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Groundbreaking Survey of Childhood Loss Finds

**A VEIL OF TEARS: ONE IN SEVEN AMERICANS
LOSE A PARENT OR SIBLING BEFORE THE AGE OF 20**

Women Tend to Bear the Brunt - as Kids and as Caregivers

But Childhood Loss Tough on Everyone; Among Adults Who Lost a Parent Growing Up:

- Most would trade a year of their life for one more day with their departed parent
 - 73% believe their life would have been "much better" if their parent hadn't died so young
 - Growing Pains: 69% still think about their parent frequently
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Friends, Community Support Are Critical To Restoring A Sense of Normalcy

**Comfort Zone Founder: "We Can't Eliminate the Grief Journey,
But We Can Make It More Manageable"**

**Need Help, Perspective or Guidance Dealing with Childhood Grief?
Comfort Zone Creates Breakthrough Site for Kids, Parents, Friends and Families**

RICHMOND, V.A., March 22, 2010 - More Americans are grappling with the childhood loss of parents and siblings than may be commonly thought - and its impact is immense, especially for women, according to the results of a groundbreaking survey released here today by Comfort Zone Camp, the nation's largest non-profit provider of childhood bereavement camps.

Of the 1,006 adults age 25 and over surveyed, more than one in seven (15%) reported losing a parent (11%) or sibling (5%) before turning 20.

The impact of such loss can be profound. Among adults who lost a parent growing up, more than half (57%) said they would trade a year of their life for one more day with their parent, 73% believe their life would have been "much better" if their parent hadn't died so young and 69% said they still think of their parent frequently.



“Childhood bereavement is one of society’s most chronically painful yet rarely examined and most underestimated phenomena,” said Comfort Zone Camp Founder and Chief Advocate Lynne Hughes. “Fearful of burdening their surviving parent— and growing up in a society that is unnerved by death and uneasy with their grief— kids who lose loved ones get the message early on that people are uncomfortable talking about their loss, so they suffer in silence. As a result, these children are too often subject to a distressing range of emotional, psychological and behavioral difficulties, which can extend well into adulthood. It’s time for a national conversation on childhood bereavement.”

The poll of 1,006 adults was conducted via the Internet between November 24th and December 7th, 2009 by the national polling firm of Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc. All respondents were at least 25 years of age. The margin of error for the poll is $\pm 3.2\%$. Of the 1,006 adults surveyed, 110 had lost a parent before the age of 20, and 52 had lost a sibling (13 had lost both). Greenwald then surveyed an additional 298 adults who had lost a parent growing up, for a total over-sample of 408 (110 + 298). The margin of error for the 408 adults who lost a parent before the age of 20 is $\pm 4.6\%$.

Commenting on the survey results, Brian Perlman, Ph.D., who directed the study for Greenwald & Associates, said: “When it comes to childhood loss, the numbers are staggering. To put it in context with another devastating childhood occurrence, we estimate that for every one child diagnosed with cancer this year, at least 35 children will lose a parent.”

“Our hope is that this research can help all of us to better understand childhood loss - its incidence, what families are going through, how that loss extends into adulthood and what we can do to ease the grief journey,” said Chris Park, president of The New York Life Foundation, which provided financial support for the research.

Coping with Loss: Women Bear the Brunt

Experiencing loss as a child takes a tremendous toll on the entire family, but the survey indicates that for women, the effects tend to be more immediate, more profound and more enduring than they are for men.

Among adults who lost a parent growing up, close to two out of five women (38%) strongly agreed with the statement that “Losing a parent as a kid was the toughest thing I’ve ever had to deal with”; by comparison, 29% of men strongly agreed. Thirty-six percent of women who lost a parent growing up said that compared to most adults they have experienced more feelings of loneliness (versus 27% of men), and 35% of women who lost a parent growing up said they are more insecure than most people (vs. 25% of men).

Finally, while well over half of all men who lost a parent growing up (57%) agreed with the statement that “Death is a part of life; people need to get over it,” only 36% of women who lost a parent growing up agreed.

“The effects of childhood loss, while considerable for everyone, are amplified for women who tend to take more time to recover and who are generally more sensitive to grief issues throughout their lives,” Hughes said. “Women are nurturing by nature. When they lose a parent growing up, girls frequently step up to play a critical role in keeping their families intact and functioning, sometimes at the expense of their own grieving process.”

