

Teaching the Toughest Lesson - About Death

By David J. Schonfeld and Murray Kappelman

Death is a topic most teachers would rather not discuss, let alone teach. It is easy to understand why surveys show that very few elementary-school teachers deal with the subject in any planned manner in their classes. Death is an uncomfortable topic to think about, so we look for reasons not to teach it. We rationalize by thinking inwardly, "How can I even begin to explain something to my class of small children that I don't understand well myself?"

What we may fail to realize is how much greater a disadvantage young pupils have when coming to grips with this mystifying reality. They may lack an understanding of even the most basic concepts about what it means when someone they know dies. They are unable, then, to understand what has occurred and to begin to deal with the loss.

Can children learn this type of information without our assistance? Not easily. Parents and other significant adults in their lives (including teachers) often unsuccessfully attempt to protect them from the experience and the knowledge. But what these well-meaning adults fail to grasp is that virtually all children, by the time they reach school age, have had some experience with death that is significant to them. Avoiding the subject in school and at home only creates more mystery and fear.

Do these experiences involve the kinds of losses an adult would appreciate? Not always. One girl, for example, raised her hand in a school assembly to share a significant personal-loss story with the group. She had found a spider in her bedroom, and without her family's knowledge, had raised it as a pet, bringing it crumbs to eat and watching it spinning its web. One day a family member found the spider and killed it. As the girl recounted this story, she began to cry. The loss for her was far more significant than her family could have realized. Such "minor" but significant losses occur regularly in children's lives.

Yet the information children are given about death is almost invariably incorrect. Television and children's stories are full of references to death, but typically depict it inaccurately -- characters die and later return to life with regularity. Parents and other adults often try to replace deceased pets and give children false assurances, such as telling them that they will never die. It is not surprising, then, that children do not learn these basic facts easily without added guidance. Teachers, in fact, may be their only source of correct information.

We can prepare children for later losses by teaching them this information before they need to use it. As with all topics, we have to teach children information prior to the time it is needed to allow for mastery and acquisition of skills. If we wait till a child is faced with the death of a close relative or friend, we have waited too long.

Through our work with schools, we have found that teachers who are armed with insight and information feel freer to allow discussions about death to occur in their classrooms. Many, moreover, are pleasantly surprised by how well such instruction is received, and how comfortable the children become with the discussion. We may not be able to answer all of children's questions about death, but we can certainly provide them with some of the most basic concepts as a foundation for their future. These include the knowledge that:

- *Death is irreversible.* Children need to understand that death is a permanent phenomenon. There is no return or recovery from death, no matter how much we may wish otherwise. The child who expects the deceased to return, as if he had gone away on a trip, may be angry at the one who has died for not coming back, or even bothering to call. If the child does not appreciate the irreversibility of death, then there is also no reason to begin to detach personal ties to the deceased, a necessary first step in the mourning process.
- *All life functions cease at the time of death.* Children must understand that all of the activities of body and mind -- eating, breathing, cognition, sensation and so on -- cease completely at the time of death. Young children who do not understand this may wish to bury pet food with their dead dog, or may be unduly concerned about a deceased relative's being hungry, cold or in pain. They will tell you that dead people don't see well because it is dark underground or that they can't move "as much" because they are restrained by the coffin.

Failure to understand this concept often leads to a preoccupation with the physical suffering of the dead person. In one assembly of 4th graders, three of the children had experienced a death of a parent or guardian in the previous 12 to 18 months. All three had been to a wake where the casket was open and all of them had thought, at some point, that they saw the body move. Because of their incomplete understanding of the concept of death's finality, all three children still had recurrent nightmares that their parent or guardian was, in some way, "buried alive," fighting to get out of the grave. Merely explaining the concept to these children helped them by reducing this unnecessary fear -- a fear that is unfortunately augmented by some horror movies and sensational stories in supermarket tabloids.

- *There are true causes why living things die.* The child must develop a realistic understanding of the true causes of death. Young children who lack this understanding will often reach the conclusion that bad thoughts or unrelated actions or omissions were responsible for the death of a loved one. This leads to excessive guilt that is very difficult for the child to resolve. It is almost universal for those close to someone who has died to question whether there was some thing they did, or failed to do, that was related to the death. But most adults, after considerable introspection, will correctly reach the conclusion that they were not, in fact, responsible. That is because they know the real reason for the death.

Children who lack an understanding of the true causes of death are not able to reach this conclusion; they are left instead with little as an alternative to self-blame. As one bright 2nd grader matter-of-factly stated: "My brother died of sudden infant death syndrome because I went away to camp that day." Only after a discussion of the true causes of death was the boy able to absolve himself of his perceived responsibility for his brother's death.

