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Children and Death: A Guide for Caring Adults
Michigan State University Extension Service
Jean Shane; Jeanne Brown, Human Development Specialist
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CHILDREN AND DEATH:

A Guide for Caring Adults

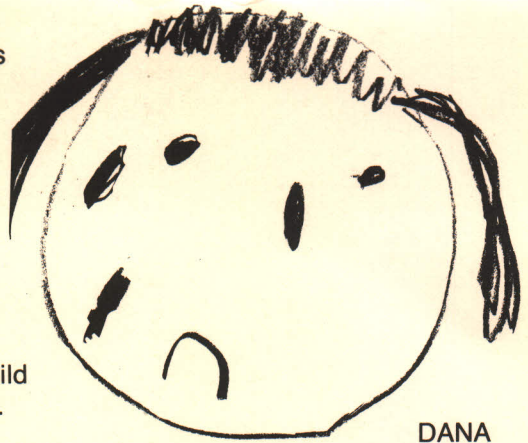


CORI
age 9

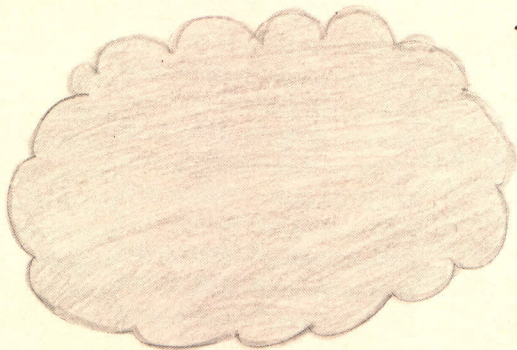


This pamphlet is written for parents, teachers, and other caring adults as a simple guide to interacting with children who have experienced loss through the death of a family member or friend. Some of the ideas might also be used within an educational unit on death and dying before a crisis occurs.

Each family and each person within a family is unique. Past experiences, individual personalities, economic and social standing, and political and religious orientation have an effect on the way death is viewed. While stages of dealing with grief and loss have been identified, they should be regarded only as guidelines in determining an adult response to a grieving or questioning child. Being sensitive to the individual child, listening, caring, and replying honestly are essential for both the child and the adult. UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD.



DANA
age 5



This is what heaven
means to me.

ANNE
age 9

Children's understanding of death has been studied by a number of researchers. Stages of understanding have been defined and attached to chronological age. It is important to remember that not all children experience these stages as defined. The caring adult must attempt to understand the child at the current level of development, regardless of age.

Studies have concluded that children evolve through three stages of understanding death.

1. Three to five year-olds see death as a departure or sleeplike state that is reversible; "forever" is an impossible concept to grasp.
2. Five to nine year-olds are unable to understand the finality of death. They see death in the form of the "bogeyman" or skeleton or angel.
3. At nine years of age and older, children begin to see death as part of the life cycle. All living things are created, grow old, and die.

What is Death?

What do we say if a child asks about death? If the child experiences the death of a loved one? The following suggestions are important to consider.

Tell the child about death using one of these approaches:

1. A RELIGIOUS APPROACH:
"We know God loves each of us. He wants us to live with him. God can be trusted. Your 'loved one' is now with God."
2. A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH:
"When someone dies, life stops. The dead cannot return. They are buried and become a part of the earth."

These approaches can be altered but it is essential that you are honest with the child. If you are not, you may be projecting your own fears. (Have you come to terms with the concept of death?)

Encourage children to talk about feelings and fears. Listen, love, and show understanding. It is all right to cry or show emotion. It is important for children to know that it is possible for them to feel sad or angry without losing control. It helps them to understand that it is all right to have feelings and to express them. Assure children that you love them!

Explain the cause of death. Children need honest, simple explanations. They have ways of knowing when the truth is not being told. Their fantasies and misunderstandings are frequently much worse than the truth.

1. Do not say that the person has gone to sleep or is on a trip.
2. Assure the child that she/he had no part in causing the death.
3. Have the child re-explain what you have said so that you know what was heard.

Observe the child in the months to come. Be attuned to his/her need to talk again.

The concept of death can produce fear in any of us, especially children. These fears can be eased through planned activities that address the idea or occurrence of death. Adults and children can work together on these activities within the home or school setting.

The following are suggested activities. The key to increasing their effectiveness is:

Do the activities alongside the child! Let the child know about your feelings. Don't ask the child to do something that you cannot or will not do.

Encourage the child to talk about feelings. Listen!

Cry; allow the child to cry.

AT HOME:

- Have the child write a letter of good-bye to the person who died.
- View a film together. The Afterschool Special: "Very Good Friends," based on the book *Beat the Turtle Drum*, is a good film on the death of a sibling. Talk about how you felt while watching it.
(Film available through Learning Corporation of America)
- Go on a family field trip to a cemetery. Examine the tombstones. Discuss the practice of burying the dead body.

