

ACEI Teachers' Resource: Helping Students Grieve

Childhood Education
and
Professional Focus
Newsletters

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Children and Grief

Doris Bergen

How can the death of a parent or close friend be explained to a young child?

Dr. Bergen: A child must be told that he/she is not the cause of a parent's death. Young children connect events that happen at the same time as being causally related. [Some children correlate death with some type of bad behavior they had exhibited], but even those who don't might still somehow feel responsible. This is an issue that has to be revisited many times because grief is a long process. Having as much love and support from others as they can is certainly needed and that is one way that teachers can help. They can provide this in a quiet way but should be open to letting the child talk about his or her grief and anger, and give the child opportunities to express feelings in drawings or writings.

Could a child hide his grief because he doesn't want to upset the surviving parent?

Yes, especially if the parent gets more upset when the child is upset;. It is scary to feel the adults are not in control, but children need to see their loved ones grieve to some extent because it gives them permission to grieve and makes them realize the finality of the situation. The adults need to help children to learn that life must go on and share whatever beliefs they have about the meanings of this experience from religious, patriotic, or other perspectives. Grief takes many forms and is a recursive process so sometimes it takes a while for it to appear (might be more numb at first) and it can come back many times with different behavioral forms, depending on the child's age.

Should you bring up with the child that you haven't noticed him/her grieving?

Children deal with death differently at different ages, but in every case, adults should not assume the child is not grieving just because he or she is not talking about it or visibly expressing anger and sadness. Continue to talk about the person in loving ways, remembering things they did, looking at pictures, sharing your sad feelings so children understand it is okay to express their grief. Give them opportunities but don't ask why they aren't sad.

How can children achieve closure when death occurs in a manner that makes it impossible to recover a body—for example a disaster, attack, or war?

Seeing the body without life in it, as at a funeral, at least provides a finality that doesn't exist otherwise. Death is hard for children to accept when they do not have first-hand knowledge of the event (as through illness). The surviving parent should be prepared to continually, sadly, but in a matter of fact way remind children of the death and that they won't see the dead parent again.. Playing out the death and funeral, while that seems bizarre to an adult, may be a good way for some children to express their grief and anger, and help them to heal. The parent should make available materials that could be used to play out the death, such as blocks and small figures, but not suggest the death theme. Play with the child and see what types of themes the child uses—often these death themes will come out over time. The child should not be “pushed,” but if the theme emerges naturally, the parent can observe and take the role the child wants the parent to have—let the child lead the play.

What can adults expect from children whose surviving parent isn't the primary caregiver (and may not know the child as well as the other parent), or children who must leave his/her stepfamily and live with a divorced, natural parent?

This is a more difficult situation since the child has two losses—the loss of the parent caregiver and the loss of the familiar home environment. Also the child has to adjust to a less well-known figure. In this situation it is important for the child to bring as many things from his/her former situation to the new setting—bring pictures and artifacts that belonged to the dead parent. The surviving parent needs to be willing to talk about the dead parent—how much he/she cared about the child, and let the child express not only grief but anger at the changed situation. They should not expect the child to adjust easily to this new situation and should expect to give much more attention, love, care, and support to the child for a long time. They should never make the child feel he/she can no longer think about or talk about the dead parent.

What activities can the surviving parent and children do together to ease stress during holidays and other events?

Holiday seasons are notoriously hard for anyone who has lost a loved one, although a child may act like nothing is the matter. Sometimes this confuses adults but it is often the way children cope. Adults should be prepared for some behavior differences, perhaps outbursts, irritability, or lack of interest. Doing something to remember the deceased is important, and what that might be depends on the dead parent's interests, the child's age and interests, and the opportunities that are available. You might try planting a tree in the person's memory, giving to a cause that might help others to be saved, or making a scrapbook of that person's life, depending on the child's age level.

Surround the child with caring people on special occasions, such as a birthday, and maybe have the person present with a picture. Another option is to have "email pals" of children who lost parents in similar circumstances (so they feel they have a friend who knows what they are going through).

What can be done by caregivers of children whose parents serve in the military?

In the case of the parent leaving for war or other action, and the possibility that he or she may not come back, the age of the child is very important. For young children I wouldn't mention the fact of possible death, but instead try to have strategies that keep the child feeling in touch with the absent parent— cards, pictures, letters, email if possible. If the parent is reported dead while at war, the child will probably react similarly to hearing about his/her death in a disaster or other traumatic event.

What impact will the attack on September 11, 2001, have on this generation of children?

It is hard to say how it will affect [this generation] long term. I think no one will feel quite as immune from harm as we did before and many children will be more fearful, and sad, depending on how close their loss was and how sensitive and caring adults and other children are to them in the next few years. They will always carry some feelings about this. The 'depression children' have been known for their careful money management and the 'WWII children' for their patriotism, so each generation carries with it the formative experiences of their childhood.

In sum, the reality is that it isn't ever easy and the trauma of a parent's death will be with the child for the rest of his or her life, but that the presence of loving relatives, friends, and teachers can help the child regain some sense of the continuity and life-giving factors in the world. There certainly are no easy answers.

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Helping Children Cope With Grief

Nancy Hogan and Michelle Graham

Resources at a Glance: Grief Organizations

The Compassionate Friends

P.O. Box 3696
Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696
613-990-0010; 877-969-0010 (toll-free)
www.compassionatefriends.org

Bereaved Parents of the USA

Box 96, Park Forest, IL 60466
217-241-HOPE
www.bereavedparentsusa.org

The Dougy Center

P.O. Box 86852, 3909 SE 52nd Avenue
Portland, OR 97286
503-775-5683
www.grievingchild.org

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

1700 Diagonal Road, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314
703-837-1500
www.nhpco.org

Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center Institute for Psychoanalysis

122 S. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1300
Chicago, IL 60603
312-922-7474 ext. 308
www.barrharris.org

Children's Hospice International

901 North Pitt Street, Suite 230
Alexandria, VA 22314
703-684-0330; 1-800-2-4-CHILD
www.chionline.org

Rainbows

2100 Golf Road #370
Rolling Meadows, IL 60008
847-952-1770
www.rainbows.org

Compassionate Books

477 Hannah Branch Road
Burnsville, NC 28714
828-675-5909
www.compassionbooks.com

During the first years of schooling, many children experience the death of a significant loved one—whether a parent, sibling, or other family member (McGlaulin, 1998). Research suggests that four percent of children experience the death of a parent (1.2 million) by age 15 (Sood, Weller, Weller, Fristad, & Bowes, 1992). Hogan and DeSantis (1996) note that each year, “1.8 million children from birth through 18 years of age become bereaved siblings” (p. 235). Moreover, these statistics do not acknowledge other significant losses, such as the death of a pet, a grandparent or other relative, a classmate, or a friend.

