

The Meaning of Parent's Death for Children and Adolescents

Novie Triana Wijayanti
 University of Muhammadiyah Malang
 trianawijyantinnovie@gmail.com

Wiwik Suatin
 University of Muhammadiyah Malang
 wiwiklatief@gmail.com

Abstract: *The purpose of this research is to know the meaning of death for children and adolescents. The study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The participants were eight children and adolescents at the age of 9-15 years, who were left by their father or mother. Data were collected from the interview. The result of this research showed that all participants had different reactions in facing the death of one of their parents. The loss resulted in deep sadness, feeling the loss of prominent figures, and even a lack of love of intact family.*

Keywords: *death, parent, children, adolescents*

Introduction

Death is a fact in life that cannot be avoided by everyone. It comes to the elder, young people, and even babies. Causes of death can be illness, age, accident, natural disaster, or even suicide. According to the words of Allah in Al-Qur'an, "Anywhere you are, death will come to you, even if you are in the tallest and the strongest castle" (An-Nisa: 4:78).

Someone's death involves not only himself but also someone else who suffers from that and feels deep sadness because of the death (Turner & Helmes in Hurlock, 2007). It can also significantly affect someone physically, emotionally, and spiritually (James & Friedman, 1998).

Anyone experiencing a loss means that he separates from something that existed before (Yosep, 2010). The feeling of losing someone is usually expressed through crying, getting angry, feeling sad, feeling disappointed, and getting depressed. A loss is very difficult to be avoided (Stuart & Sundeen, 1998), including losing wealth, health, beloved one, and a chance.

The normal condolence response from children who lost their parents is similar to the adult's response when facing severe problems, but their condolence is not the same. It is a little bit harder for children to accept death, and sometimes the feelings show in a couple of years, even until they become teenagers. On the other hand, teenagers who are grieving may feel it hard to believe that their parents are gone, strongly protest, and try to get their parents back (Bowlby in Hiew, 2005). The more mature someone is the more understanding and accepting he is in facing death. In contrast, children and teenagers have stages when facing difficulty and never know what stage they will be more accepting (Astuti, 2005).

Based on the explanation, the purpose of this research is to understand the meaning of parents' death for children and teenagers, and how they deal with it.

Death

Biologically, death is the discontinuation of the activity process in an individual, which is shown by the loss of brain function, the stop of heartbeat, blood flow, and breathing (Ismail, 2009). Sihab (2008) stated that death is the end of all the luxury of the world. The participants of this research are children and teenagers who experienced the death of their beloved family members. It is reported that about 4% of children and teenagers in the United States lost their parents (Joyce-Beaulieu & Sulkowski, 2016).

The loss of a parent because of death can affect their growth development at a young age. On the one hand, a study by Hoeg et al. (2016) shows that children who lost their parents quickly get depressed, anxious, hurt themselves, get involved in drug abuse, or even overeating. On the other hand, children who were left by their parents can be socially and financially successful, enjoy their life, and physically healthy (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

Teenagers often express their feelings by crying, being sad, or refusing and regretting things. As a substitute, a teacher can replace the function of parents (Suzanna, 2018). A teenager is in the transition phase from childhood into adulthood (Marmi, 2015). The early years of adolescence are marked by dramatic physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that are initiated by the onset of puberty (Allison, 2000). In this transition stage, adolescents are also looking for their identity. In this confusing and challenging development process, they need understanding and help from their beloved ones, especially their parents. Therefore, in the critical stage, losing someone they respect and guide them can be very troublesome (Hurlock in Adina, 2013).

Margaret (Hurlock, 2007) reported that besides the fulfillment of a physiological need, children need love for their healthy psychological development. Teenagers can survive well from stressing situations if they have a close and loving relationship with their parents,

especially mothers.

Losing is an actual and potential situation that can be experienced by an individual when they separate from something that existed before, partly or as a whole, that can change their life (Pooter & Perry, 2005). The loss can include losing an external object, familiar environment, or someone precious in life. An individual who experiences it will show an emotional reaction, which is grieving. The meaning of losing parents for children and teenagers can be different and happen for a long time, even for years.

Research Method

This research uses qualitative with a phenomenological approach. This is to find the definition or understanding of the phenomenon experienced by the research subject through the description in words and language in a particular and natural context (Moleong, 2009).

