. Little research was conducted on this manifestation (14%). It is assumed that children would behave in a negative way after experiencing a death, and most articles that did discuss behaviors confirmed that assumption. Children who are living with a loss are most likely to lash out and do the opposite of how they behaved before. On the contrary, some research has found that children think if they behave better than they did before the death occurred, it will bring their loved one back.

When comparing research describing the person who died (e.g., parent, sibling), it was found that parents were the most common (48%). Although parents were the most discussed person of death, the specific relationship did not appear to be closely related to a student’s actual academic achievement. The research that did discuss parental death with academic achievement found that negative academic outcomes were fairly common (e.g., not completing homework). It was also found that with the disruption of a child’s daily life that a change in their attitude at school was usually seen and this attitude change was found to generally be negative.

A majority of the resources researched focused on the death of the person being either a family member (a parent, sibling, aunt/uncle, grandparent, or cousin), or anyone that the child knows who has died (a friend, classmate, neighbor). Of the articles researched, 47% discussed this large range of people. Most of the research, again, focused on a student’s emotional and social being. Developmentally, children are understanding and grieving death at different stages; causing different emotions to surface at different places in life, such as school. After reviewing the previous research, it can be assumed that no matter the relation a child has to the person who has died, they will in some way be affected emotionally and/or socially.

Little research focusing on the death of a grandparent or sibling exclusively and relation to academic achievement has been conducted. Research focusing on family members has included both the grandparents and siblings. In all articles reviewed, 5% focused solely on grandparents, and none of them focused on siblings alone. A chart breaking down the percentages of results can be seen in Table 2.
Table 2. Percentages of (a) Different Age Groups, (b) Different Problems Manifested, and (c) Different Significant Other Lost, That Were Discussed in Article or Books Used in the Present Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Percentage Discussed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of Child:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Manifested:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Other Lost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When evaluating different trends in the research, it becomes noticeable that a child’s emotional well-being tends to be the main focus. Although parental death represents the highest percentage of who was discussed, it was generally based around emotional functioning and lacked information regarding academic achievement. When comparing ages of children, almost all articles discussed children at the elementary and secondary level.

The analysis and comparison of research resources reviewed for this study allowed the researcher to answer the following proposed questions:

1. Is an elementary school student’s academic achievement impacted after experiencing loss by death of a parent?

   The review of research indicated that student’s academic achievement is impacted after experiencing loss by death of parent. It is unclear whether the impact of parental death directly affects children’s learning ability and grades; however it can be expected to impact academics based on the fact that research has demonstrated that negative
attitudes and refusal to do school work has been observed in students experiencing parental death. The present study was unable to distinguish between elementary and secondary student age reactions and manifestations related to parental death. It can be assumed that parental death at any school-age (preschool through secondary) will have a negative impact on a child’s life at school. It should also be assumed that death at any age in a person’s life, (such as at their birth through adulthood) will have implications that are lifelong.

2. Is academic achievement adversely impacted following parental death at an elementary school age more than a secondary school age?

This research was unable to determine whether academic achievement was more adversely impacted after experiencing parental death at elementary or secondary school age. The focus in previous research reviewed for this study was mostly focused on school-age, in general, (Kindergarten through 12th grade) children who are bereaved and did not specify impacts between different age groups.

There is a lack of data provided in previous research regarding the impact of parental death on elementary aged students in particular. Further research in the area of parentally bereaved students and their academics would be recommended and necessary to better explore this researcher question.

3. Does a child’s developmental level determine their reaction to parental death?

A review of previous research indicated that a child’s developmental level did in fact play a role in their reaction to parental death. As Eppler (2008) suggested, children who have experienced parental death will not grieve appropriately until they are at the developmentally appropriate age. An example would be of a child who lost their father when they were three years old. If previous research is taken into account, that child will probably not grieve appropriately until they are nine or 10 years old. This can be assumed based on Nagy’s (1948) study. At that time he found that when children are nine or 10 years old, they began to understand that death is forever.