Bereavement in childhood is a traumatic experience of intense and painful loss that has a lasting effect on children (DeMaso, Meyer, & Beasley, 1997; Tonkins & Lambert, 1996). Monroe and Kraus (1996) note that “children need information, reassurance, an opportunity express their feelings and adults who share their feelings” (p. 261). Without this support, children may be unable to grieve, or they may suffer from unresolved grief and distress as they struggle to understand the “confusing and troublesome feelings that they have no words for” (Mann, 1994, p. 26; Seager & Spencer, 1996; Shane & Shane, 1990). Grieving parents, however, may be unable to provide support to their children (DeMaso et al., 1997; Monroe & Kraus, 1996). Furthermore, childhood grief is difficult for many adults to understand, as it is different from adult grief (Mann, 1994). For example, Sontag, Nadig, and Henry (1994) report that children grieve their loss a “piece” at a time (p. 23). Westmoreland (1996) further describes children’s grief reactions, noting that “children do not often have the vocabulary to express their feelings, and may instead act out their grief” (p. 158). Children’s grief and its reactions are influenced by many factors, including the child’s age, cognitive level, and support system. Given the prevalence of experiences of grief for very young children, we present a case study, and what the case illustrates, as a tool for teachers and parents.

Case Study

Mrs. Cohen arrived early to her preschool classroom. She set her book bag and coffee on her desk as she turned to hang up her winter coat. In the silence of the room, she thought of the past week’s events. The mother of one of her students, Caroline, had

been killed in an automobile accident. Caroline had been attending the preschool for two years. Her mother had volunteered in the classroom often, helping with field trips, holiday parties, and other activities.

When Mrs. Cohen had told the children about the death of Caroline's mother, the children were sad and had many questions about the accident, and about death itself: "What happens when you die?" "Why do people die?" "Will Caroline's mommy ever come back?" Mrs. Cohen sat on the floor while she answered the children's many questions, using concrete language and supporting their concerns. Over the next several days, Mrs. Cohen read the book *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* (Krasny & Brown, 1996) to the children. She allotted time for the students to talk about grief and ask questions. During this special reading time, Mrs. Cohen talked with the class about ways they could "help Caroline feel better." She told them that saying, "I am sorry about what happened to you and your dad" might make Caroline feel better. In addition, the class collectively made a condolence card for Caroline. Mrs. Cohen delivered the card to Caroline when she attended the funeral.

Today would be Caroline's first day back at school. Mrs. Cohen was aware that it would be hard for Caroline to return, as she now might feel "different" than her classmates. Mrs. Cohen had asked that Caroline come to school early so she could learn from Caroline's father how she was adjusting to her grief and

loss. When they arrived, Mrs. Cohen noticed that Caroline looked tired and held tightly to her father's hand. Mrs. Cohen gave Caroline's father a card with the name of the school counselor, who would be calling about providing support for Caroline as well as sharing grief resources for Caroline's family. He thanked Mrs. Cohen for her support, kissed Caroline goodbye, and left. Mrs. Cohen knelt down to talk with Caroline at her eye-level. She said she was glad to have Caroline back at school and told her that there was a "safe space" where Caroline could go when she felt sad. Caroline smiled when she saw the large yellow beanbag chair near a shelf of books. She sat on the chair, saying that it "helped her tummy feel better." Mrs. Cohen smiled and Caroline began to cry. Mrs. Cohen reassured Caroline stating it was "OK to cry when you feel sad." She sat next to Caroline for a while, soothing and reassuring her.

When it was time for the children to go home, Mrs. Cohen gave Caroline a gift wrapped in pretty paper and said, "This is a book your classmates and I want you to have." Caroline opened it slowly. It was the book *When Dinosaurs Die*. Inside the cover was written, "We love you"; Mrs. Cohen and the students all had signed their names.

What Our Case Illustrates

Children often must grieve significant losses in the presence of peers and teachers. The above vignette illustrates that proactive teachers may prepare the class for a bereaved classmate's return to school after a death in the family. It also illustrates ways a teacher can "shine a little light" on the bereaved child to let her know that adults will be there for her to help her as she copes and adapts following a family tragedy. Teachers are often the first school representative to know that a child's parent is dying or has died. The first response should be to offer condolences. Then, the teacher should notify the "care team" in the school, including other teachers, the school psychologist, social workers, and the principal.

Teachers may reassure the bereaved child that her class-

Children's grief and its reactions are influenced by many factors, including the child's age, cognitive level, and support system.

mates know about the death and that they are sorry it happened. This relieves the child from either trying to explain the event or trying to keep it a secret. In

CHILDREN'S GRIEF REACTIONS AND SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES

