

Only death can destroy parent-child bond

A parent is a parent for life; only one power can destroy this special relationship, and that is death. Then the loss is deep and permanent.

"If you are a parent who has lost a child to death, you cannot expect other people to completely understand your pain," says Dr. Leo Hawkins, extension human development specialist, North Carolina State University.

Condolences offered by friends often vary with the age of the lost child. It is important for friends to try to understand the depth of the loss.

There is usually less sympathy offered to parents who lose infants with serious birth defects. "In fact, the family may be seen as slightly crazy to put so much importance on an immature infant."

"But the neighbors and friends did not stay up all night many times with that sick, tiny person. It is irrelevant whether the mother or family could later give the tiny one a good chance for success in society," Dr. Hawkins

says.

Parents who lose a young child also lose the wishes, hopes, dreams and all the potential that only parents can see. "Many regrets are also reviewed during mourning, for not having been the perfect parent, never impatient with the child," Dr. Hawkins says.

Those who lose a teenager have special problems. "There is some discord during adolescence among the very best families.

Elderly are dependent upon families

Despite critics and change, the nuclear family remains the front line of support in today's society.

Unfortunately, for the elderly, their nuclear family is small and sometimes nonexistent. Seventeen percent of men and 54 percent of women over the age of 65 are widowed and most live alone, Dr. Linda George, associate professor of medical sociology at

Death then comes and leaves a gaping hole of unfinished business. Enormous guilt usually joins the pain, making bereavement ever tougher," Dr. Hawkins points out.

Older parent who lose an adult child may feel this loss is unnatural and intolerable. "The order of life is reversed, and helplessness is especially keen," Dr. Hawkins says. "Reasons for the death are often reviewed at length. Distortions, idealizations

and attempts to avoid or accept blame are common. The older parent who had become dependent upon the now dead child faces a special hardship."

Whatever the age of the child, the death hits a parent hard. Most parents keep their true deep feelings mostly private, but those who can find expression for grief have better chance to rebuild a life of quality and purpose. "Friends and professionals who will share these feelings should be picked carefully," Dr. Hawkins says.

Duke University, recently told volunteers and professionals who deal with elderly. Dr. George spoke at extension's Eloise Cofer Family Living Seminar held at North Carolina State University.

When the nuclear family cannot help, people turn to their extended family (relatives not living with them), friends neighbors and professionals offering services.

Problems may arise when an older relative turns to the extended family for the same day to day care usually found in the nuclear

family, Dr. George said.

A network of friends, bound by ties of affection, is very important to the older person whose nuclear family is shrinking. Most older people report many satisfying friendships last until they get very old. Then they are also losing their friends and may become isolated.

It is important for an older person to find new friends Dr. George said. Organizations, clubs, parks, and shopping malls are useful. A shared activity can lead to friendship.

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