There are eight respondents with the following characteristics: (1) Children and teenagers who lost either a mother or a father, or both parents, because of death (2) Aged between 9 and 17 years old, so they can describe death. (3) Children and teenagers who lost one of their parents or both.

The data were collected using an in-depth interview. The interview is retrospective because the event was experienced by the respondents in the past.

Result and Discussion

Based on the in-depth interview and field notes during the data collection process, there are five themes discovered: 1) The different levels of sadness, 2) The loss of parents figure, 3) The decrease of love, 4) The loss of intact family.

Theme 1: the different level of sadness

Fatimah stated: *“At that time I was very sad because I was really close with my father, I didn’t believe it and cried for a long time, because my father asked me to do the isya’ prayer and he looked very healthy, but suddenly died the next morning.”* The death of her father is a significant loss because, for her, he is everything.

The same thing also happened to Rara, who was left by her father at seven years old *“At that time I was aware that my father had passed away at home, I was just crying my heart out more when I saw my mother passed out, whereas we still had a conversation at maghrib, but he passed away at isya.’*

Another story came from Andika, who had been left by his father since he was a toddler: *“I don’t know when my father passed away. My mother and other people told me that my father passed away when I was a baby, but I don’t know why sometimes I envy my friends who have a father because I don’t know the feeling of having one.”*

Toddlers are aware of any changes in their environment. Unlike preschoolers, they have concerns

about who is taking care of them. School-age children will be concerned if their friends or other people see them differently (Abeles et al., 2004).

When toddlers grow up as a teenager, the feeling of losing someone will appear as something missing because they feel different in their life compared to their friends who have both parents. Growing up in a single-parent family can affect a child's health (Weitoft, 2003). Children cannot completely resolve early loss, but it depends on how children understand early loss when their cognitive capacity is mature (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011).

Another participant, Adelia, felt a deep sadness for a while before she accepted the fact and tried to be patient. She stated, *“When my father passed away, I felt really sad, I cried the whole time for days, but after that, my mother said that I have to be patient and did not feel sad anymore and take care of her. My mother said that my father is not in pain anymore. He is happy up there instead of sick all the time here. Those words stopped me from crying at that time until now; I rarely felt sad because I believe that he is happy there.”*

Adelia was able to find a way to overcome her sadness over the loss of her father because she was told as much as possible about her father’s illness. Families who did not tell their children about parental illness would weaken the positive response (Cinzia et al., 2014).

It shows that the participants have different ways of expressing sadness. Girls can express their loss better than boys, which often express it by being silent and hiding their feelings (Marks et al., 2007).

Being sad is the process of losing. Someone who experiences a loss should be given a chance to find a way to overcome it so that they can be more accepting (Hatta, 2015). Otherwise, it could be the beginning of mental disorders.

Theme 2: The loss of parent figure

There are several categories of parents figure for the participants.

1. Father as a role model for his family (4 out of 8 participants)
2. Father as an adviser (2 out of 8 participants)
3. Father as a friend (2 out of 8 participants)
4. Father as an important figure (1 out of 8 participants),

The participants had different experiences with their father, as mentioned in the interview.

“The night before my father passed away, he asked me to do the isya’ prayer together, he said prayer could not be delayed” (Fatimah)

“My father was very kind; if I did something wrong, he never got angry with me. Instead, he gave me some pieces of advice while hanging out with me” (Rara)

“My father was really close to me. Other children are taken care of by their mother, but I was always taken care of by my father” (Fatimah)

“My father used to tell me to study hard so I can be a

policeman. I always remember that “ (Fathir)

It can be seen that losing parents also means losing a role model and motivator for children and teenagers. When they need those figures, it is very hard to accept the loss as they are in a transition phase and need a role model to get through the development stage well (T. Castiglia, 1988). The death of an older adult member in a family can have a significant impact on family functioning (Abeles et al., 2004). A father's death leads to more negative effects on sons, and a mother's death leads to more negative effects for daughters (Marks et al., 2007).

The result is parallel to Noviani's research (2006), "The Meaning of Losing Parent for Teenagers in social institution Bina Remaja Indralaya South Sumatera." By interviewing six subjects, she found that the meaning of a parent's death includes losing a figure as a role model.

