

Resilience and the Fate of a Child: Loss of a Parent Due to Death and Incarceration

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Abstract

Many studies have shown that children who lose parents to death or incarceration have lasting negative outcomes. The purpose of our study was to shed light on factors that may lead to resilience in adulthood even in the face of parent loss. In this study, we interviewed three African American women in their late 20s and early 30s who lost a parent in their childhood. Questions sought to uncover what kinds of mentorship was available to the women after losing their parents as well as their support systems. Areas of interest that were uncovered in these interviews include the importance of mentorship and support in creating healthy coping strategies. Additional research should be done to show whether gender and age makes a difference when a child loses a parent.

Introduction

The Adverse Childhood Experience Study, more commonly known as the ACE Study, was popularized in the 1990s as a tool for doctors to use to predict risk outcomes in children. The thought was that doctors could predict mental and physical outcomes of the child from their ACE score (Felitti et al., 246). The questionnaire measures how many adverse childhood experiences a child faced, and is broken down into seven categories, including physical, psychological, sexual abuse, substance abuse, mental illness, violence towards family members, and incarceration of parents (Felitti et al., 245). Doctors interpret the study by saying the higher a child's ACE score is, the more likely they are to be at higher risk of several negative outcomes in adulthood. For example, a child could be at a higher risk of obesity, depression, and substance abuse, according to their ACE score (Felitti et al., 248). However, current studies often ignore factors that can allow children to become resilient in the face of adversity.

The aim of our study was to see what factors may lead to resiliency among children who lost a parent due to incarceration or death. In order to do this, we researched the common experiences of children who lost a parent to incarceration or death. We also interviewed three women who had experienced the loss of a parent in their childhood. We wanted to see if having support made a difference in the lives and adulthood of our interviewees.

Literature Review

Parent Loss in the African American Community

“More than one out of every six black men who today should be between 25 and 54 years old have disappeared from daily life” (NAACP, 2021). Despite stereotypes surrounding single-parent households, the majority of African American parents who are not present in their children's lives can be attributed to death and incarceration, not a parent just leaving (NAACP, 2021). It is important to understand why incarceration and death rates are so much higher in African American communities.

“Compared with Americans of European descent, Black Americans have greater physical health, morbidity and mortality at every age”. For example, black women are twice as likely to die of hypertensive cardiovascular disease than white women. African Americans have a shorter

life expectancy than white Americans, blacks average is 70 years old compared to whites average is 77 years old (Jackson et al., 2010, 1). African Americans, especially men, are incarcerated at higher rates than white Americans are. “African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites.” (NAACP, 2021). Specifically, “one out of every three Black boys born today can expect to be sentenced to prison, compared to 1 out of 6 Latino boys; one out of 17 white boys.” This is not because they commit crimes at higher rates, but because they are more heavily policed. “5% of illicit drug users are African American, yet African Americans represent 29% of those arrested and 33% of those incarcerated for drug offenses” (NAACP, 2021). This is why there is a higher amount of African Americans incarcerated and dead because of stress caused by societal pressures.

Death of a Parent

Children often face many consequences when a parent dies. Many children are impacted immediately after the loss. These impacts are widespread; in the United States, three to four percent of children have lost a parent before the age of 18 (Bergman et al., 2). Children who lose their parent to death show an increased amount of mental health problems and behavioral problems, including depression, anxiety, and at risk of committing suicide (Bergman et al., 2). There are also long term consequences for children when they lose a parent at a young age. The University of Pittsburgh completed a longitudinal study over seven years to examine pediatric grief over a parent’s death. This study found that losing a parent at a young age negatively impacts a child’s academic performance and social interactions. In fact, children who lost a parent were more than twice as likely to show negative social and academic consequences than children who did not have a death of a parent, even after seven years (University Of Pittsburgh Psychiatry Department 2018). One mitigating factor that may improve these outcomes is whether the child has a healthy attachment to another parental figure in their lives.

After a parent death, many children seek an attachment to someone who can fill the void of the parent they lost. This idea is called the attachment theory, which says that small children need love and support from at least one consistent adult in their life. When a child is in a two parent household, both parents play an important role in how the child develops, especially when it comes to developing healthy relationships with others in the present and the future (Vitelli

2018). However, attachment theory stresses the importance of at least one consistent adult; children in single parent households can also form healthy attachments. Many times after the death of a parent, however, the child may not have a completely present parent in their life because their other parent is struggling with grief. This can make the child crave for attachment because the other parent is not fully capable of caring for their child (Bergman et al., 2). Some children if they lose their only present parent, may not have another consistent, caring adult in their lives, and therefore may be less likely to form healthy attachments. When a child loses a parent it can sometimes lead to traumatic grief if the child is completely void of another attachment to an adult.

