

Death of a parent during childhood is associated with greater mortality in early adulthood

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Experiencing the loss of a parent during childhood or adolescence is associated with a greater risk of mortality, according to a study published in this week's *PLOS Medicine*. The study, conducted by Jiong Li and colleagues from Aarhus University in Denmark, finds that individuals who lost either a mother or a father during childhood had a greater risk of mortality in the years following the parent's death compared with people unaffected by parental death during childhood.

The researchers reached these conclusions combining data from national registries from all children born in Denmark (1968 to 2008) and Sweden (1973 to 2006), and 89% of children born in Finland (1987 to 2006). Of these children, 189,094 (2.6%) lost a parent when the child was between 6 months and 18 years old. A total of 39,683 individuals died over the follow-up period, which ranged from 1 to 40 years. The researchers found that those exposed to parental death had a 50% greater risk of [mortality](#) during the study period than those unexposed to parental death. This increased risk of mortality persisted into early adulthood irrespective of child age at parental death. A greater risk of mortality was found among children whose parent died from unnatural causes compared with natural causes (84% vs. 33% increase in risk of mortality, respectively), and was greatest for children who lost a parent due to suicide.

Because the study was undertaken in high-income countries, these

findings are unlikely to be the result of a lack of material or healthcare needs. Rather, the increased mortality among the exposed children likely reflects both genetic susceptibility and the long-term impacts of parental death on health and social well-being.

The authors say: "parental death in [childhood](#) was associated with a long-lasting increased [mortality risk](#) from both external causes and diseases, regardless of child's age at bereavement, sex of the child, sex of the deceased parent, cause of parental death, as well as population characteristics like socioeconomic background"

They continue: "[These] findings warrant the need for health and social support to the bereaved children and such support may need to cover an extended time period."

More information: Li J, Vestergaard M, Cnattingius S, Gissler M, Bech BH, et al. (2014) Mortality after Parental Death in Childhood: A Nationwide Cohort Study from Three Nordic Countries. *PLoS Med* 11(7): e1001679. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1001679](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001679)

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