Attending the funeral	Children often are comforted by having teachers and peers attend a parent's funeral. By attending the funeral and/or sending condolence cards, teachers communicate to the child that they are aware of the death and that they care. Saying "I am so sorry" may initiate further conversation about the family tragedy.
Answering dreaded questions	Children dread being asked questions that require them to acknowledge their parent's death (e.g., "Does your mother work?" or "What does your father do?"). Such questions require the children to tell strangers that their mother or father is dead. Teachers will benefit from knowing the bereavement history of the children entering their class. Children's school records should document significant family deaths for each child.
Feeling different than peers	As children want to belong to their peer group, being bereaved may make them feel different. Their classmates have two parents; they have one. When classmates talk about their mothers and fathers, the bereaved child may feel left out. If appropriate, teachers can reveal that they have known children who lost a parent and these children in time became happy again. This revelation may help children realize that other children have survived a parents' death.
Dealing with thoughtless remarks from peers	Peers may be thoughtless to, and even reject, bereaved children. They may say such things as, "You don't have a mother, so you can't . . ." or "If your father was a better driver, he wouldn't have crashed his car." Such comments from classmates serve to distance them from the bereaved child and the child's tragedy. Distancing reduces classmates' fears that their own parents could die. Teachers can intervene by reminding students that these kinds of statements are hurtful. Teaching children how to give and receive support is part of affective education. This is a teachable moment to help children learn and practice important prosocial skills, and to help them support a grieving classmate.
Being afraid of losing control and crying	Children fear that they will suddenly think about their loss and, without warning, lose control and cry in front of classmates and teachers. They worry about being ridiculed and being called a "baby" if they cry. Teachers can discuss with students how crying is a natural response to sadness and that children and adults cry when they are sad.
Missing and longing	Children miss and long for their deceased parent. It takes time for them to learn to live in a world in which their deceased parent is physically missing. Often, children maintain an ongoing relationship with the deceased parent. Children may perceive their parent as a guardian angel who watches over them. Children whose religion encompasses an after-life often believe that they will be reunited with their parent after death.
Needing to be alone, having a safe place	Bereaved children may need to be alone at times for temporary relief from feeling watched by peers and others. Early in the grieving process, they may feel that "everyone is looking to see how I will act." Teachers can help by offering a special quiet time and place if the child feels a flush of grief. Allowing them to go to the nurse's office for a few minutes can prevent an emotional outburst in public that would be upsetting for the child or class.
Experiencing difficulty with holidays and special family days	Certain days—including the deceased parent's birthday, Mother's Day or Father's Day, and holidays—are particularly difficult times for bereaved children. These special family times serve as reminders that family routines have been changed forever. Teachers may find that children are preoccupied and sad during these special times. Extra support may be necessary, particularly during the first year after a parent's death, when children's grief is retriggered.
Being uncomfortable about having fun or being happy	Bereaved children may feel uncomfortable if they have fun. They may believe that it is disloyal to their dead parent to have fun and be happy. They might suddenly stop in the middle of play, think about their dead parent, and have an overwhelming feeling that they are doing something wrong. Children early in their grief process often believe they will never be happy again. However, most children eventually come to believe that their deceased parent would want them to be happy.

continued on next page

Table 1

CHILDREN'S GRIEF REACTIONS AND SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES, CONTINUED

Having difficulty with concentration and certain kinds of projects	In addition to the usual difficulty with concentration that can occur early in the bereavement process, certain usual school activities may make the bereaved child feel singled out. Common projects like drawing a picture of your family or describing a family activities over a holiday break may exacerbate students' feelings of being unlike their peers. Teachers can avoid having bereaved children feel uncomfortable by suggesting that children select among several drawing choices or story-telling themes.
Sleep disruptions	If they suffer from nightmares, children may become afraid of the dark and of going to sleep. Encouraging their parent to maintain old bedtime routines helps children find renewed continuity in their life. Leaving on the light, leaving the bedroom door open, and letting young children sleep together in the same room may help.
Experiencing aches and pains	Aches and pains that can result from emotional overload are referred to as somatization. Suggest to the parent that persisting symptoms need to be investigated by a pediatrician. Stressors may include observing their parent, sibling, and other family members grieving. Watching their parent and siblings cry is anxiety producing. In time, children will experience a lessening in their grief for themselves and for other family members.
Regressing behaviors (e.g., whining, clinging, and baby talk)	Children commonly will regress to an earlier, safer time in their life when the deceased parent was alive and life was "normal." Regression is an emotional time-out that helps children reserve and restore energy for the long struggle of learning to live without the physical presence of a parent. It gives them a temporary safe haven. Extra hugs and attention help them feel cared for as they regain their equilibrium.
Believing no one understands	Children often do not believe that others understand what they are going through. As a result, they may feel alone, with no one to share their sadness. Reading stories about children who lost a family member helps students know that other bereaved children have had similar thoughts and feeling. Learning that other children found happiness again reassures them that things will get better in time.
Talking about grief	Children have a limited vocabulary for describing their grief. They usually can describe feeling mad, sad, or jumpy; because of their cognitive immaturity, however, they lack the ability to express verbally their thoughts and feelings. Drawing, however, may be ideal for helping younger children (say, 4 to 6 years old) to express their thoughts and feelings.

Table 1, continued

addition, children need to believe that they are not alone in their grief. Table 1 provides a framework for understanding children's common ways of expressing grief, and suggests ways that classmates and teachers may respond.

Children have a natural tendency to provide care and nurturance for classmates who have experienced a significant loss. Teachers, too, may enlarge their instinct to help others in need by modeling affective support. For example, telling stories about giving and receiving support during difficult times teaches children how to support a distressed classmate.

Bereaved children have a remarkable ability to recover from intense grief. Recovery, however, does not happen in an emotional vacuum. Demonstrating caring support tells children that, despite the tragedy, they will be taken care of and they are still loved.

Research demonstrates that many children who have experienced significant loss feel they have matured more than peers who have not experienced a traumatic event. In addition, many children who experience loss believe they are more aware of others' feelings and can provide help to those going through hard times. Bereaved families may benefit from talking with others who have gone through a similar experience by joining a support group, where they

will find that they are not alone and that what they are experiencing is normal.

Children, unlike adults, grieve intermittently. One minute a child may be playing freely, laughing, and appearing to be having fun and the next minute act withdrawn and look sad. Teachers can watch for clues that the child needs special attention. While extreme behaviors, if they occur, usually modulate with time, children may experience episodic grieving. Certain circumstances surrounding a death may increase and prolong the grief process. Violent deaths, such as suicide or homicide, or a death where the loved one's body is never recovered, require more adjustment. If a child remains preoccupied with grief and appears to be unable to make developmental and cognitive gains, the teacher needs to refer the child to members of the school's "care team" for assessment and intervention. If the child's stress reactions appear to be unremitting, teachers should confer with parents about referring the child to a counselor or school psychologist for more intensive help.