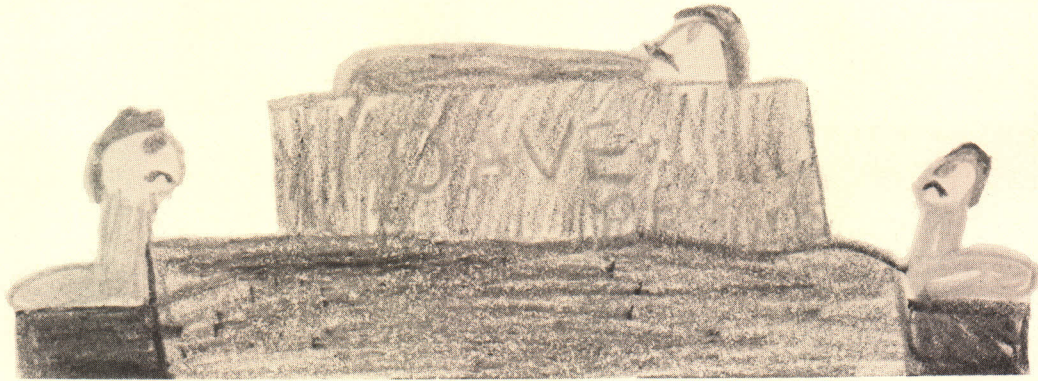
- Obtain a pet with a relatively short life cycle, for example a goldfish, hamster, gerbil. Read the book, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. Talk about the story and what might happen when your pet dies.

AT SCHOOL

Any of the above home activities would be suitable in addition to:

- Write essays on “What Death Means To Me”, “Why I Loved _____”, “My Friend _____”.
- Write a story about a person who has died.
- Draw a picture of death, what death means to you, or of a person who died. Explain your pictures to each other.
- Explore the seasons of the year. What happens with plants, trees, and some animals at different times of the year? Plant some seeds in different containers. Watch them grow. What can you say if the new plants die?
- Have fictional books readily available in the classroom library. Make sure that the topic of death is touched upon in some of them. Choose one to read to the class at least once per year. Discuss the story with the class.
- Children cope with feelings and concerns through play. Child Life Specialists have found it beneficial for hospitalized children to play with dolls and act out the shot-giving, pill-taking, and other medical procedures which they themselves endure. Imaginative situations might be provided in similar fashion in connection with funerals. One example of this is the funeral home director who provides a special room for children where toy caskets, hearses, figurines, flowers, funeral homes, and cemeteries are available.

PEOPLE ARE SAD and
go to see the person
for the last time.



CORI
age 9

Children of all ages should be allowed, but not forced, to take part in family rituals surrounding death. Participation provides children with the opportunity to ask questions, make comments, and act out feelings. Many authorities suggest that children can better understand their inclusion than their exclusion from these family events.

Children need to mourn. Adults need to provide the permission for this. It is a healing process that helps the child to face and to recover from the loss. The healing grief is a gradual process and cannot be rushed. It is met one step at a time. Denial and hostility may be part of the process. A child will absorb and assimilate what he/she is ready to accept and pass over the rest. When she/he is ready for more, the questions will be asked.

Death is sadness.

Death is crying.

Death is disbelieving.

Death is unfortunate.

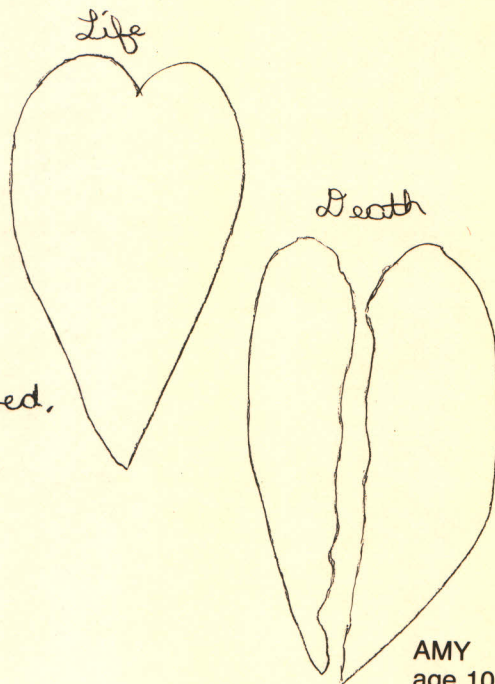
Death is scary.

Death is mourningful.

Death is truthfulness being showed.

Death is happy, to be with God.

Death is confusing.



Age: 5 years

Dana: "Death is sad."

Age: 8 years

Susie: "When something bad happens I go to my bed and cry, like when someone dies."

Age: 9 years

Anthony: "When someone dies they get buried and go to heaven."

Elizabeth: "Death is sometimes scary and is sad. When someone is about to die, I know that they are going to live a better life, but I wish I could live that life with them."

Age: 10 years

Tim: "Death can be happy and it can be sad. When someone dies you are sad but if that person goes to Heaven he will be happy. You deny the doctor when he tells you somebody you liked just died. You will get angry at the doctor. You don't want to believe him. Death is sad to the people you leave behind."

Jessica: "I am afraid to die. I am afraid it is going to hurt. That is why I want to die when I am sleeping."

Lisa: "Death could be painful or wonderful, we do not know. It is the end of life on earth."