There are several ways that a child may be traumatized about the death of their parent and struggle to grieve healthily. When kids are dealing with grief over time, if they did not come to terms with the death they are more likely to withdraw from others and suffer from anxiety and depression (Vitelli, 2018). Traumatic grief is especially likely when a parent dies a violent death or the loss was immediate and unexpected. Traumatic grief is when the child may experience a trauma response when they think of their parent's death throughout their lives, even years after the death. For example, a child may have witnessed their parent get violently killed or see their parent overdose. A child may benefit from counseling, especially if the child is or has experienced traumatic grief. Traumatic grief can also occur when a child does not have a second stable parent in their life and deprived of that much needed attachment. A child may be forced to deal with their trauma alone while having to take on a bigger role in their home.

Children may have to take on larger roles in the home after the loss of a parent. Adulthoodification is when young boys and girls are overaged or forced to take on caretaking roles in the home (Johnson 2020, 129). For example, girls can be sexualized as they get older and boys can be looked at as a threat (Johnson 2020, 132). When a child loses a parent, the most likely form of adulthoodification, however, is parentification. Parentification often occurs when the parents either pass away or are incarcerated. This forces children to have to step up in order to take care of themselves and their siblings. For example, a girl can take on the traditional caretaking role of the mother and be forced to have the burden of doing the things a mother does, including keeping the house clean and taking care of younger children in the family. Also, boys can be parentified

due to economic issues in the home. Some boys feel forced to become, “the man of the house,” when a father is not present, and may feel pressure to bring in money for the household at a young age. This can be really difficult as a young child when they barely have enough knowledge to complete these tasks effectively (Johnson 2020, 137). Not only are children impacted by the death of a parent, but also the incarceration of a parent.

Incarcerated Parents

There are a vast number of people incarcerated in the United States. Mass incarceration has grown over time, so much so that, “by 2008, 1.5 million people were incarcerated in prisons, with hundreds of thousands more in jails” (Geller et al., 2011, 50). This consists of mostly men, many of whom have children (Geller et al., 2011, 50). However, the female incarceration rate has also increased over time. Daillare states that, “In 2000, the female incarcerated population was growing by 11.2% annually” (Daillare, 2006, 15). One consequence of the rise in incarceration is that it impacts a child’s relationship with their parent negatively.

The incarceration of a parent is an especially hard form of absentee parent. Children with incarcerated parents generally have worse outcomes than children with other forms of absent parents for several reasons. One reason is because less than, “ $\frac{1}{3}$ of fathers who are incarcerated see their child regularly” (Geller et al., 2011, 51). This can be because of many factors. Transportation to the jail may be difficult, or the child’s mother may not want their child to see their fathers in jail. When a child’s father is incarcerated, children are forced to be separated from them for a long period of time, which can be detrimental to their relationship with their father (Geller et al., 2011, 51). This can be due to a child not seeing their father everyday or being angry because of the incarceration. When a parent is incarcerated it can also disrupt the family in other harmful ways. Since the father traditionally may be the “breadwinner” before becoming incarcerated, the household income will suffer with the loss of his paycheck and may not be able to pay their bills (Geller et al., 2011, 51). The home can become even more broken because parents are more likely to be divorce or separated when their father goes to jail. If this is the case, the child not only has to manage having their father in jail, but also the challenges that come with divorce or separation (Geller et al., 2011, 51). While having an incarcerated parent can There are many gender outcomes from having an incarcerated father.

When a father is incarcerated and not present in the home, this affects boys and girls differently. Boys become increasingly more aggressive when their father is incarcerated. This is not seen when their mother is incarcerated, however (Geller et al., 2011, 61). Comparatively, a girl does not show these same impacts. This is likely because a father is more likely to be more involved in their sons' lives rather than in their daughters' lives (Geller et al., 2011, 61). Boys and girls are affected similarly in school. Generally, both boys and girls have more problems in school, due to attention problems and language deficits (Geller et al., 2011, 61).

Many children are affected by the incarceration of their mothers. Having an incarcerated mother tends to be more detrimental to children than having an incarcerated father. This is because children have lower levels of social support. Children need social support because when kids lose their mother, oftentimes the mother is their primary caregiver (Dallaire, 2006, 17-18). Children need their mother to talk to when things get hard and if they do not have that support, it can be detrimental to the child. Comparatively, only half of fathers who are incarcerated were involved in regular child care prior to their incarceration (Geller et al., 2011, 51). Many children whose mothers are incarcerated do not have a father at home and have a history of incarceration (Geller et al., 2011, 62). Children can be left without the support of their mothers and left to be dealt with by people who do not have their best interests at heart.