Teachers are in a unique position to make a difference in a bereaved child's life by providing support as children heal. In addition, teachers may teach children how to give support to others and how to ask for help when they need it. These are vital life skills, that if learned in childhood, may be used for a lifetime.

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Demonstrating caring support tells children that, despite the tragedy, they will be taken care of and they are still loved.

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*Additional books for children and teachers are available at Compassion Books
(www.compassionbooks.com)*

Note:

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Coping with Death: *Helping Students Grieve*

Paula Westmoreland

One morning in September 1993, I arrived at school to the unexpected news that the teacher with whom I shared a classroom had died. She had been in a traffic accident the week before, but appeared to be healing well and was scheduled to leave the hospital in a few days. Unforeseen complications, however, led to her death.

Our students trickled into the classroom, aware that something was wrong. Although they knew about the accident, I had assured them that she would be okay. Now, they were filled with questions. As the day passed, I realized I was not prepared to help my students deal with their grief. We muddled through that day and the following weeks, but the questions remained. What should I have said or done differently? What should I do in the future? I searched for answers to these questions in a graduate class on helping others cope with loss. And I conducted further research into children's grieving process, and specific activities that classroom teachers can use to help their students cope with death.

The subject of death is a difficult one for many adults to discuss. Teachers are no different. As death is part of life, however, it should not be ignored. Although many teachers would prefer to avoid discussing death and grief, the effect of a loss on students makes dealing with this topic unavoidable. Well-intentioned adults may try to protect children from pain by discouraging discussion, lying or using

symbolic language. These methods only succeed in confusing and frightening children. Teachers can best help students cope with death and grief, whether expected or unexpected, by being prepared (Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1992).

Some schools have intervention plans for helping students cope with death. These plans incorporate input from parents, teachers and faculty. Interventions are designed to assist in the coping process. Gramer (1987) states that before dealing with children's feelings about death and loss, teachers must first deal with their personal feelings about these issues. Further preparation includes educating oneself about children's perceptions of death, stages of grief, expressions of grief, conceptions of death and strategies for helping children cope with death.

Perceptions of Death

Children have different perceptions of death depending on their age and developmental level (Aldrich, 1993; Lagorio, 1993; Mills, Reisier, Robinson & Vermilye, 1976; Ragouzeos, 1987; Ward, 1993). Three- to 5-year-olds have a poor concept of time and permanence. They may view death as a temporary thing. Or they may link death to sleep and consequently fear falling asleep. Often, young children view death as something deliberately planned; therefore, they think someone is responsible. Children may even feel they are responsible for the death in some way. They may also worry that someone else will soon die. This worry can become an intense fear.

Six- to 8-year-olds begin to realize that death is final. They are very interested in what happens to the body after death, associating death with disintegration of the body. They may not view death personally, but rather as something that happens to other people. Their views of death may be distorted by what they see on television or overhear from adults.

Nine- to 11-year-olds begin to understand death as a final, irreversible part of life. They realize that death

can happen to anyone, including themselves. They are more concerned, however, about a parent's possible death than their own. They may develop a fear of death and begin to question what happens after death or they may display indifference. Sometimes they will joke about death as a cover for grief (Aldrich, 1993; Lagorio, 1993; Mills et al., 1976; Ragouzeos, 1987; Ward, 1993).

Stages of Grief

Adults and children experience grief in several stages. These stages are fluid—children may move in and out of the stages during the grieving process. Ward (1993) cites the following stages of grief:

1. Shock and Disbelief: In this stage, children may feel numb or apathetic. They may withdraw from others or appear abnormally calm.

2. Denial: This stage usually occurs within the first two weeks after the death and can last minutes, days, weeks or months. Children may appear not to understand what has happened or may behave as if nothing has happened. They may refuse to acknowledge any loss or escape into fantasies.

3. Growing Awareness: In this stage, children may feel peculiar if they have never experienced such intense feelings. They may be bombarded with uncontrollable anger, guilt, depression, yearning and anxiety.

- a. Children may feel anger at the person who died, for leaving; at God, for allowing the person to die; at medical

services, for not preventing the death; at others, for causing the death (as in a traffic accident); or, at themselves, for not being able to stop the death.

- b. Children may feel guilty about imagined or real negligence toward the dead person. Children often think they should have loved the person better. Or, they may think their feelings about the death are not appropriate.
- c. As children begin to feel the pain of the loss, they may become depressed and may experience feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth.
- d. Children may experience anxiety as they realize changes have occurred and begin to wonder how those changes will affect their future.

4. Acceptance: This stage usually takes place the second year after the death. Children begin to relearn and adapt to the changed world and its new conditions.

Although children and adults may experience similar grief stages, children do grieve differently from adults.

Expressions of Grief

Ragouzeos (1987) points out that grief does not have a timetable. Although children and adults may experience similar grief stages, children do grieve differently from adults. The

limitations of their life experiences and maturational stages affect how they view and cope with death.

Children generally do not grieve regularly or constantly. At times, they may appear unaffected by the loss or may seem to be handling their grief. Children often do not have the vocabulary to express their feelings and may, instead, act out their grief. They may fluctuate between being very upset and not being upset at all.

Typical reactions include seeking attention, becoming anxious about separation from parents, acting out difficult behaviors or having difficulty sleeping. Children may be reluctant to go to school, have difficulty completing assignments or become overly conscientious about schoolwork. They may want to talk constantly about the person who died or they may not want to talk about the person at all. They may overeat or undereat, complain of headaches or stomachaches or develop a fear of the dark. We must remember that grief is a process and children, as well as adults, usually take approximately two years to adjust to death (Arent, 1990; Lagorio, 1993; Mills et al., 1976; Schaefer & Lyons, 1988; Ward, 1993).

