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CHILDREN and DEATH

by Anne B. Cox

In the early part of this century, most of the deaths occurred in the home, just as most of the funerals did, and also, most of the births. Children were around. They heard most of the conversations and the stages of life occurred as a natural part of living. Today, death most frequently occurs in hospitals and nursing homes rather than at home. Death is removed from everyday life, and because it is not a pleasant, happy event, children are frequently shielded from the reality. Thus, when an accidental or young death occurs, the event is more traumatic than it was in previous years.

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN AND GRIEF

Children Are Concrete In Their Thinking.

When talking to children, use the words “death” and “dying.” One needs to describe death literally. Answer their questions simply and honestly; do not use euphemisms such as “passed on” or “went to sleep.” You don’t have to add a lot of details unless it seems vital to their well being. Children will ask more if they want to know more.

Children Are Repetitive In Their Grief.

Children may ask questions repetitively. The answers do not resolve their searching. The searching itself is their processing work. The questions indicate the feeling of confusion and uncertainty. Listen and support their searching. Answer repetitively, keep telling the story.

Children Who Are Young In Developmental Perception Generalize Concepts.

If someone died in the hospital, children think that hospitals are scary. If someone died in their sleep, children are afraid to go to sleep. If one person died, “someone else will,” or “I will.”
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They will learn to accommodate new truths on their own if they are allowed to express themselves and try things out — i.e. going to sleep and waking up alive. They will study the world in their own time and find out that eventually everyone dies, and that although some people die when they are young, most people die when they are old.

Children Grieve Cyclically.

Children's grief work goes in cycles throughout their childhood and their lives. Each time they gain a new developmental ability, they reintegrate the important events of their lives using these newly acquired processes. A child who was three when his mother died will become absorbed in the death again when language skills develop so that he can now use words for the expression of his feelings. Piaget estimated that most children begin to develop a realistic concept of death at about age six. By age eleven or twelve, the finality of death is recognized, and children have formed many of the concepts they will carry into adulthood. The child may again experience grief as an adolescent, using the newly acquired cognitive skills or abstract thinking.

Children Are Physical In Their Grief.

Children may be more physical than cognitive, depending on their age and development. The older they are, the more it is possible to express themselves in words. Younger children simply are their feelings. Grief is a physical experience for all ages, and most especially for younger children.

Movement and active play yields communication. Watch their bodies and understand their play as their language of grief.

Children reflect their feelings in their play both verbally and physically as a way of supporting their communication needs. Thus they will feel that they are being heard and may feel like continuing to communicate to you in this way.

Children Need Choices.

Death is a disruption in their lives. They feel scared. Life may seem undependable, unstable, confusing, or out of their control. This can be an assault to their early developmental perceptions of the world as being in their control. This can challenge the perception of the
world as a safe and comforting place that is perhaps fostered by adults. This topsy-turvy feeling can be ameliorated if the children have some say in what they do or don’t do to commemorate one who died, and to express their feelings about death.

Whenever possible, offer choices: viewing the body, going to the hospital, attending the funeral, or not.

Offer children pictures and possessions of the deceased as a way of supporting this process. Allow them to have some clothes of the person, play with the toys or objects, or have pictures. Let them choose what they want to do with them.

The grieving child may assume qualities of the dead person as a way to keep a sense of the dead person alive.

Children Grieve As A Part Of A Family.

When a family member dies, it will affect the way the family functions as a whole. All relationships in the family may shift, adjusting to the change in the family’s structure. The child may mourn the person who died, but also the environment in the family that existed before the death. The child may grieve about the changed behavior of family and friends.

PERMANENCE AND IMPERMANENCE OF DEATH IN CHILDREN’S THINKING

Sensorial Thinking

Younger children often do not initially respond to the telling that someone has died as do older children and adults. Many parents are concerned that their children have no initial reaction, no visible grief. It is important to remember that younger children’s perception is oriented in the senses. It is concrete, short range, and based on what they feel in the present. They do not comprehend the concept of death. A person is there . . . then a person is gone. When a person is gone, and then still gone, and then still gone, the child may grieve at each moment when he feels the person’s oneness. A child may not grieve at all for these leavings until the accumulative affect of the “oneness” inspires a longing, aching protest from the child. The child will miss the specific elements of the person: the sound of his voice, the expression, the smell, the things they did together.
A very young child may not understand that a specific person is no longer there, but may respond to the change in environment, and over a long time, may yearn for the “former experience” of his world.

Abstract Thinking

As children grow older, they begin to grasp the concept of death. They will begin to understand just by hearing the word “dead” that the person will never come back because they are dead. Words, then, will begin to affect mourning reactions, not just the feeling of the absent person.

Abstract thinking develops more in depth with the onset of adolescence. What is life? What is death? Who am I? Sometimes a death will lead an adolescent into philosophic pondering (sometimes appearing like depression) as the meaning of the event is investigated.

A CHILD’S FEELINGS

Most children experience some fear when a death occurs in their lives. Reassuring them falsely that no one else will die will create a sense of betrayal at the next death of someone close. Reassurance only delays the fear. It does not resolve it. Children of all ages must go through their fearful feelings until they come to their own understanding. This may be strenuous on both the parent and the child: i.e. nightmares, physical symptoms, regressions. If children have good enough attention and nurturance during this fearful time, they will recover a sense of the basic dependability of life with the additional understanding that some people die when they are young, but most people die when they are old.

Young children are developmentally egocentric and believe that they cause events to happen in their lives. As they develop, they begin to comprehend that life’s events can be independent of their making and that there is a balance of co-creation between themselves and their environment. Sometimes guilt can ease the fear that children may feel when someone dies. Taking unrealistic responsibility for a death gives a child false reassurance that they could have prevented unwanted events if only they had tried harder. “The world is dependable only if I work hard enough to make it so.” Guilt counteracts the fear children may have when they are faced with life’s uncertainty and seemingly unexplainable events.
There may be unresolved issues between the child and the one who died which angers the child. There may be anger in a child as a protest against the fact of the death. Anger can also be an antidote to the fear — an outward display of personal power. Through a child’s anger, he may be communicating “I am strong enough to control life with my force.” Children can become rebellious and angry to counteract the vulnerability of feeling fear and sorrow.

When a child feels sorrow he may be ready to accept the truth of the loss without protest. Sorrow can be an expression of a child’s feelings of vulnerability as he continues to live without the person who died. Sorrow can also be a release of the fear the child may feel about death. There may be a loss of security for which the child grieves. Loving arms around a child who cries with sorrow can offer the child safety and acceptance in a world that includes the dying of those we love.

Children’s literature, carefully selected, can introduce the life cycle of plants, animals, and people. Death can be introduced as a normal part of life, then when a child experiences the death of a loved one, the understanding of death will enable the experience to be less traumatic.

DEATH: SUGGESTED BOOKS

Picture Books:


**Adolescent Books:**


**DEATH OF PETS**

**Picture Books**


**Resource Books**