

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SENSE OF TIME

The experience of separation and loss can only exist as a function of time. It may be common knowledge that the experience of loss shifts over time, often following a pattern of shifting emotions from initial shock to a painful crescendo and then falling back to a dull ache that for some may never disappear. It may not be common knowledge, however, that the time course of this process varies for individuals by circumstance (Archer, 2008; Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007 [cf., Weiner, 2007]; Murray-Parkes, 2006) and with the cognitive and socioemotional development of the experience of time (Busby & Suddendorf, 2005).

Children experience the passage of time quite differently as they grow. Piaget (1927/1969) observed a succession of stages in the understanding of time built upon the child's experience of velocity and travel across physical distance. To oversimplify, I have suggested elsewhere (Garber, 2008a) that we can understand an individual's subjective experience of a given period as a proportion of his or her total experience, a quantity most easily gauged as a function of chronological age.<sup>2</sup> Thus, one year is a full 20% of a 5-year-old's experience and an inconceivably long period for that child to understand, never mind to wait for Mommy to come home. The same 365 days is, however, only 2% of a 50-year-old's life and can, in some circumstances, be experienced as a tolerable, even a fleeting moment.

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Let me illustrate the importance of working within a child's sense of time with a clinical example: To motivate behavior change, I often recommend to parents that we establish incentives or rewards for the child. It is commonly the case that one or both parents present this reply, "We tried that. It didn't work." Upon further discussion, this usually means that Mom and Dad have told their impulsive and immature 5-year-old that if he makes his bed every day for a week, he can earn a reward on Sunday.

Why did the child make his bed on Monday, then half-heartedly on Tuesday, but not at all the rest of the week? Chances are that on Monday he had the reward fresh in mind. On Tuesday, the salience of that same reward had eroded so that by Wednesday, the eventuality of success

seems far, far too distant. Assuming that he values the promised reward, the answer is that he couldn't manage the time interval. For this child, working toward something 1 week distant is like offering his mom or dad a job for which they'd be paid only once every 2 or 3 years. The temporal connection between today's behavior and the desired outcome is far too weak.

The same principle applies to family law matters: Contact with an absent parent, for example, is often scheduled to occur on alternating weekends to accommodate adult needs, with little consideration of the child's needs. A preschooler may experience a 2-week separation the way you or I would experience a period of months or even years, whereas a teenager might complain that the same alternating-week schedule gets in the way of his or her social life.

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The law has occasionally recognized developmental differences in the subjective experience of time. *The Model Statute for Termination of Parental Rights* (as discussed in Ezzo, Evans & McGovern-Kondik, 2004, p. 33), for example, acknowledges that "a child's sense of time and urgency is quite different than an adult's. A short wait for an adult can be an intolerable separation for a young child."

The development of the sense of time is associated with the growth of critical socioemotional capacities introduced in chapter 5, namely, the ability to delay gratification and the ability to tolerate frustration. Together, these interwoven developments bear directly on understanding a child's conception of and reaction to separation and loss.

From the earliest emergence of object- and person-permanence sometime in the sensorimotor period (4–7 months of age), the emotionally secure child gradually learns to tolerate longer and longer periods of separation from his or her primary attachment figures. By contrast, the experience of inconsistent and chaotic caregiving can interfere with a child's reaction to separation, causing some to become almost instantly crippled with distress and others to disengage in a manner that suggests indifference upon separation (e.g., Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Zilberstein, 2006).

Even the most secure children normally go through periods of more intense separation anxiety. This typically peaks between 18 and 30 months of age. In atypical cases, separation anxiety can persist into adolescence (Foley et al., 2008) and may be a harbinger of adult panic disorder and depression (Lewinsohn et al., 2008).

The normal course of development can be significantly and even permanently disrupted when a parent and child are abruptly separated, when a child's contact with an absent parent is either too distant in time or unpredictable and/or when the separation is extended beyond the child's cognitive and emotional tolerance: "A disruption of this attachment, and repeated uprooting of a child...[is] seriously detrimental to their physical, mental and emotional well-being" (Ezzo, Evans, & McGovern-Kondik, 2004, p. 33). At the extreme, the child's experience of separation is indistinguishable from the child's experience of death. Grief sets in with its panoply of expectable emotions:

[G]rief and mourning occur when the attachment figure is repeatedly unavailable, thereby activating the child's attachment system in the form of crying behavior....continual parental absences could leave a child with an inability to form deep relationships. (Bowlby's work as summarized by Nelson & Bennett, 2008, p.3).

### TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS AND INTERIM CONTACTS

Earlier, I described caregivers as the source of the child's emotional fuel. As the healthy child grows, his or her fuel tank and efficiency grow. All other things being equal, one unit of Mom or Dad's love might carry the healthy toddler through a half-hour of play, the healthy grade-schooler through a full school day, a healthy high-schooler through a week or 2 of summer camp, and a healthy young adult through the years that lead toward becoming a parent him- or herself.

With the introduction of stress, fuel efficiency plummets. At any age, healthy individuals turn from stress back to their emotional anchors in search of refueling. Once basic representational thought is developed, we can facilitate a child's independent functioning, the ability to tolerate frustration, the ability to delay gratification, and thereby the ability to manage separation through the use of transitional objects.

A *transitional object* is anything that represents the security that a caregiver provides in his or her absence (Ikeuchi & Fujihara, 2004). Pacifiers and thumb-sucking may be among the most primitive transitional objects, helping the infant and toddler to self-soothe by providing a sensorimotor (prerepresentational) substitute for the security associated with nursing. Later in development, many toddlers and preschool-