Ashley: "Death is dying and rising."

Amy: "Death is confusing."

Age: 11 years

Sharyn: "To me it means losing a relative, losing a friend. It means you can't go with them anywhere anymore."

Anne: "Just to me it is sort of scary cause you dream about it and it scares you to death that you don't want to die.... I cry when someone I love dies. It is very sad."

Kim: "Death is a part of life. Death is also a final resting place from all the noise."

Chris: "You really shouldn't go around thinking how you are going to die. Instead live a very good life and be happy. Most of the time when someone dies we ask God why, why did he let him or her die. Or sometimes we blame it on ourselves when it really wasn't our fault."

Carin: "If you do go to the funeral, you just might feel a lot better. Death is sometimes scary, sad, happy, joyful, suffering, peaceful, even wanted. Sometimes people are afraid to die so they pray and pray not to die til they are really old."

Age: 12 years

Tina: "Death is going and never coming back."

BOOKS:

For children ages preschool through grade 3:

Brown, M.W. *The Dead Bird*. Glenview, IL: Scott, 1965.

DePaola, T. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. N.Y., N.Y.: Puffin, 1978.

Tresselt, A. *The Dead Tree*. N.Y., N.Y.: Parents', 1972.

Viorst, J. *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. N.Y., N.Y.: Atheneum, 1971.

Grades 2-6

Smith, D. *A Taste of Blackberries*. N.Y., N.Y.: Scholastic, 1973.

Blue, R. *Grandma Didn't Wave Back*. N.Y., N.Y.: Watts, 1972.

Corley, E.A. *Tell Me About Death, Tell Me About Funerals*. CA: Grammatical Sciences, 1973.

Lee, V. *The Magic Moth*. N.Y., N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1972.

Coutant, H. *First Snow*. N.Y., N.Y.: Knopf, 1974.

Grades 4-6

Miles, M. *Annie and the Old One*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971.

Paulus, T. *Hope for the Flowers*. N.Y., N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1972.

Lichtman, W. *Blew and the Death of the Mag*. CA: Freestone, 1975.

Harris, A. *Why Did He Die?* Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 1965.

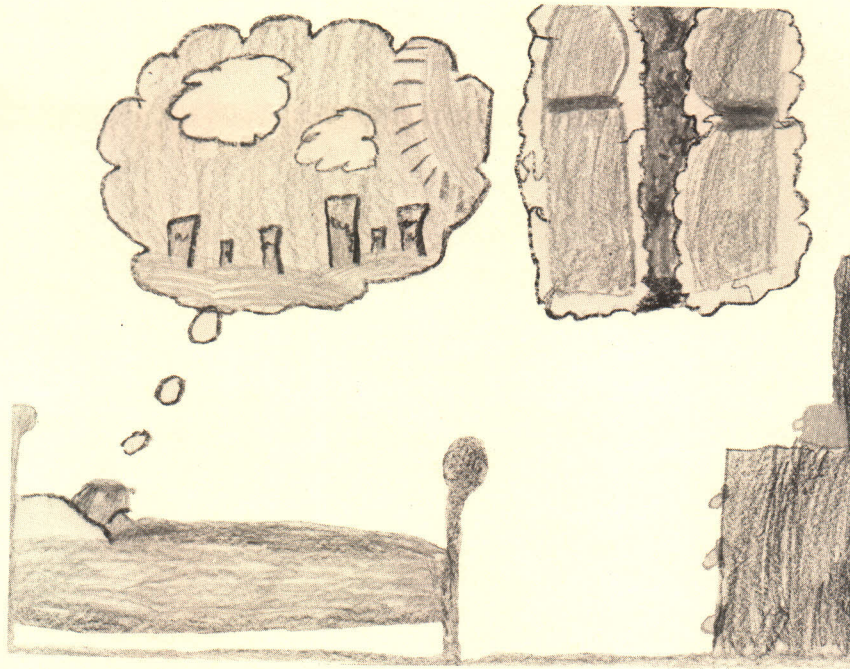
Druon, M. *Tistou of the Green Thumbs*. N.Y., N.Y.: Scribner, 1958.

deSaint-Exupery, A. *The Little Prince*. N.Y., N.Y.: Harbrace, 1943.

Buscaglia, L. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. N.J.: Slack, 1982.

General:

Stein, S.B. *About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together*. N.Y., N.Y.: Walker, 1984.



KARI
age 10

For Adults:

Grollman, E.A. *Explaining Death to Children*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967.

Klopfenstein, J. *Tell Me About Death, Mommy*. PA: Harald Press, 1977.

Kubler Ross, E. *On Death and Dying*. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969.

Reed, E.L. *Helping Children with the Mystery of Death*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970.

Schneiderman, G. *Coping with Death in the Family*. Toronto, Canada: Chimo Publications, 1979.

Mills, G.C., Robinson, A.D., Vermilye, G. *Discussing Death*. CA: ETC Publications, 1976.

Sincere thanks to the children
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Jean Shane, M.A.
Author

Jeanne E. Brown, Ph.D.
Consultant and Coordinator
Human Development Specialist



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