Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Parentally Bereaved Children and Adolescents


Thirty-nine youth (age 7-17 years old) whose parent had died and their surviving parent were surveyed; they were compared to children who had experienced a tornado, and to a non-trauma control group on measures of emotional adjustment. Parentally bereaved children reported significantly more PTSD symptoms compared to the other groups.

- Parentally bereaved children reported significantly more PTSD symptoms than the children who survived a tornado and children in the non-trauma group. A significantly greater portion of the bereaved group (41%) scored in the severe range on the PTSD measure than youth surviving a natural disaster (14%) and the nontrauma (13%) group.
- Bereaved girls, younger children, and children whose parent scored higher on a measure of PTSD were at greater risk for PTSD symptoms.
- Surviving parents underestimated the severity of their children’s PTSD symptoms. However, children who reported more severe symptoms were generally perceived as being distressed by their parents.
- Parents who were more distressed perceived more symptoms in their children.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could provide classes for children of a deceased parent, offering strategies for coping with emerging challenges and resources for further assistance if needed.
- Programs could educate surviving parents and other caregivers (e.g., grandparents) about possible difficulties children may experience in relation to parental loss.

Implications for Policies:

- Policies could recommend funding to develop mental health resources for families with a deceased military parent, including practical supports for both the children and surviving parent.
- Policies could fund outreach efforts to families of deceased Service members and could offer opportunities for mutual support (e.g., camps, support groups.)

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could be conducted within a military population for children with a deceased parent to explore any differences in outcomes.
- Additional studies could be conducted with more diverse samples and with different comparison groups.
Parentally bereaved youth ages 7-17 years old were recruited from 12 public schools via school counselors in suburban communities. Youth with parental deaths occurring within the previous 6 months and those with a history of psychiatric disturbance or exposure to a natural disaster were excluded.

The parentally bereaved students were compared to students who had experienced a tornado and to those who had not experienced a trauma.

All students completed the Child Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index, children’s anxiety and depression scales, and a negative events checklist. Surviving parents completed the Child Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index, children’s anxiety and depression scales for their children, and measures of their own PTSD, anxiety and depression.

Analyses of variance compared group differences between the parentally bereaved, non-trauma, and natural disaster groups of students. Regression analyses evaluated how these correlates contributed to post-death adjustment.

39 parentally bereaved students participated (67% female).

Mean age of students = 12.97 (SD=2.74) years, 95% White, parent’s job: 59% middle management, 33% professional.

Mean child age at time of parental death=9.82 (SD=4.19) years, mean length since death = 3.14 (SD=2.80) years.

85% lost their fathers due to disease (71%) or accident (29%).

The sample was self-selected, and these results may not generalize to all parentally bereaved children.

The sample was not diverse, and these findings may not generalize to other groups of children.

The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was...

The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...

The limitations of this study are...

The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...

Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating

Assessing Research that Works