Theme 3: The decrease in love

Rara stated that she could not get much love and attention from her father anymore, so she felt a profound loss. She said, *"My father used to get my school report. If I got good grade he would smile, now I always remember my father when I get my school report, especially when I saw my friend' parents got the school*

Another participant, Adelia, said, *"My father cared so much about me. He always checked if I had already had a meal or not, if I studied or not, even though sometimes he only asked me by phone."*

It is different from Andika, who felt that losing his father is also losing love from his parents. Even though his father passed away when he was little, but stories from other people make him feel a great loss of love. It also happened to Bella and Bagas. For Bagas, his father was a funny man. He liked to play football with him. When they watched television, it was very loud and chaotic and made his mother angry.

Adolescents who experience parental death during their childhood consider themselves more vulnerable to future losses (Gina). This research is relevant to a previous study by Nurhidayati & Chairani (2014), which revealed that teenagers aged between 11 and 15 years old who lost their father experienced an emotional problem like loneliness, sadness, and loss.

The participants in this study missed the father figure, who gave them an abundance of love. Therefore, with limited guidance, they have to arrange their own life and will have more psychological problems in comparison with children and teenagers who have complete parents.

Theme 4: The loss of intact family

The feelings expressed include sad feelings because they cannot together and jealousy over friends who are helped a lot by their father.

"I feel sad when I saw my friends being accompanied by their father, but I have to go alone" (Adelia)

"My father used to get my school report, and he would be smiling if I got a good grade, so now when I get it, I

remember him, especially when I saw my friend got their school report taken by their parents" (Fatimah) *"When I had a father, I was always accompanied everywhere. If my mother worked, he always accompanied me at home. He liked to take me somewhere, like watching football in the field even it was hot. I was thrilled."* (Rara)

"My father used to take me to go swimming. He said a boy should be able to swim so he could help people, but now I rarely go swimming because sometimes I feel sad and jealous over my friends who are accompanied by their father." (Fathir)

"Yeah, even though my grandparents give me much attention, but sometimes I am jealous over my friends who have father, joking together and getting what they want, that was when I feel sad." (Bella)

"I am very sad, even crying, when I heard takbir on lebaran day when everybody gets together with their family. There is only me and my mother at home. Sometimes it makes me angry, and I wanted to go to my father's place up there." (Ratna)

The result of the research is parallel with Gladding (2002), which stated that the character of a dysfunctional family is imbalance parenting. A negative relationship will have a sad response that is different from those who basically have a positive relationship with parents (Apelian & Nesteru, 2017).

Children and teenagers who lost parents do not get enough attention, love, togetherness, or protection. This will not happen if children get support from parents and other adults around them, which helps the entire family cope with the situation (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2014). They will face a stressful new reality created by drastic changes in family structure and their daily routine (Elizur & Kaffman, 1982). This was also shown in Allison's (2000) study reporting lower levels of depressive symptoms in boys compared to girls, and older children showed lower levels of anxiety than younger children.

Conclusion

The death of parents can result in loss of attention and love, role model, sense of security, friend to share everything with, intact family, and loss of direction in life in children and teenagers. It also leads to deep sadness and a lack of love for an intact family. The response of loss like denial, anger, depression, and acceptance should be accompanied by prayer, hope, and support from the family so the children can get through the sadness and acceptance the destiny from Allah SWT. Children and teenagers need a substitute figure, from the closest family, step-mother, or step-father. If the substituting figure can play the role well, children and teenagers will be more responsible and emotionally stable. Otherwise, the children may perform in negative social behavior or experience mental disorders.