- *Death is inevitable.* The child must learn that death is a natural phenomenon; every living thing eventually dies. Children who feel that significant individuals, such as themselves or their parents, are immortal are indicating their lack of appreciation of the inevitability of death. Parents and other adults will often question why children need to know "this harsh fact of life" at young ages. What harm, they may argue, is there in protecting their children from this reality for "as long as possible"? The problem is that death is a reality; someone or something of importance to the child will eventually die, and usually before the parent feels it is time to acknowledge this "harsh reality". If the child does not view death as inevitable, then he or she is likely to view death as a form of punishment, either for actions or thought of the deceased or of the child. This, in turn, leads to excessive guilt and shame that makes coping and adjustment to the loss very difficult.

Studies have shown that even very young children are capable of understanding these concepts about death. Most children, in fact, learn them between the ages of 5 and 7. Education has been shown to even further advance the understanding of the young child (that is, pre-kindergarten through 2nd grade). But teachers need not create formal death-education classes in the primary and elementary grades. Instead, we recommend that they make a conscious attempt to integrate information about death into existing curricula, and that they take advantage of spontaneous class discussions and naturally occurring events, such as when a student finds a dead goldfish in the class fish tank or a dead bug on the playground.

Children have many questions about death and are eager to discuss it once the topic has been broached by a caring adult. One child, on hearing that we would be talking about death in her class, pulled out a picture she had drawn earlier that day of an elaborate graveyard scene and was eager to discuss it. Her teacher seemed surprised by the picture, but such drawings are common among young children and need not be cause for alarm. In fact, young children find the topic fascinating.

Teachers also may wish to take advantage of the many excellent stories and videos dealing with death that can be found in the school system or at local libraries. Educational materials should be selected that present the information clearly and accurately and that reinforce the relevant concepts in a manner that is developmentally appropriate for the intended group.

It is reasonable for teachers to be concerned that when they first begin discussion death in their classroom children will challenge them with questions they fear are inappropriate -- or perhaps impossible to answer. Questions involving religious beliefs actually occur infrequently in the primary and early-elementary grades. When they do, such questions as "When you die, don't you go to heaven to live with God?" can easily be answered with statements such as "No one knows for sure what happens when someone dies; some people believe in a special place called heaven where they believe God lives." The children can, and should, be directed back to their parents and family if they want further information touching on religious beliefs.

At times children will also ask questions for which no good answer is available, such as "But why did my dog have to die so young? It just isn't fair." Such questions should be answered honestly, reflecting the lack of an adequate explanation.

Older children, in the latter elementary grades, may ask questions relating to details of body preparation, burial, and decomposition that may make the teacher initially uncomfortable. In one assembly of 4th graders, several children wanted to know why the eyes remained closed during the wake and funeral. Unsatisfied by simple assurance that the body was prepared so that they would not open, they persisted with this line of inquiry, reflecting their age-appropriate curiosity. Once informed that the eyelids were sewn closed, they moved quickly onto new questions, with little reaction other than a brief, "Oh, gross."

In fact, children of this age group are able to provide much more vivid and unsettling images drawn from their own imaginations and supplemented by exposure to graphic horror films.

Most children will not become upset by these discussions. But for an occasional child, the teacher's willingness to talk about death may provide the opportunity for expressing feelings about prior or current crises, some related to death, some not. Children have used these occasions, for example, to talk about their concerns regarding their parent's drug abuse, ongoing physical abuse in the home or unresolved feelings about prior losses. Teachers will need to be prepared to deal with such situations when they arise, and they should know about appropriate resources for children within their school and community.

Teachers must remember that the child who is upset during such discussions is invariably expressing feelings and emotions that existed prior to the discussion; the teacher's willingness to "hear" these feelings is the reason that the child is able to express them. The discussion did not cause the upset, but only allowed its expression, a needed first step toward its resolution.

The intensity of the discussions should be monitored, however, and when it seems appropriate the conversation should be refocused on positive coping techniques (such as talking to people, drawing pictures) and on sources of support within the home (emphasizing parents), school, and community. Children can then raise their hand to share with the group about when their dog died and be asked in turn "What helped you feel better then?" Other students will eagerly volunteer activities that made them feel better when they were sad. An individual student who appears to have more to discuss than is appropriate for the classroom setting can be approached individually after class.

Teachers will be amazed, though, at the capacity of even very young children to tolerate sad emotions in a caring context and to assist their peers. In one 2nd-grade class, a boy began to cry during a film, because he was reminded of the death of his pet dog a year earlier. When the film was stopped, the boy insisted on remaining for its conclusion and asked that it be restarted. Without any prompting, a classmate brought him a box of tissues and another child put his arm around the boy's shoulder.

In a pre-kindergarten class a girl who had not been present for the class's discussion about death the week before returned from the weekend and told a friend that her grandmother had died. The teacher was proud to overhear the friend offer support and advice on coping techniques: "you could try drawing a picture of your grandmother," the child said. "Sometimes that helps you feel better."

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