Abnormal Reactions

Some reactions to death, however, are not normal and signify the need for outside intervention. Teachers who observe the following behaviors in bereaved students should not hesitate to refer the children to professional counseling:

- pretending absolutely nothing has happened
- constant anger toward anyone and everyone
- pervasive depression and isolation from friends and family

- physical assaults on others
- cruelty to animals
- excessive misbehavior, fighting or other serious socially delinquent acts
- involvement with drugs or alcohol
- frequent panic or anxiety attacks
- truancy or a phobic fear of school
- threat of suicide
- persistent physical illness (Aldrich, 1993; McIntier, 1993).

Conveying Basic

Concepts of Death

Whenever possible, teachers should discuss death and grief with students before the loss of a loved one occurs.

Children gain more benefit from lessons about death *before* a crisis. Although every question that children have about death cannot be answered, teachers should be honest and forthright with students concerning the following basic concepts:

- ***Death is inevitable.*** All things in life die; it is a natural occurrence. Students need to realize that death is part of the life cycle; neither the child nor the deceased are being punished for specific thoughts or actions.
- ***Death is irreversible.*** Children need to be told that death is permanent. No matter how much one wishes otherwise, the dead person will not return. Children who expect someone to come back, as if from a trip, may experience intense anger and hurt when the deceased does not reappear.
- ***Being dead means that all life functions stop.*** Children should

understand that all activities, such as movement, sensory functions, thinking or eating, have ceased and will not start again. Children lacking this understanding may experience anxiety over the deceased person's physical well-being. They may worry, for example, that the person is cold or hungry.

Children need to be told that death is permanent. No matter how much one wishes otherwise, the dead person will not return.

- ***Living things die because of definite reasons.*** Teachers can help students understand that people die because of illness, injury or old age, not because of someone's thoughts. Children who have no knowledge of this concept often think they caused a death because of "bad" thoughts about the person, and consequently experience unresolved guilt (Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1992).

Teachers can convey these basic concepts by referring to naturally occurring events and situations, such as the death of a pet or finding a dead bug. Teachers may also wish to use a commercial program guide for teaching about death and grieving. Most of all, teachers can help students cope with loss by being open and honest about death and encouraging discussions of feelings and ideas.

Helping Students Cope

Teachers' demeanor and actions can do much to help students cope with feelings of pain and loss. Whether the loss is an individual student's relative or friend or a faculty member or student at the school, whether expected or unexpected, teachers can be prepared to help their students move through the grieving process.

General Tips

- Gather as many facts as possible. Be prepared to stop rumors and be truthful about the death.
- Share your own feelings of loss and grief.
- Be open and honest. If you do not know the answer to children's questions, tell them so.
- Explain funeral rituals, customs and services to those children who plan to attend the funeral.
- Be understanding of students' feelings of anger, fear and guilt.
- Expect children to function in the classroom. Encourage them to try their work.
- Be flexible with schedules, assignments and schoolwork; children who are grieving have short attention spans and may have difficulty concentrating on tasks.
- Be patient with children who talk constantly about the person who died.
- Remember that grieving takes time and children often fluctuate between the stages of grief.
- Most important, be available when children need to talk. Encourage open communication and acceptance.

Acknowledge children's feelings, even confused feelings, and really listen to what they have to say (Aldrich, 1993; Arent, 1990; Lagorio, 1993; McIntier, 1993; Ragouzeos, 1987; Ward, 1993).

Specific Strategies

- Reach out to the family of the deceased person by talking with them about the person who has died. Remember special moments or favorite activities. Encourage children to express their feelings.
- Use journal writing to help children work through their feelings. Journals can be shared or kept private. Students may record their memories of the person or describe their feelings about death.
- Draw or paint pictures of the deceased or of a remembered activity with that person. Display a deceased student's work.
- Help students create a memorial book that contains writings, pictures, letters or small mementos connected to the person who died.
- Make a collage of pictures or words cut from magazines that remind students of the person who died.
- Create a special art project, such as a mural, pottery or weaving, in memory of the deceased.
- Read books about death and grief. These stories demonstrate that grieving is a natural process and help students realize that all children experience fears, anxieties and anger. *The Grieving Student in the Classroom* (Ragouzeos, 1987) includes a list of appropriate books and films.
- Plant a tree, shrub or entire garden at the school as a memorial to a deceased teacher or student.
- Start a fund in honor of a student or faculty member who died. Use the money to purchase books for the school library. Inside each

book bought with the money, place a bookplate that honors the person.

- Children may want to write letters, stories and poems, or create artwork about the deceased to send to the family.
- Have a memorial service at the school so faculty and students can honor the deceased. Ask a local clergyman or community leader to preside (Aldrich, 1993; Arent, 1990; McIntier, 1993; Ward, 1993).

Death is an intrinsic part of life. Children are exposed to death in the natural world, as well as by what they see or hear in the media. When the loss of a loved one occurs, teachers can facilitate a healthy grieving process by maintaining awareness of the situation, demonstrating care and concern and encouraging honest communication (Aldrich, 1993; McIntier, 1993; Ragouzeos, 1987).

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Helping Kindergartners Deal with Death

Helen L. Miller

I remember my first experience with a child who was in the process of dealing with death in the family. Mary was a lovely child whose father was in the hospital dying of cancer. Mary's mother was honest with her daughter, explaining that her father was not going to recover. Mary realized that only death would relieve her father of his pain and suffering. She talked to me daily about her father's illness and how she felt.

Mary's mother had prepared her for the inevitable; I simply listened when Mary needed to express her feelings. She handled her father's death as only a 5-year-old can--with a feeling of loss, but with faith in what caring adults had told her. Her classmates were kind and considerate when she returned to school after her father's funeral. This helped her to adjust to her loss. Mary was the brave one; we were her support. To this day, I can see her tiny hand clutching a flower from her father's coffin.

Then there was Lizzie. Lizzie's grandfather died unexpectedly during the school year. She and her family left town for the funeral and stayed with her grandmother for a week. Lizzie was still concerned when she got back to school. She told me where she had been, and talked about it for awhile. Then she asked me if I could write something down for her.