Women Three Times More Likely to Become a Caregiver

Not only do women struggle with childhood loss to a greater degree than men, they are also the ones more likely to be the surviving parent and caregiver. Among adults surveyed who lost a parent growing up, 71% lost their father while 25% lost their mother (4% lost both).

“The cruel irony is that daughters disproportionately lose their fathers, which means that as adults, women are more often than not the surviving parent, stepping up to play double duty as both the mother and father figures in their household,” Hughes said. “In many regards, the surviving parent is truly an unsung hero. Without skipping a beat - and typically with scant parenting resources - they must cope with their own grief even as they maintain their household and provide emotional support for their children, mindful that each child is dealing with the loss in his or her own unique way.”

“Childhood loss is not a women’s issue per se, but it is an issue with particular poignancy for women,” Hughes concluded.

The Grief Journey: A Long, Winding and Painful Road

Childhood loss - particularly of a parent - presents challenges that can persist for decades.

How profound are the effects of childhood loss? Almost 7 in 10 (69%) respondents who lost a parent growing up said they still think about their parent frequently - including over 60% of respondents who lost a parent 35 years ago or more. Nearly six in 10 (58%) of Americans who lost a parent as a child - and 34% of those who lost a sibling - said that the experience was “the hardest thing (they’ve) ever had to deal with.” One-third of Americans who lost a sibling growing up believe their family never recovered from the loss.

“The burden of childhood loss is immense, and it is a toll paid over decades, not years,” said Hughes, who herself lost both parents by the age of 12. “The impact of the experience is disturbingly clear to those of us who have had some exposure to the issue, but it’s lost on too many Americans. We need to do a better job of raising awareness of the effects of childhood bereavement so that kids can get back to being kids again - instead of miniature adults. Giving these kids the time and opportunity to heal is critical to their ability to thrive as adults.”

Hughes said that kids’ grieving process is frequently complicated by feelings of isolation (e.g., “no one else knows what I’m going through”) and vulnerability (e.g. “who will be there for me now?”) and a wide range of “secondary losses” including moving homes, the return of the surviving parent to work, and financial strains.

“Loss is particularly tough for teenagers, who have to cope with their grief at the same time that they are trying to manage the normal stresses of adolescence and creating their adult identity,” said Jill FitzGerald, LCSW, and Founder of the Grief Resource Center of Richmond. “Loss and grief separates them from their peers at a time when most children are desperate to fit in. After experiencing a loss, children need to rebuild their safety nets. We, together, need to support them - at home, at school, and in everyday life.”

“Grief is a journey. We can’t eliminate it, but we can make it more manageable,” Hughes said. “More resources and greater public sensitivity to the issue - including support from friends, relatives, classmates, the community, and other caring adults - can make a big difference.”

Growing Up Fast

Of course, one of the way kids survive childhood loss is by “toughing it out.”

In fact, survey results indicate that individuals who endure childhood loss may be better able to deal with life’s challenges - or at least think they can. Better than eight in 10 (81%) of those who lost a parent as a kid say they are equally or more resilient than most adults, and nearly six in 10 (59%) think they became stronger as a result of their loss.

The experience of losing a parent can also solidify one’s own appreciation for family. Almost three-quarters of respondents who lost a parent at a young age agreed that the experience made them more appreciative of the importance of family relationships.

“Children who have lost a parent or sibling no longer take family for granted,” Hughes observed. “They realize that life is fragile and recognize how precious their family is to them. Those are lessons they take forward into their adult lives.”



“While early loss can make a child more resilient, more responsible and more independent, that stoical, seemingly adult response frequently comes at a fierce price, namely one’s childhood,” Hughes said. “Kids must be allowed to process and grieve as kids. We can’t undo their loss, but by giving them a voice and a place to grieve, we can break the isolation and give them the tools and understanding they need to shrink the hole they feel inside and adjust to their ‘new normal.’”

Friends Matter

One of the things that could ease Americans’ grief journeys is more support from families, friends and coworkers.

Friends in particular have a special role to play in helping kids and parents alike. Comfort Zone Camp conducted additional research - to be released in its entirety in April - among kids 13 to 19 who had lost a parent as well as among their surviving parents. Among the 104 kids surveyed, friends were deemed the second most helpful group in helping kids deal with their loss, behind only their surviving parents and well ahead of siblings, grandparents and therapists/counselors. Similarly, 75% of parents said it “really helps” to talk with friends.

“It’s not like bereaved families are looking for special treatment,” Hughes said. “The vast majority of kids and parents just want to be treated normally. That’s why it’s so troubling that half of the surviving parents in our survey said some friends stopped talking or socializing with them after their spouse died.”

