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**Vulnerable Parent, Vulnerable Child:
Parenting of a Subsequent Child following the Loss
of an Infant to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
Human Development**

**at Massey University,
Palmerston North,
New Zealand.**

Barbara Lois Maclean

2003



- Physical Education
- Guidance & Counselling
- Health Education
- Human Development

Candidate's Name: Barbara Maclean

PhD Topic: *"Loss of an infant to Sudden Death Syndrome and parenting of a subsequent child"*

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Professor Gary Hermansson
Supervisor
30 April 2003



Candidate's Name: Barbara Maclean

PhD Topic: *"Loss of an infant to Sudden Death Syndrome and parenting of a subsequent child"*

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- (ii) Research practice and ethical policies have been complied with.
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PhD Candidate:

B Maclean.

Supervisor:

Gary Hansen

Date: *3-14/03*



Candidate's Name: Barbara Maclean

PhD Topic: *"Loss of an infant to Sudden Death Syndrome and parenting of a subsequent child"*

This thesis represents my own work, with the only assistance being that which is normally provided by academic supervisors. The thesis material has not been used for any other degree or diploma.

PhD Candidate:

B Maclean

Supervisor:

Ray Feman

Date: *30/4/03*

Doctoral Research Committee, Massey University
APPLICATION TO BE EXAMINED

Name: (in full): **Barbara Lois Maclean**

Address: Department of Health & Human Development
College of Education
Massey University
Hokowhitu
Palmerston North

I request that I be examined for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the following field(s): **Human Development**

Doctoral Candidate signed:

B Maclean

Supervisor: I approve that the thesis is ready for examination.

Supervisor signed:

Ray Emerson

Date: 30/4/03

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate evidence of replacement child and vulnerable child pathology in the caregiving relationship between caregivers who had lost a previous infant to SIDS, and their subsequent children, who were now 2-3 years of age. To assess the possible traumatic disruption to the parent-child caregiving system arising from unresolved parental grieving, 20 mothers of 2-3-year-old subsequent children participated in an attachment-based clinical interview, the Working Model of the Child Interview (WMCI). Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were examined for content themes showing mothers' replacement feelings toward the subsequent child. The interview was then rated on a formal scoring system for the WMCI and the parents' representations of the child were classified into one of three categories: balanced, disengaged, or distorted. In addition, a modified version of the Reaction to Diagnosis Classification System (RTDSC) was used to classify the interview transcripts as Resolved or Unresolved with respect to the trauma to the caregiving system arising from the loss.

To look for specific evidence of the Vulnerable Child Syndrome, the 20 mothers and a control group of 100 non-bereaved mothers of children of a similar age also completed three questionnaires: (a) the Vulnerable Child Scale (VCS) to assess parental perceptions of the child's vulnerability, (b) the Parent Protection Scale (PPS) to assess parental protective behaviours, and (c) the Achenbach Child Behaviour Checklist for ages 2-3 years (CBCL/2-3) to assess behaviour and personality problems in the child.

Results of the questionnaires showed that in comparison to the control group, mothers of subsequent children perceived their children as significantly more vulnerable and reported higher levels of protective behaviours. Subsequent children, in turn, experienced significantly higher levels of sleep problems and destructive externalising behaviours. Interview data showed that 70% of mothers were Unresolved with respect to the loss regardless of the time since the death, but the children were not regarded as replacements for the dead siblings. Only 25% of interviews were categorised as balanced and the majority were characterised by ongoing fears for the child's safety, and a significant level of emotional distancing from the child.

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