

Parenting after the Death of a Co-parent:
A Qualitative Study of the Lived Experiences of Surviving Parents

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Abstract

Findings from this study suggest that surviving parents' parenting experiences following a co-parent's death are difficult and multifaceted in comparison to co-parenting before the death. A parent's death is an unexpected event that incurs family stress and grief for remaining family members, whom often include the surviving parent and dependent children (i.e., children under the age of 18). Following loss, it is typical for family members to experience role confusion and reorganization, as the surviving parent is expected to fulfill certain norms (i.e., assuming full guardianship and parenting roles) with their children. According to Belsky's Process Model of Parenting, bereavement-related changes may affect a surviving parent's ability to parent based on characteristics of: 1) the parent (e.g., the parent's mental health and grief processes); 2) the child (e.g., the child's age and understanding of grief); and 3) the broader social context (e.g., support from friends and family). However, a dearth of research regarding the experiences of widowed parents warrants further study of this population. Guided by phenomenology, this qualitative study sought to answer: 1) How the lived experiences of surviving parents change after a co-parent's death in relation to the meaning of parenting and the parent-child relationship; and 2) What day-to-day practices are used by surviving parents to continue parenting their child/children after a co-parent's death. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using an inductive analytic procedure (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell, 1998; Thomas, 2006). Results from this sample (N=12) show that before death, co-parents were involved and parenting was enjoyable. Following death, results reveal that parenting responsibilities increase and include new parenting strategies, such as using more reassurance with children, not showing grief in front of children, and trying to fill the deceased parent's role. It may be beneficial for family interventions to: 1) mentally prepare surviving parents for anticipated changes in

parenting that will likely occur due to their partner's illness so they are better equipped to assume their partner's parenting responsibilities; and 2) explain to the ill co-parent that their illness may negatively impact their parenting and aid them in working through negative feelings associated with parenting.