

Children of First Responders

How parents and professionals can support their
unique developmental needs

By Kimberly Bell, Ph.D.

Clinical Director at Hanna Perkins Center for Child
Development



Hanna Perkins Center
for Child Development

Learning Objectives

- Gain an understanding of the differences in a child's response to the professional role of their parent at different developmental phases.
- Gain an improved understanding of what is meant by the “inner life” of children and how it impacts their perception of dangerous situations.
- Gain improved ability to participate in problem solving in a crisis situation involving children of first responders
- Gain and implement new ideas that will help children who suffer the loss of a parent during a crisis situation.



The Inner Life

Children draw on previous experiences to make sense of new experiences

The Mental Map

From birth, children are reacting and responding to their inside feelings as well as their experience of the outside environment and gradually constructing a **mental map** of their experience. That mental map includes theories about cause and effect and what they can do or not do to have some control over their environment.

What creates the mental map?

- **Feelings:** are central in the creating of the mental map
- **Insufficient knowledge:** children do not have an adequate understanding of reality
- **Earlier experiences:** children try to integrate each new experience

The Inner Life cont.

What creates the mental map cont. ?

- **Inside ideas:** children 's inside ideas become major parts of their mental maps. Children are constantly trying to make sense of their world and what they can do to get what they need and desire. The more intense their wishes are, the more active they are in trying to figure out how they can satisfy them. The more painful the experience, the more active they are in figuring out what they did to deserve such pain.
- **Fantasies as coping mechanisms:** children's fantasies become more powerful forces in their efforts to cope with their anxieties. Adults help children correct the fantasies and gain a better understanding of reality. Mental maps are revised as they let go of their primitive ideas and fantasies. When children get stuck in their fantasies, we can see it in their behaviors.

Infant and Toddlers

Infant and toddler development: moving from body to mind

- **Infants** feel their feelings in a physical way. Each separation is a little death and loss. Only through repetition and consistency does permanency develop
- **Toddlers**
 - Becoming separate from their parent by experimenting with their newly discovered ability to choose to do something different than what their caregiver wants them to do, trying to become independent while not yet ready to do so.
 - while striving for independence, experience feelings of aggression and conflict.
 - have two way feelings: please you and defy you; get rid of you yet terrified of losing you.
 - are on the cusp of moving from body to mind, from nurturing to independence, from sensory exploration to more goal oriented problem solving.
 - Understanding of death is not developed. Long separations can feel like a total loss.
- **Response needs at this phase:**
 - physical comfort
 - consistency
 - attachment

Preschoolers

Children are the most emotionally vulnerable during crisis at this time

- **Younger preschool children focus** on who they are in relation to others. Having mastered the basics of self-care, they are ready to look outside themselves and notice more about others.
 - Realize that not all people are created equal, grown ups have more control over their choices that they do and that there is competition for the affection of loved ones.
 - WORRIES and CURIOSITY. They worry that there is something wrong with them...that their unhappiness and frustration is connected to a fundamental defect.
 - Older preschool children focus on matters of life and death: where babies come from, the incomprehensible finality of death. The realization that loved ones have relationships that do not include them.
- **ANXIETIES that come from their wishes.**
 - Being the most important person to mommy or daddy, magical thing like making babies, or powerful things like killing enemies.
 - They compete intensely to be the biggest, best and the boss, and engage in play about being powerful.
 - Look for distraction from their conflicts by engaging in endless exciting fantasy play with each other in an attempt to get rid of their feelings of shame and inadequacy, they will put others down.
 - Impact child's conception of the death of a loved one.
- **Response needs in this phase**
 - Still very reliant on the response of adults
 - Blaming self
 - Importance of feeling safe with adults and availability of calm adult who can talk through fears and anxiety

Elementary Age Child

The Elementary Age Child

Children experience a developing conscience as an unwelcome visitor who is extremely judgmental and make them very anxious.

Notice who is and isn't following the rules...TATTELING

Challenge the rules and get overly upset when making a mistake.

Struggle with their wish to be perfect and feelings of utter failure.

Have an "inside voice" that tells them what to do.

Response needed at this time:

Identification with parental roles and work: Parent role as "hero"

My "dad" is bigger than your "dad"

Can confuse anger and grief, feeling responsibility

Regression in the service of integration

Adolescents

The Adolescent Phase

Identity development is the key resolution of the phase

More complex identifications

The beginning of abstract thinking

Needs during crisis response

Identification with parental roles and work: Parent role as “hero”

Can confuse anger and grief, feeling responsibility

Regression in the service of integration

Tendency to over-intellectualize (may not appear to have an immediate emotional response)

Wrap up

- Questions
- Comments
- Suggestions

Thank you for your attention. You are a wonderful audience!