References

- Abeles, N., Victor, T. L., & Delano-Wood, L. (2004). The impact of an older adult's death on the family. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(3), 234–239. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.35.3.234>
- Adina. (2013). Berduka pada remaja dengan kehilangan orang tua. *Jurnal Masker Medika STIKes Muhammadiyah Palembang*, 8(2), 39–49.
- Allison, B. N. (2000). Parent-adolescent conflict in early adolescence: Research and implications for middle school program. *J Family Consum Sci Educ*, 18(2), 1–6.
- Apelian, E., & Nesteru, O. (2017). Reflection of young adults on loss of a parent in adolescence. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 8(3–4), 79–100.
- Astuti, Y. D. (2005). Kematian akibat bencana dan pengaruhnya pada kondisi psikologis survivor: Tinjauan tentang arti penting death education. *Humanitas: Indonesian Psychological Journal*, 2(1), 41–53.
- Biank, N. M., & Werner-Lin, A. (2011). Growing up with grief: Revisiting the death of a parent over the life course. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 63(3), 271–290. <https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.63.3.e>
- Cinzia, P. A., Montagna, L., Mastroianni, C., Giuseppe, C., Piredda, M., & De Marinis, M. G. (2014). Losing a parent: Analysis of the literature on the experiences and needs of adolescents dealing with grief. *Journal of Hospice and Palliative Nursing*, 16(6), 362–373.
- ELIZUR, E., & KAFFMAN, M. (1982). Children's Bereavement Reactions Following Death of the Father: II. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 21(5), 474–480. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-7138\(09\)60797-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-7138(09)60797-4)
- Gladding, S. T. (2002). *Family therapy: History, theory, and practice* (3rd ed.). Columbus: Pearson Education Inc.
- Hatta, K. (2015). Peran Orangtua Dalam Proses Pemulihan Trauma Anak. *Gender Equality: Internasional Journal of Child and Gender Studies*, 1(2), 57–74.
- Hiew, C. . (2005). Trauma healing and resilience. In *Tsunami Trauma Training Conference*. Jakarta: Universitas Tarumanegara.
- Hoeg, B. L., Appel, C. W., Heymann-Horan, A. B. von, Frederiksen, K., Johansen, C., Boge, P., ... Bidstrup, P. E. (2016). Maladaptive coping in adults who have experience early parental loss and grief counseling. *Journal of Health Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316638550>
- Hurlock, E. (2007). *Psikologi perkembangan suatu pendekatan sepanjang rentang kehidupan*. (Istiwidayanti & Soedjarwo, Eds.) (Edisi keli). Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Ismail. (2009). *Menuju hidup islami*. Yogyakarta: Insan Madani.
- James, J. W., & Friedman, R. (1998). *The grief recovery handbook: The action program for moving beyond death, divorce, and other losses*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Joyce-Beaulieu, D., & Sulkowski, M. L. (2016). The diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: Fifth edition (DSM-5) model of impairment. *Assessing Impairment: From Theory to Practice*, 167–189. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-7996-4_8
- Kirkpatrick, L. A., & Davis, K. E. (1994). Attachment style, gender, and relationship stability: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Personality, and Social Psychology*, 66(3), 502.
- Marks, N. F., Jun, H., & Song, J. (2007). Death of parents and adult psychological and physical well-being: A prospective U.S. national study. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(12), 1611–1638. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07302728>
- Marmi. (2015). *Kesehatan reproduksi*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Noviani, S. (2006). *Konsep kematian dan rekasi kedukaan pad aremaja yang kehilangan orang tua akibat gempa di Yogyakarta pada tahun 2006*. Universitas Indonesia.
- Nurhidayati, & Lisy Chairani. (2014). Makna Kematian Orangtua Bagi Remaja (Studi Fenomenologi Pada Remaja Pasca Kematian Orangtua). *Jurnal Psikologi UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau*, 10(Juni), 33–40.
- Pooter, & Perry. (2005). *Fundamental keperawatan* (Volume 1). Jakarta: EGC.
- Schonfeld, D. J., & Quackenbush, M. (2014). After a loved one dies — How children grieve and how parents other adults can support them . *New York Foundation*, 1(1), 21.
- Sihab, M, Q. (2008). *Menjemput maut*. Jakarta: Lentera Hati.
- Stuart, & Sundeen. (1998). *Buku saku keperawatan jiwa* (3rd ed.). Jakarta: EGC.
- Suzanna, S. (2018). Makna Kehilangan Orangtua Bagi Remaja di Panti Sosial Bina Remaja Indralaya Sumatera Selatan; Studi Fenomenologi. *Jurnal Aisyah: Jurnal Ilmu Kesehatan*, 3(1), 61–76. <https://doi.org/10.30604/jika.v3i1.86>
- T. Castiglia, P. (1988). Death of a parent. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 2(3), 157–159. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0891-5245\(88\)90011-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0891-5245(88)90011-9)
- Weitof, G. R. (2003). Mortality , severe morbidity , and injury in children living with ... *The Lancet*, 361, 289–295.
- Yosep, I. (2010). *Keperawatan jiwa*. Jakarta: Refika Aditama