Lizzie dictated the following words: "Grandpa. Take care of my

grandpa. He died." Then she whispered, softly, as I finished writing the last letters, "He's up in heaven." After I finished, she folded the paper and put it in her book bag to take home to her mother. She knew the fact of her grandfather's death was now written down and she could go on with other things.

My last experience with a child's grief involved Danny. Danny's new baby sister died of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). The day after it happened, Danny came to school as usual. He said nothing about the baby's death. (Fortunately, a parent had told me about it.) I let Danny lead the way, not pressing when he chose to be very quiet all day. The next day he was absent because of the funeral. It was then that I told the class about Danny's baby sister.

When Danny returned to school the day after the funeral, he came to me immediately and told me what had happened. He also explained that he wanted to tell everyone in the class. I suggested that we wait until everyone arrived so that he could tell the entire class.

When the time was appropriate for Danny to make his announcement, he approached the 30 children individually, saying to them one by one, "My baby sister died and we buried her in the ground yesterday."

Every child nodded and listened quietly. When Danny was finished, many of us shared our own experiences with death--the death of a

grandparent, a baby cousin, an aunt or uncle, a favorite pet. The room was filled with sharing and caring. Whatever had been planned seemed insignificant compared to the feelings expressed by each person.

It didn't matter that this was not part of the lesson plan. The children learned to deal with their feelings, and they found that their feelings were like everyone else's. They helped each other; they all helped Danny. When he left the room to go home, he seemed relieved of a great burden. He knew that he had people who cared about him and how he was feeling. It was a good feeling, not being alone. We all left that day with good feelings about ourselves and each other.

Learning has its priorities. Academic learning should not always be paramount in the classroom. It is also important to know that whatever happens, there are people who will help you with your feelings--both good and bad.

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Death of a Friend

Eva L. Essa, Colleen I. Murray, Joanne Everts

Not quite a year before, in December, Tommy told a teacher that he did not feel well. Then, after Christmas, the news came that he was in the Oakland Children's Hospital, diagnosed as having a particularly virulent and rare form of cancer. Shock, anger, helplessness and dismay hit everyone at the Child and Family Research Center, where Tommy was enrolled. Tommy? That bright, cheerful, mischievous, wonderful little boy? How could that be? Why could that be? As the adults probed their own hurt, they realized they would also have to tell Tommy's friends. Although Tommy was absent, he was still very much a part of his class.

The teachers first informed the other children's parents about Tommy's illness. Then they talked to the children. "Tommy is very sick and is in the hospital. He has a special type of illness, not like catching a cold. It is called cancer and makes him very sick." The children asked a lot of questions. They wanted to know why Tommy got this illness, if they could catch it and if he would be back. Someone asked if he would die.

Tommy's class talked about him often. While Tommy was in the hospital, his classmates frequently made pictures, cards, stories and videotapes to send to him. The children's preoccupation with illness was also reflected in their play. They used the doctor props in the dramatic play area almost daily, they built a hospital out of blocks and they frequently read books about illness and death. Some children talked about Tommy every day while others never mentioned him at all.

Sometimes the teachers cried and shared their feelings with the children. All of the staff at the Center talked among themselves, both in staff meetings and informally. For some, Tommy's illness reminded them of their own childhood experiences with the death of a sibling or friend. Likewise, many of the parents frequently discussed Tommy's illness among themselves and with the teachers. One parent, a clinical psychologist, offered her counseling services to staff and parents who wanted to discuss their feelings with a professional.

After Tommy came home from the hospital, he was invited to visit his friends at school. For several days before his visit, the teachers discussed Tommy with the other children. They told the children that although he might look a little different, the Tommy who would visit was the same Tommy they already knew. He might, they said, have lost his hair. He would also be more tired and the children would have to be especially gentle with him. They all talked about how they remembered Tommy and looked at some old photographs.

The day Tommy first visited his class was difficult. Tommy was hesitant, as were some of his friends. But the children's natural curiosity about what had happened to Tommy helped break the ice. They wanted to see where the tubes that disappeared under Tommy's shirt went and to know what they did. They wanted to know why his head was covered with a cap. Tommy was pleased to lift his shirt, but embarrassed to show his bald head. Tommy's friends reacted in different ways; Diana, for instance, was looking forward to playing with Tommy while Christopher, who used to love rough-and-tumble play with Tommy, did not want to be around him at all.

When he felt well enough, Tommy also visited some of his school friends at their homes. Ben particularly treasured these visits from his good friend. Ben's mother recalls one occasion when Ben and Tommy laughingly compared a spaghetti dinner to intravenous tubes and blood.

Tommy visited his classmates a few more times during the spring and summer. When he died in the fall, a palpable sense of sadness fell over those who had known him. Although many of his classmates had moved on to kindergarten and 1st grade, the children who had known Tommy, as well as younger siblings of his former classmates, needed to be told about his death.

*On September 23, 1989,
Tommy died,
just two weeks before his
seventh birthday.*

***“It was a calming experience,”
recalled one of Tommy’s teachers, “
sad, but not overwhelmingly sad.
I felt soothed by the experience,
not oppressed.”***

The staff at the Child and Family Research Center also telephoned parents of former classmates who were no longer at the Center.

Many children and teachers attended the grave-side funeral service. A slight breeze ruffled the fall foliage on that beautiful, sunny day and a children’s choir, of which Tommy had been a member, sang sweetly. Some of the children wandered to the edge of the group and played near a grove of pine trees. Some looked at a scrapbook full of pictures and other mementos of Tommy. “It was a calming experience,” recalled one of Tommy’s teachers, “sad, but not overwhelmingly sad. I felt soothed by the experience, not oppressed.”

The topic of Tommy’s death was brought up repeatedly at school and home, and, according to some of the parents, continues to be raised even now, more than 5 years later. Katie, who was 4 when Tommy died, at first frequently asked, “Tommy is dead, right? He won’t ever come back, right?” Now she remembers that he is dead and talks about the fact that Tommy is under the ground. Sometimes she wonders if he is up in the air and she speculates about whether he still has bones.

