Supporting Children Who Lose Parents to Accidental Overdose

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Overview

• Background
• Children left behind analysis: Allegheny County, PA
• Supporting children and families
• Questions/discussion
Background on Overdose and Childhood Bereavement
Drug overdose rates throughout U.S.

CDC estimates 72,000 deaths due to drug overdose in the U.S. in 2017.
- Opioids contributed to about 68% (49,068) of those deaths\(^1\)
- More than the number of U.S. military casualties in the Vietnam War (58,220).
- More than the number of deaths due to car accidents in 2017 (40,100)\(^3\)

Sources
\(^1\) CDC: www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm
\(^2\) National Archives: www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics
\(^3\) National Safety Council: https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates
Why is this an important topic?

• Prevention efforts have attempted to address individual- and community-level risks of overdose.

• The overdose epidemic is also affecting families. People who are at risk or who have died of an overdose are connected to families.

• There are unique risks for children who have experiences an unexpected parental death

• “Substance misuse within the household” has been identified as one of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
Efforts (rightfully) focused on overdose prevention

- Targeted Naloxone Distribution
- Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)
- Academic Detailing
- Eliminating Prior-Authorization Requirements for Medications for Opioid Use Disorder
- Screening for Fentanyl in Routine Clinical Toxicology Testing
- 911 Good Samaritan Laws
- Naloxone Distribution in Treatment Centers and Criminal Justice Settings
- MAT in Criminal Justice Settings and Upon Release
- Initiating Buprenorphine-based MAT in Emergency Departments
- Syringe Services Programs
Opioid epidemic is affecting families

• Deaths occurring among those in their child rearing years.

• As the number of overdose deaths rise, so does the number of families and children affected.

• Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (July 2018)\(^5\)
  • “More than 2,500,000 grandparents in the United States are the primary caretaker of their grandchildren……”
  • “Between 2009 and 2016, the incidence of parental alcohol or other drug use as a contributing factor for children’s out-of-home placement rose from 25.4 to 37.4 percent”
  • “The number of foster children placed with a grandparent or other relative increased from 24 percent in 2006 to 32 percent in 2016…”

Sources
4 CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db294.htm
Impact of the loss of a parent/caregiver

• The death of a close family member may present unique risks to a child’s development. Negative effects can include:
  • limited emotional availability of surviving caregivers and others who provide social support,
  • challenges to the child’s self-efficacy and self-esteem,
  • disruptions in daily family life, and
  • inhibited communication with parents

• When compared to their peers, children who have lost a parent/caregiver are at increased risk for:
  • depression and post-traumatic stress disorder,
  • social withdrawal,
  • anxiety,
  • reduced self-esteem,
  • internalizing and externalizing symptoms,
  • suicide attempts and suicide, and
  • conduct disorder.
Risks of sudden or unexpected loss

• Complicated grief: prolonged grief symptoms

• Childhood traumatic grief: involves trauma symptoms that prevent the child from negotiating the typical steps associated with normal bereavement

• The Burden of Bereavement Study (2018)
  • 7-year longitudinal study
  • Bereavement by sudden parental death was associated with an increased incidence of depression, primarily during the first two years, along with post-traumatic stress disorder and functional impairment
  • Early identification and intervention may lessen the long-term impact
The Children Left Behind from Drug Overdoses, Suicides and Homicides in Allegheny County, PA
Purpose of the analysis

• Identify the prevalence of children in Allegheny County who have experienced a sudden, unexpected or traumatic loss resulting from a parent’s fatal drug overdose, homicide or suicide.

