

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE (LETTER).

Helping Children Cope With Death

July 25, 1996 | By Thetis Cromie, Regional Coordinator for Children's Programs, Vitas Hospice.

CHICAGO — I applaud Norma Libman's sensitive and timely article "Understanding the pain" (WOMANEWS, July 7).

It is a startling fact that almost 6 percent of children under 18 lose one or both parents before the age of 18. Each year in the United States, approximately 1.8 million children up to 18 become bereaved siblings. Kenneth Doka's book "Disenfranchised Grief" points out the hidden sorrow of children whose grief is unacknowledged and unsupported by society.

This lack of support is particularly disturbing when we realize that a clear relationship exists between the functioning of a given support network and its impact on the way stress is experienced. Data from the important Harvard Medical School Child Bereavement Study (a prospective study of children between the ages of 6 and 18 who lost a parent to death) show the importance of looking at children in their social and family system. A social network can provide children with feelings of being cared about and supported and make available resources that facilitate coping.

New models of children's bereavement focus upon adaptation rather than concepts of "healing" and "recovery." These models emphasize resiliency rather than dysfunction. In addition, new research such as the Harvard study indicate that children's bereavement may be better conceptualized not as "letting go" or "putting the past behind" but as change in the nature of the connection to the person who died.

The deceased continues to have a place in the child's life, but he or she cannot replace the living. The movement from one type of connection to the other may be an important indicator of the quality of the bereaved child's adaptation in the face of loss. It is altogether possible to see grief as an ongoing process with the deceased living on within the hearts and minds of bereaved children not only as memories, but also as guides and witnesses.

The Harvard study mostly involved parental deaths due to natural causes (89 percent). The study found that a majority of children were not overwhelmed by the stresses involved in the death of a parent. Dr. William Worden, who co-directed the research with Dr. Phyllis Silverman, notes that only one-third of the children showed serious levels of emotional disturbance over time. One significant risk factor, however, was a high degree of change and disruption in the child's life. This caveat is particularly important in view of the difficult challenges children face growing up in urban environments where violence and unnatural death are not uncommon.

In the Children's Bereavement Art Support Program of Vitas Hospice, we see children whose experiences of death are sometimes complicated by violence and other serious disruptions in their lives. Among the children's programs cited in Libman's article, I would like to add ours. We offer a number of programs free of charge in Chicago and the surrounding metropolitan area. Our programs are time-limited, use art therapists, social workers and counselors. They are intended for children and their families.