To this day, Ben declares “Tommy is my best friend.” Teachers and parents still talk about him. Tommy’s picture is posted on the bulletin board in his former classroom, along with pictures of other children. When a child asks, “Who is that?” the teacher answers, “That’s

Tommy. He was in our class. He was a friend of ours and we like to remember him.”

Unfortunately, the death of a child is not an unusual occurrence. Life-threatening illnesses and accidents take the lives of thousands of young children in the United States each year, leaving behind family, peers and adults who must cope with grief and a sense of loss. When a friend dies, teachers must come to terms with their own feelings, as well as those of the children and their parents. The experiences of the Child and Family Research Center staff in the wake of Tommy’s illness and death can provide some insights and guidelines that may be helpful to others coping with a similar situation.

Honest communication helped everyone deal with Tommy’s illness and subsequent death. In spite of social norms that often prevent open discussion of death and dying, teachers from the Center consciously maintained an open environment. They talked freely among themselves, with the parents and with the children. Children need an accepting atmosphere that allows them to discuss such sensitive topics. They should never be “protected” from the facts of serious illness and death. Experiencing the disappearance of a friend without knowing what happened to him can be more distressing than hearing about his death (Fox, 1985; Wolfelt, 1983).

Communication also meant the adults acknowledged and faced their

own feelings. Many relived past experiences that compounded the reality and emotion surrounding Tommy’s death. One teacher, reminded of her brother’s death, found herself recalling how she and her mother reacted. She felt that Tommy’s death helped her gain a new, adult perspective on a painful childhood experience.

The teachers were not afraid of acknowledging Tommy’s illness and death or sharing their own feelings with the children. By showing their genuine reactions, they sent the message to the children that it is all right to be sad, to grieve or to feel uncertainty. Children also find it reassuring to know that someone would care if they became seriously ill or died.

The teachers talked to the parents about Tommy’s illness and death first in order to prepare them in case their children brought up the topic or asked questions. Knowing the situation helps parents understand any changes in their children’s behavior resulting from feelings of fear, anger, loss or distress (Fox, 1985).

The teachers tried to keep their explanations simple and honest. They did not overwhelm the children with a lot of detail or technical terminology. They presented the basic facts and then allowed the children to ask questions. Many of the children’s questions were concrete and reflected concern about themselves: whether, for instance, they could also become sick (Fox, 1985; Grollman, 1967; Wass & Corr, 1984).

By listening to the children and reflecting their questions and comments, the teachers gained insight into the children’s thoughts and feelings and were better equipped to help them understand. The teachers sometimes asked, “What do you think?” The responses helped them discern the children’s emotional and cognitive grasp of Tommy’s illness and death.

Once the children knew about Tommy’s illness, they reacted in different ways. Teachers should recognize

that children will not react in the same way and some may not appear to react at all (Wolfelt, 1983). Some reactions may even seem to be callous. Children employ different coping strategies. Diana and Ben were eager to play with Tommy and looked forward to his visits. Christopher remained aloof. The teachers speculated that their admonitions to “be gentle” with Tommy frightened Christopher because he generally communicated in physical ways. The humor Tommy and Ben exhibited by comparing spaghetti to intravenous tubing is a healthy reaction to stress.

Adults also responded in various ways, depending upon how comfortable they felt answering the children’s questions, interacting with Tommy and talking about their own feelings. Teachers rarely receive sufficient information or training in dealing with death or dying (Pratt & Hare, 1985). Teachers who have not adequately resolved their own misgivings about death will be less able to help children and parents deal with the issue. A professional can ease the situation by discussing attitudes, values and concerns about death and dying—either with individual teachers or at a staff meeting. Tommy’s teachers benefited from their talks with the clinical psychologist.

In addition to facilitating open discussions, the teachers allowed the children to work through their feelings in indirect ways. They equipped the dramatic play area with medical props and encouraged the children to express their feelings and concerns artistically. The children used the materials often (Tait & Depta, 1993).

Books about illness and death also can be helpful. Teachers should be careful, however, to review the

Dealing with death is a deeply felt experience that, while inevitable, is particularly difficult for young children who still have a rather limited capacity for comprehending its finality.

books in advance, as some books can be more confusing than helpful. For example, books about the death of a grandparent or a pet are probably too removed from the reality of losing a friend. Furthermore, teachers should not use such stories to help children cope with the death of a friend because instead of feeling better, the children may become fearful of losing another important person. Children’s books about death need to be carefully screened for age-appropriateness, situation-appropriateness and religious overtones. Only a few books are appropriate for young preschoolers. While some books for preschoolers deal with the deaths of parents or grandparents, animals and plants, books specific to the death of siblings or peers are missing for this age group (Ordal, 1983).

The teachers caringly supported Tommy and his family in a number of ways. They kept in touch throughout his illness by sending special messages from themselves and the other children, such as cards, pictures and videotapes. Many attended the funeral. Staff members should continue to consider an ill child as being part of the class and should express their feelings to the family.

Although children’s concrete responses to illness and death can seem ghoulish to adults, they reflect children’s curiosity and a need to know. The questions Tommy’s classmates asked about the tubes under his shirt or Katie’s speculation about whether Tommy still has bones are typical. Children of dif-

ferent ages respond to death in different ways. Preschoolers tend to conceptualize death in an immature way. Ben, who was 7 when Tommy died, seemed to understand that his friend’s death was permanent and irreversible. He grieved for the loss of his close friend, realizing that he would never see him again. Katie, at 3, did not yet recognize the finality of death. She continues to bring up Tommy’s death and now, at the age of 8, she is working through the experience from a more mature understanding of death. A sizable body of research supports the belief that the ages between 5 and 7 are pivotal to the development of an understanding about death (Speece & Brent, 1984; Stambrook & Parker, 1987). During this stage, children begin “to grasp that death is not temporary, that one cannot come back to life under any circumstances, and that death happens to everyone” (Essa & Murray, 1994).

The children continued to talk about Tommy, both at school and at home. They asked questions about his illness and wanted to know what happened to him after he died. Such persistent conversations are not unusual. Teachers should expect that children will ask many questions about illness and death and can tell parents to expect the recurring conversations and questions. By continuing to help children process their questions, teachers can help them deal with their fears, anger or confusion in a healthy manner.