• Describe the human services and public system encounters of this group of children to identify potential mental health support and other social service needs.
Allegheny County Data Warehouse

**Internal Data Sources**
- Aging
- Child Welfare
- Community Service Block Grant
- Drug & Alcohol
- Early Intervention (partial)
- Family Support Centers
- HeadStart (partial)
- Homeless
- Housing Support
- Mental Health
- Intellectual Disabilities

**External Data Sources**
- Allegheny County Housing Authority
- Allegheny County Jail
- Birth Records
- Allegheny County Medical Examiner’s Office
- Public Benefits (State DHS)
- Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
- Physical Health Claims (Medicaid)
- Juvenile Probation
- Pittsburgh Public Schools and 17 additional County School Districts
- Pre-trial Services
- Adult/family/juvenile court

Extraction, Transformation, and Loading Process
- Run weekly
- Includes client matching algorithm

Ad Hoc Analyses
Reports
Dashboards
Client View
Fatal Overdoses among Adults/Parents

- 389 (59%) were fathers
- 275 (41%) were mothers.
- 74% were between 25-44 years old
Children affected by unexpected loss

1,008 children affected by parent’s overdose death: 2003-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Overdose</th>
<th>Homicide</th>
<th>Suicide</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 yrs</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14 yrs</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-18 yrs</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of children by age and cause of death

% of children by age whose parent(s) died of an overdose (n = 1,008)

- Under 5 yrs: 25%
- 5-9 yrs: 37%
- 10-14 yrs: 26%
- 15-18 yrs: 13%
Public system experiences of children following a parent’s overdose death
Family Court

[Graph showing data over time for Family Court Delinquency and Dependency]
Child welfare involvement and out of home placement over time.
Publicly-funded mental health treatment

[Graph showing the percentage of publicly-funded mental health treatment over different time periods after the date of death, with peaks and troughs indicating changes over time.]
Supporting children and families
It starts with self-awareness

Supporting grieving children begins with examining our own thoughts, beliefs and attitudes about death.

• Using clear, direct language vs. euphemisms
• Managing the natural desire to avoid loss or protect children from pain
• Acknowledging the grief experience vs. pressure to “be strong”, “move on” or “get over” one’s grief
• Learning about the grief process and the emotional, cognitive and behavioral manifestations in children

Source: Fiorini and Mullen
Understanding potential grief issues

- Stigma of addiction and opioid abuse
- Disenfranchised grief
- Shame or embarrassment
- Anger
- Guilt
- Traumatic grief

Photo: https://ca-mh.com/children-love-children-grieve/
Importance of early identification and treatment

• Caregivers may be struggling with multiple demands due to impact of sudden loss.

• Possibility of pre-existing mental health issues or other Adverse Childhood Experiences.

• Early support and intervention can reduce the long-term impact on functional impairment. (Pham et al., 2018)
Helping children cope

Interventions that promote adaptive grieving include:

• Education about death and grief
• Supporting emotional expression
• Cognitive coping skills
• Preserving positive memories
• Preparing for grief triggers
• Stress management and resilience skills

Source: Cohen and Mannarino, 2011
Helping children cope

Other therapies or creative activities:
• Art therapy
• Narrative therapy
• Music
• Commemorating the person who died

Source: Fiorini and Mullen
Photo: https://www.erinshouse.org
Thoughts on the subject of closure

• Grief throughout the lifespan: school events, parent/teacher conferences, proms, graduations, weddings…

• Navigating the rhetoric of closure (Berns, 2011)
  Redefining the relationship
  Discovering your own path
  Carrying grief and joy together
Questions?
Thank you

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Resources

• The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families (www.dougy.org)
• Eluna - Formerly the Moyer Foundation (https://elunanetwork.org)
• Center for Loss & Life Transition (www.centerforloss.com)
• GRASP: Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing (http://grasphelp.org)
• The National Alliance for Grieving Children (https://childrengrieve.org)
• Grief.com (https://grief.com)
• Hello Grief (www.hellogrief.org)
Resources

• *A Complete Book about Death for Kids*, Earl A. Grollman and Joy Johnson (Editors)

• *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*, by Earl A. Grollman

• *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant


• *Treating Trauma and Traumatic Grief in Children and Adolescents*, by Judith A. Cohen, Anthony P. Mannarino and Esther Deblinger (2017)


References


References