Daughters of incarcerated mothers are vastly affected by their mother's incarceration. In particular, daughters tend to have more emotional and physical problems when their mothers are incarcerated. Girls who are in elementary school have physical and emotional problems, including bedwetting and have higher rates of depression, anger, and unable to express their emotions in a healthy way (Dallaire, 2011, 17). The incarceration of a girl's mother can impact them into their adolescence. Teenage girls are more likely to be sexually promiscuous and get pregnant than their peers (Dallaire, 2011, 18). This may be because mothers tend to be a buffer for their daughters being adultified and over sexualized. The hardship of losing a mother to incarceration in their childhood can impact their formative years.

A child's teenage years can have a vastly different outcome if their mother is incarcerated. Once a child becomes a teenager, the child begins to grow stronger social ties outside of their mother, like friends, family, and school. Having these stronger social ties can be

either positive or negative, based on their peer group, because teenagers are more prone to peer pressure (Dallaire, 2011, 17). However, if the father or another family member steps in, the teens can benefit from increased stability at home (Dallaire, 2011, 17). There are some general negative outcomes of adolescents having their mothers incarcerated. Adolescents are three times as likely to drop out of school and six times as likely to go to jail themselves if their mother is incarcerated. In their teenage years, 17% of teens with an incarcerated mom are placed in a juvenile detention center themselves (Dallaire, 2011, 18). During formative teenage years, this can impact the rest of their lives.

Building Stability After the Loss of a Parent

Grief looks differently for various people, but it is important to have an outlet to embrace and speak about grief, no matter how the grief looks. One way to help people embrace grief is to reframe the idea of, “overcoming” a parent death to, “coming to terms” with a parent death. Psychologists believe it may be important for people to see that grief can look differently over time, too. Generally, the stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The stages of grief are not linear, and kids may not experience all of them, but they do need to be explored to reach acceptance. Children often live in a state of denial for months and even years after the loss was experienced. Counseling can be helpful, when it comes to embracing grief.

A form of counseling that can be helpful for a child experiencing grief is a Family Bereavement Group. A Family Bereavement Group is a group where children can speak to other kids who have gone through a similar experience, and parents can speak to other adults in the same situation (Bergman et al., 3). This gives kids and parents an outlet to speak and also a community that better understands what they are going through. This could help parents and children learn to talk about the grief or trauma surrounding a parent death.

Study Hypotheses

Research says that having an absent parent can have a negative impact on a child into adulthood. However, much of the research highlights the experiences of white Americans. We were interested in researching African American women’s experiences. Additionally, while research has shown that adverse childhood experiences lead to negative outcomes, it has not

explored buffers that may lead to a better outcome for the child. Our research aims to shed a light on what buffers can lead to a child having resilience despite losing their parent through death or incarceration.

We hypothesize first that when a child loses a parent of the same gender, they will likely face more challenges. Our next hypothesis is that if a child has an emotionally stable second parent, they are more likely to have stable outcomes themselves. The last hypothesis is that if a child has a support system outside of their household, they are more likely to cope in healthier ways.

Methods

In our study, the primary author interviewed three African American women who grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. All of the women were in their late twenties to early thirties at the time of the interview. The first woman's father died when she was 15, and the second's father was incarcerated when she was a young child. The final interviewee's mother died when the interviewee was 14, and her father was incarcerated when she was 5. The purpose of the interviews was to uncover the challenges the three women faced after they lost their parents and how they became resilient despite the challenges that they faced.

Results

Our first hypothesis, that when the child loses a parent of the same gender, they will likely face more challenges, was not supported. Only one of the interviewees lost a parent of the same gender. However, she and the other interviewees went through similar experiences and challenges and should be researched more in depth.

One reason that our hypothesis was not supported was that all three women struggled with forming healthy relationships with others, but the woman who lost her mother struggled with having a healthy relationship with herself. Aubree was the only woman interviewed to have lost a parent of the same gender, and she had challenges with her confidence and self esteem. Aubree said, "My mother had conversations with me when I was 11 to 13 years old about things no one else ever talked to me about and she tried to instill important things in me." Her mother

was not there to help build up her self esteem and support her. The other women did not openly talk about their self esteem, but they also were not directly asked about it. All three interviewees faced challenges in relationships they made and kept. Sarah said, “my social life would have been different if my father was alive.” Sarah believes she would not have struggled within her social life because her father would have been there to guide her.

Under this hypothesis, we believed that children who lost parents of the same gender would be more likely to be adultified. This was not supported. In our interviews, gender did not seem to matter when it came to adultification, however, age and birth order did seem to matter. In Sarah’s family, she saw her older sister’s role change as she became a stand in father figure, while Sarah herself did not see her role change in her household. This was very different compared with Bella’s experience, who experienced adultification when her father was imprisoned. She explained that she had to take on a larger household role and take care of her younger siblings while her mother was working.