Thus, the death of a child is not an end. The child continues to live on in the memories of all who knew him or her. Dealing with death is a deeply felt experience that, while inevitable, is particularly difficult for young children who still have a

rather limited capacity for comprehending its finality. Teachers have an important role in helping a deceased child's friends understand and cope with the death.

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Some Helpful Resources

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Life and Death:

A Cross-cultural Perspective

Stewart Cohen

Birth and death form the boundaries surrounding our presence in and connection to our community of membership. How we celebrate and experience each of these defining events represents, in part, an expression of how we understand our meaning within the life cycle.

The death of a family member or friend is one of life's most difficult transitions. Interestingly, English-speaking societies react to death with attitudes and practices that differ dramatically from the death and funerary rituals of other societies. The anxiety and discomfort that characterize contemporary English-speaking expression of death contrast sharply with the practices of other cultures, both contemporary and ancient. This column describes the celebration of death in Mexico, providing an alternative perspective from which to examine our current attitudes and practices.

Todos Santos: The Day of the Dead in Mexico

Carmichael and Sayer (1991) observe:

In one sense death is not an event which has to do with life for by definition it is something beyond the experience of living. Yet, how individual cultures treat this circumstance is variable. In many, death is . . . not regarded as a termination but as an elevation to another level of existing. It is an event initially tinged with

uncertain emotions, but ultimately one to be celebrated as the dead are reaccommodated as ancestors. (p. 7)

In Mexico, the celebration of death plays a major role in the lives of its people, providing an outlet for the inevitable emotions that accompany the loss of a loved one, as well as an opportunity for community remembrance. This institutional expression of respect and remembrance occurs during the festival of *Todos Santos* (All Saints), the "Day of the Dead." On this day, it is believed, the souls of the dead return to visit their families and to enjoy food, drink and other earthly pleasures.

For Mexicans, death is considered to be a natural element of the life cycle and is, consequently, to be celebrated in all its glory and solemnity. The Day of the Dead, in addition to its importance as a religious experience, also provides an opportunity for community expression in open festival. Entire communities construct altars of remembrance in order to welcome the return of their ancestors. Both adults and children bring offerings that range from simple to elaborate, from foods to flowers. Farmers, artisans and housewives join in a celebration of joy, color, creativity, music, dance and, most of all, community.

From Symbol to Celebration

The present-day Mexican festival of *Todos Santos*, also referred to as *Dia* or *Dias de los Muertos* (Day or Days of the Dead), is an amalgam of the traditional customs and beliefs of Catholic Spain and the indigenous Indian cultures. Many of the festival's elements have evolved over time, resulting in a rich mixture of form and expression throughout Mexico. The central focus of *Todos Santos*, however, remains the remembrance of lost community members and celebration of their return. *Todos Santos*, as such, forms a remarkable unifying event within Mexican culture; all facets of Mexican society, urban and rural, rich and poor, descendants of the old world and the new, join in the festivities.

The Ofrenda

The focus of the celebration is the *ofrenda*, an altarpiece constructed by family members to honor and welcome the return of the deceased soul. Each *ofrenda*, built upon a platform table richly decorated with bright flowers, offers the clothing and personal articles of the deceased, as well as their favorite foods and drinks. The souls of the deceased are not actually seen, but their presence is felt. Consequently, the deceased do not physically consume the food offerings, but rather absorb their essence.

When the souls have had their "fill," it is then the turn of the living to take a share. Some of the offerings will be consumed by family members, some

distributed among relatives, some given to neighbors and friends and some placed upon the graves of the deceased. This joyful sharing creates a form of communal reciprocity: it helps connect the community with their dead and, in turn, creates a symbolic presence of the deceased within the community.

"I can't say what form the dead take on their return, but I like to think they come as doves. When the spirit leaves the body, it flies away. Some people here have seen white doves on altars, and the Holy Ghost is like a dove, so I think our souls return as doves to earth. Of course, there are those who say the dead do not return, but I know they do. I feel sure of this, because when we offer food to the deceased, it loses its aroma and its taste." (Candido Reyes Castillo, Huaquechula, State of Puebla in Carmichael & Sayer, 1991, p. 99)

Children and Celebration

Children play an integral role in the *Todos Santos* festivities, from the preparation and creation of the *ofrenda* to graveside celebrations. In addition, children learn the lessons and parables for living that are implicit in the practices of *Todos Santos*.

One of the beliefs associated with the celebration is that the souls of deceased children return first. When the child souls withdraw, the souls of the adults can return. Consequently, different offerings are prepared to honor the children. The *ofrenda* for *angelitos* (souls of dead children) is prepared in miniature and includes simple foods and drinks appropriate for children, as well as sweets. Such foods are called *comida blanca* (white foods) to signify that they are blander and different from the traditional spicier fare consumed by adults.

Children are also involved in the leavetaking ceremonies at the gravesides of departed relatives which signal the festival's end. Here, they help decorate the graves with the brightly colored *cepasuchil* flower (a form of marigold used to decorate graves in Mexico since Aztec times), scent the air with incense and join in lighting the traditional candles of reverence. Death is celebrated as a passage, where the mystery of the occasion is de-

mythologized through joyful ceremony. The dead are remembered and missed, but also welcomed back after their long journey home.

The lessons of *Todos Santos* are many and varied. Above all, children are taught that death is part of life. Death is not to be feared, but to be respected in terms of its inevitability. This outlook toward death is most vividly evident in the skeletal imagery used to caricature all phases of life, using death to satirize life. Children are also taught to respect life, through the remembrance of each community member. Moreover, they are taught to live each day as if it were their last, a somber reminder of life's transience. And finally, as we are reminded by Fredy Mendez of La Congregacion del Tajin, State of Veracruz, "We do the things our ancestors did; my father follows his parents' teachings, and I will continue to do the same" (Carmichael & Sayer, 1991, p. 77). The continuity of tradition is a valuable lesson for us all.

Reference

Carmichael, E., & Sayer, C. (1991). *The skeleton at the feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. London: British Museum Press.

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