4. Is there more coverage in the impact on an academic aspect compared with behavioral, emotional, and social?

The current review demonstrated that there is not more research coverage on the impact of academics compared with behavioral,
emotional, and social following parental death. Of the books and articles researched, only 29% discussed the impact of a child’s academics following parental death. The research that this investigator reviewed found that a child’s emotional well being is the most consistent manifestation discussed. Research found that emotionally a child will probably be unstable following the death of a parent, or anyone close to them. Twenty-nine percent of the previous reviewed research discussed the social impact a student often faces following parental death. Socially, a child will usually become more withdrawn following parental death. Finally, the impact parental death has on student behavior varies. Although only 14% of the previous research reviewed discussed this manifestation, it is an impact that is suggested to not be taken lightly. Students who are dealing with the grief following any death will vary in all these manifestations, depending on their support system, developmental level, and how close they were with the person who died.

5. Are more of the articles published by university faculty compared with counselors, teachers, social workers, and parents?

Results of this study indicated that a majority of the published articles and books that were reviewed were published by university faculty (67%). Counselors (24%), teachers (4.5%), and social workers (4.5%) had very little contribution to the articles and books that were available for review. Parents did not publish any of the articles or books, although it should be noted that parental input was often a valuable contribution in many articles that were published.

Implications for future practice for classroom teachers and school staff would be to explore how students are feeling and what they are thinking following the death of a loved one. Let them grieve properly, yet, in a developmentally appropriate setting and style. Letting a child grieve, even at school, may decrease the negative impact it may have on their education, and help them get back into a normal routine. School counselors, social workers, and school psychologists should be encouraged to have an “open door policy” for students needing to talk or express their feelings. School staff could also form small groups for children experiencing a death, either parentally or someone they know, as a way for children to interact with a same age like peer who is experiencing a similar life experience.
Previous research has consistently found an overall general consensus that a child’s emotional well being after the death of a parent, or anyone close to them, will have an impact in their life. Academically there has not been enough research conducted to determine whether, specifically, the death of a parent impacts the child’s academic achievement. It has been proven that the death of a parent impacts a child’s emotional well-being at school, but not necessarily their ability to learn nor the impact it may have on their educational future. Previous research has also shown that elementary and secondary age students are impacted by death emotionally, socially, behaviorally, and academically, but it does not differentiate which ages might be more significantly impacted. Overall, further research regarding academic achievement and the impact of parental death is encouraged.

References


**TĖVŲ NETEKTIS DĖL MIRTIES: POVEIKIS MOKINIAMS**

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**Santrauka. Problema.** Tėvų mirtis gali turėti esminės neigiamos įtakos mokinio akademiniam pasiekimams, nes tėvai labai svarbūs vaikų akademiniam tobulėjimui. **Tikslas.** Šio tyrimo tikslas – geriau identifikuoti, su kokiais sunkumais susiduria tėvų netekę mokiniai. **Metodai ir rezultatai.** Atlikta ankstesnių tyrimų analizė siekiant nustatyti, kokie pagrindiniai požymiai atsiranda po tėvų mirties. Rezultatai atskleidė: akademiniai pasiektiniai nepakankamai išanalizuoti, kad galima būtų atsakyti, jog juos veikia tėvų netektis; pradinės ir vidurinės mokyklos amžiuje vaikų akademinius pasiekimus labiausiai paveikia tėvų netektis, vaikų raidos lygis susijęs su reakcija į tėvų netektį, mokinių emocinė gerovė – dažniausiai tyrinėjama reakcija į tėvų mirtį, ankstesnių tyrimų rezultatų šia tema paprastai publikuoja universiteto darbuotojai. **Išvados.** Reikalingi tolesni tyrimai, analizuojantys tėvų poveikį mokiniams.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** tėvų mirtis, poveikis mokiniams, rizikos faktoriai.

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