Our second hypothesis was that if a child had an emotionally and financially stable second parent, they were more likely to have stable outcomes themselves. This also was not supported. All three women reported being emotionally and financially stable in adulthood, even though they were not supported emotionally and financially as a child. However, all the interviewees had trouble with stability growing up, and this should be researched more in depth.

One reason that our hypothesis was not supported was that all three struggled with having the support emotionally as a child, but some were not supported financially as a child. Aubree did not have a stable second parent. This affected her in the short term because she was moved from foster family to foster family after her parents passed away. She felt misunderstood in the homes and in turn acted out. This changed because as she became an adult, she began to realize that she had the autonomy to make decisions herself. She became a social worker because of her experiences in her childhood and wanted to help kids feel like they had a stable support system in her that she did not have when she was their age. However, Sarah had two stable parents after her father’s death: her mother and her stepmother. In her childhood, she had to make the difficult decision of whether to live with her stepmother or her mother, but she had two homes with a stable adult in them. In the interview, she admits that she would push people away because she

was angry due to her father's death. As an adult, she learned through her experience with grief and started to understand when she needs time for herself. She learned coping strategies and changed her mindset from being regretful for the time without her father to being grateful for that time with him. She became an entrepreneur and is fulfilled by her career. Lastly, Bella also had a stable parent, her mother. As a child, she would act in anger and get in trouble for her behavior. This was because she was confused as to why her father could not come home after visiting him in jail. She reflects on her childhood and says, "I didn't really have the opportunity to be a kid." She would self-sabotage in school and at home. She was adultfied and had to look after her younger siblings and herself at 13. As an adult, Bella grew and learned how to have a relationship with her father. She is happy in her role as a painting contractor, which is a job where she combines a shared passion with her father with making money.

Our final hypothesis, that if a child has a support system outside of their household, they are more likely to cope in healthier ways, was supported by our interviews. We saw in all three of the women that therapy and mentorship made a difference in their lives. All three of the women found a safe place at The Neighborhood Academy to serve as a support system that helped them cope with the loss of a parent.

One reason that this hypothesis was supported is all three women took part in some form of counseling, and reported that they benefited from it. Sarah's mother signed her up for grief counseling. Aubree went to multiple therapy sources, including attending group therapy, individual therapy, and a life coach. She spoke about the black household and how black families struggle with talking about their emotions. Aubree says, "It was hard dealing with depression and grief in a black family, unfortunately, because they do not know how to communicate with you." Therapy not only helped her individually, but also it helped her family understand her grief better. Both women found that going to therapy helped with their coping.

Another reason our hypothesis was supported was that each woman had a mentor in their personal lives and professional lives who helped guide and stabilize them. Sarah had a mentor in college that helped her decide on a career path and also offered professional support. Aubree had a mentor that was her life skills coach and her case worker. Bella had a mentor that helped her by allowing her to open up a lot more, express herself, and gave her the opportunity to be heard.

Therapy and mentorship made the difference for these women by seeing that other people cared for them outside of a parent figure in their homes. All three women all explicitly described themselves as resilient in adulthood in part because of these mentors.

The largest limitation of our paper was our sample size. From the sample size, we were able to describe trends we saw, but could not draw conclusions based on the experiences of only three women. Another limitation was that all three of the women attended The Neighborhood Academy, a small private college preparatory school meant to serve underprivileged students. This is a limitation because The Neighborhood Academy's staff could have perhaps given more attention and mentorship to the students than at a much larger public school. An additional limitation is that while we could elicit whether or not the women felt emotionally stable today, we could not judge financial stability based on the interview questions; we did not ask the women what their net worth or income is. Finally, the women may not have been fully comfortable sharing their full experiences of losing their parents with the primary author, as the author was a stranger before the interview.

Future researchers should look into the experiences of losing a parent from the point of view of men. Researchers could see the impact of gender in the prison system and the idea of not having a male role model in a boy's life. Additional future studies should also show quantitative data in how having financial and physical stability is important for a child experiencing grief. Through our interviews, we were able to find that self-esteem may have been impacted through losing a parent. Future researchers should study how girls develop self-esteem and what could help girls to maintain or get healthy self-esteem. Finally, more research should be done around the trauma of losing a parent, and the definition and idea of traumatic grief should be expanded upon.

Conclusion

There has been a lot of research written about the negative outcomes of having lost a parent, but more research needs to be done about the positive outcomes that can happen for children who have lost a parent. There should be more research conducted to shed light on how those who have lost a parent have become resilient, but one positive first step is to ensure that

children can be provided with mentors to help them build resilience and coping strategies. A stable second parent or another stable adult in a child's life can make the difference between a child more vulnerable to the pressure of the world and a child having resilience in the face of adversity.

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