There are plenty of opportunities and ways to be helpful. In the general population survey, one-third of respondents said they have a “close friend, close relative or colleague at work” who lost a spouse or child under the age of 18 with kids still at home.

Reflecting on the last time someone close lost a child or spouse, most reported attending the funeral/wake/calling hours (74%), offering words of condolence (72%) or visiting the family’s home (57%) but only 30% said they went out of their way to include them in social activities. Eighty-three percent somewhat or strongly agree with the statement: “I wish I did/could have done more.”

And it’s not like grieving families have an over-abundance of resources to help them with their bereavement. In the companion study to be released next month, among parents who lost a spouse with kids still at home, 85% wish there were more resources to help with their grieving children, 46% thought their children’s schools were unprepared to deal with their child’s loss, and 44% of those who worked thought their workplace was not prepared to help them deal with their loss.



“Surviving parents all too often get lost in the shuffle,” Hughes said. “Parenting is hard enough; it can seem impossible when you’re solely responsible for a household, family finances, and your kids’ well-being, all the while trying to process your own loss. There are resources for single parents, but almost none for surviving parents. I see this every day. They are overlooked, little-understood and stretched thin.”

There is not broad public recognition of the need for more resources for grieving families. Nearly four in 10 Americans surveyed (37%) believe there are “plenty of resources for kids who have lost a parent or sibling”; 18% have no opinion.

“The public is generally unaware of how common childhood loss is and of the issues these families face,” Hughes said. “Given the opportunity, most people will help. The challenge is generating greater public attention to the issue and educating people on how to effectively interact with grieving families, parents and kids.”

CZC Creates Unique Site for Kids, Parents, Families, Friends and Caregivers

Many Americans are unsure of how to engage and be helpful with grieving families.

“Most of us are well-intentioned, but our efforts are constrained by a fear of ‘doing something wrong’ or by a simple lack of knowledge over what to do or where to go for help,” Hughes said. “It’s really quite simple. Most families want understanding, an inquiring word, an occasional invitation, and some arms-and-legs support.”

Comfort Zone Camp has created a dedicated web site - www.hellogrief.org - with basic resources for kids and families in grief and their friends, extended families and other concerned parties. The site includes a wide range of articles on grief, a bulletin board, an on-line social networking community, a bereavement reference section and a camp referral function.

“We’ve combined this groundbreaking research with the knowledge and experience we’ve gained from 11 years of camp, hundreds of monthly support groups, and our national network of licensed grief therapists to create HelloGrief.org,” Hughes said. “We think it’s a superior source of information, insights and sharing for families in grief and the friends, families, communities, counselors, coworkers and others who care and want to help.”

“It’s clear that there is not one, right course of bereavement. How an individual reacts to and learns to live with a loss is colored by things like age, gender, circumstances and, perhaps most importantly, our emotional profiles,” FitzGerald said. “But it’s equally clear that understanding, friendship, community support and the type of nurturing, encouraging atmosphere that camp provides are an essential part of the recovery process.”



For more information on the camps (which are offered free of charge) or how to attend or volunteer, please visit www.comfortzonecamp.org or call 866.488.5679.

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About Comfort Zone Camps

The mission of CZC is to provide grieving children with a voice, a place and a community in which to heal, grow and lead more fulfilling lives. As the nation's largest bereavement camp for kids, Comfort Zone Camp has held over 100 camps and served nearly 5000 children in the last 11 years. Comfort Zone Camp envisions a world where grieving children and their families are not forgotten or left to grieve alone, and are supported by a wide community that understands and appreciates them. To learn more, please visit www.comfortzonecamp.org.

About The New York Life Foundation

Inspired by New York Life's tradition of service and humanity, the New York Life Foundation has, since its founding in 1979, provided more than \$130 million in charitable contributions to national and local nonprofit organizations. Through its focus on "Nurturing the Children," the Foundation supports programs that benefit young people, particularly in the areas of mentoring, safe places to learn and grow, educational enhancement opportunities and childhood bereavement. In the last three years the Foundation has committed more than \$4 million to efforts focused on childhood bereavement. The Foundation also encourages and facilitates the community involvement of employees, agents, and retirees of New York Life through its Volunteers for Life program. To learn more, please visit the Foundation's Web site at www.newyorklifefoundation.org.

Mathew Greenwald & Associates is a premier full service market research firm headquartered in Washington, D.C.