

*The Carter–Jenkins Center  
presents*



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**Psychoanalyst, Children, Adolescents and Adults**

# **Mourning in Children: A Brief Review of the Literature**

**by**

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## Age of acquisition of the concept of death

- Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), refers to the remark of a highly intelligent boy of ten, after the sudden death of his father: “I know father’s dead, but what I can’t understand is why he doesn’t come home to supper.”
- I knew a four-year-old girl, whose reaction to the sudden death of her father, several months later, on her birthday, was to be extremely disappointed because her father had not come to her party or sent her any presents.

# **Mourning in Children: A Brief Review of Literature**

1. Young children always react strongly to separation from important objects.
2. They cannot distinguish between temporary absence and permanent loss.

## Mourning in Children: A Brief Review of Literature (cont.)

3. Bowlby considers the reaction of infants, when separated from important objects, as identical with the adult reaction to mourning, a point of view that has been questioned by Anna Freud and others.
4. Bowlby believes that mourning (in the adult sense) is possible in infants and can be observed from the sixth month onward.

# Mourning in Children: A Brief Review of Literature (cont.)

6. Different authors actually disagree, on the age at which children, are capable of mourning.
7. Ten or eleven, is the age at which children comprehend the concept of death as we have seen earlier.

# **Mourning in Children: A Brief Review of the Literature (cont.)**

- 8. Furman, thinks that mourning can be observed only, from the third or fourth year of life onward.
- 9. Most authors believe, that mourning process differs in children and adults.



## **Mourning in Children: Brief Review of Literature (cont.)**

10. Wolfenstein, thinks that mourning becomes possible only with the resolution of the adolescent phase, after the appropriate detachment from the parental figures, has taken place.
  
11. My own view is closer to that of Wolfenstein, mourning as observed in the adult is not possible until the detachment from parental figures has taken place, in adolescence.

# Object Relations and Mourning

1. To understand the reactions of children to loss we need to know the role that such objects play at different stages in the child's physical, psychological, and emotional development.
2. Some of the reactions observed in the child have to be understood as the result of the absence of one of the elements required for his normal development and not necessarily as a mourning reaction to the loss of the object (as will be the case in the adult personality).

## Object Relations and Mourning(cont)

3. Distinguish then, in the overt manifestation of the child's reactions to loss, those that are the result of the developmental disturbances introduced by the object loss and the "true mourning reactions to that loss."
4. In the adult, the role of the withdrawal of cathexis previously attached to the lost object is to free energies for the cathexis of a new object.
5. Withdrawal of cathexis from the lost object will leave the child in a "developmental vacuum" unless a suitable substitute object is readily found.

## **Mourning in Children: Brief Review of Literature (cont.)**

12. Garber in his paper *Mourning in Children a Theoretical Synthesis and Clinical Application* (2008) referring to the reactions of children to the lost of a parent stated:

“The response of children to the death of a parent assumed a regular and specific pattern, one that is strikingly similar to pathological mourning in adults. A particular set of responses occurs in children who experience the death of a parent. These reactions include unconscious and sometimes conscious denial of the reality of the parent's death, rigid screening out of all affective responses connected with the death, marked increase in identification with and idealization of the dead parent, decrease of self-esteem, feelings of guilt, and persistent unconscious fantasies of an ongoing relationship or reunion with the dead parent. Consequently, Wolfenstein (1966, 1969) and Nagera (1970) believe that decathexis of the internalized parental images, as a normal part of adolescence, must occur before a person can fully decathect a parent's death”.

# Mourning in Children: Brief Review of Literature (cont.)

13. He quoted:

a. Lampl- De Groot (1976, p.278):

“The age at which a child is capable of a real mourning process varies individually and is dependent upon the rate of maturation and developmental structuralization”.\*

b. Pollock (1978, p.263) :

“When one approaches the mourning process from a developmental perspective the question of whether mourning is possible in infancy, childhood or adolescence becomes one concerning the stages of the process as they come into being at particular points of overall development”... “The above conclusions of the psychoanalytic investigators of mourning might be integrated if one views the mourning process as a sequential process that is intimately related to the maturation of the psychic apparatus” (Pollock, 1978, p. 265).

# Mourning in Children: Brief Review of Literature (cont.)

c: Garber (1981) :

He proposed a similar idea based on clinical data from the Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. Garber indicates that the either-or question in regard to mourning in children is not a valid one at this stage of our theoretical thinking. Children's mourning the death of a parent extends over a wide spectrum. It is indeed possible that a number of children are incapable of engaging in a sequential step-by-step mourning. They may be the children described by Wolfenstein and others. However, the individual children described by Furman, Kliman, and others possess the cognitive and emotional equipment to engage in an intense and meaningful mourning process. Between these extremes are children who seem to illustrate the theoretical position that the child mourns to the degree to which he or she is developmentally capable.

## Mourning in Children: Brief Review of Literature (cont.)

d. Altschul (1988): Garber mentioned Altschul as stating: “From the work at the Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center), we learned that the child's mourning does not conform to or follow a straight line. Instead, children mourn piecemeal or segmentally, approaching the loss with newly developed emotional and cognitive equipment. This allows them to deal with different aspects of the loss during different phases”.

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