

*By supporting children through discussion and the use of literature, teachers are helping them to develop a life skill that will allow children to better manage loss when confronted by it.*

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# Helping primary school children manage loss and grief: Ways the classroom teacher can help

Examples are given from classroom plans and literature that support loss and grief education.

In their daily lives, many young children are exposed to experiences of loss. It may be the death of a pet, a best friend moving far away, their parents getting a divorce, the death of a much loved grandparent.

Primary school teachers are in an ideal situation to support children who may be experiencing loss and grief and to prepare all children for future (eventual) experiences of loss. A loss occurs when anything that is valued or anyone we are attached to is removed from our lives. Grief is the process by which we adjust to living with a significant loss - it is the pain of 'letting go'. In this article I examine some of the ways teachers can support children through their loss and grief experiences and how teachers can help to prepare all children to face their future loss experiences by giving them anticipatory education in their PSE classes.

### Issues of loss and grief

To best offer support to children experiencing loss and to provide anticipatory education to all children, teachers themselves need to 'be prepared' to face loss and grief. As well as being good listeners and good communicators, teachers need to be able to use the language of loss, grief and death easily and naturally. They need to be aware of grief and bereavement patterns and be able to identify and come to terms with their feelings about their own loss experiences.<sup>1</sup> It is also important for teachers to know about

the effects of grief on children.<sup>2,4</sup> Knowing where to refer children who need specialist help and support is also helpful and the school nurse and school counsellor are a good start as is the school health clinic if there is one.<sup>5</sup>

In order to teach about loss and grief, teachers need to know the content and process of loss and grief education. There are some excellent loss and grief manuals and books available for primary teachers and a particularly helpful resource for primary teachers is Ward's 'Good Grief'.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, teachers need to ensure that they have their own support person with whom they can discuss their feelings and thoughts. Supporting a grieving person can touch teachers in unexpected ways and it is important to be able to talk about this with a friend or colleague and to seek professional help if necessary. Organisations such as CRUSE<sup>7</sup> can also help teachers.

### Experiencing loss

#### What do/might teachers say and do if a child in their class has a family member die?

I have a young friend (who has now left school) who remembers vividly that her teacher said nothing to her when she returned to school after the death of her father in a car accident. In such a situation a teacher may be unsure what to do and may be concerned that talking about the father's death may be upsetting for the child. Whilst it may be upsetting, this upset is part of the grieving process, in fact our sadness and

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tears release narcotic-like chemicals that help to ease our pain.

It may also be upsetting for the child not to have the loss acknowledged, the child feeling isolated because no one wants to talk about the death. Children at this time will benefit greatly from the teacher's support if it is provided. By being available, by offering the child the opportunity to talk and by really listening to the child's feelings and concerns without being judgmental, teachers provide the child with much needed support. When teachers acknowledge the child's grief at this time it is particularly helpful because other important adults in the child's life may be distracted by their own grief. Sometimes young children believe that they were in some way responsible for the parent's death. By being a supportive listener the teacher can reassure this child that the loss of the parent is not punishment for some wrongdoing or caused by their having 'wished' the parent dead.

### Classroom plan

A plan used by a classroom teacher to provide support to a grieving child is shown here. Such a plan not only provides support for a grieving child, it also provides a model for the classmates to follow. They learn that it is permissible to acknowledge to their classmate what has happened and that it can be beneficial to talk about these things.

#### What do/might the teacher do if the children in the class have experienced a traumatic incident?

By providing a stable and caring environment and re-establishing routine as soon as possible the teacher can provide opportunities for the children to discuss what happened, to talk about the event. By answering their questions honestly, by allowing them to express their feelings and by accepting their feelings as real and normal teachers provide important support and help. This process is assisted if teachers provide children with opportunities to re-enact the critical incident and express their feelings (through art, clay, music, drama, stories, writing, discussion, dressing up, puppets, toys etc). Such experiences help them make sense of the incident and gain some feeling of control. If teachers are concerned about the welfare of any of the children, it is important to consult with

### A CLASSROOM TEACHER'S PLAN FOR ASSISTING A CHILD THROUGH A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

- ★ On hearing of the death, CT (classroom teacher) contacts someone in the family and
  - offers commiserations
  - asks after the child
  - seeks details eg nature of death  
date of funeral  
date of child's likely return
- ★ CT discusses basic details with class
  - allow children to talk about personal experiences
  - help class organise formal responses (cards, flowers etc.)
- ★ CT helps class plan for the return of their classmate
- ★ CT contacts child at home (phone or visit)
  - relays commiserations of self and classmates
  - discusses child's return eg 'We are looking forward to your coming back'
- ★ On child's return, CT welcomes child privately, offers support and permission to be upset
- ★ CT makes welcoming remarks on child's entry to class eg 'We know you are sad but we are glad you are back'
- ★ At the end of the first day back, CT asks child how s/he is and commends class for their help
- ★ After a couple of days, CT discusses with the child. eg 'It's been good to see you back at work ... playing sport. etc.' (CT is establishing normality and being positive)
- ★ CT checks on child's progress from time to time (do they need more support, counselling?)

the parents and discuss possible referral to specialist help.

### Loss and grief education

Loss and grief may be one of the more 'difficult' health issues for teachers to discuss with the children. It is particularly difficult if the first time teachers discuss it is after some critical incident when all are feeling very emotional. Loss and grief are however a normal and natural part of life and there is good reason to include loss and grief education in the school's PSE program.

Because teachers have incomplete knowledge about the loss experiences of members of their class they may be hesitant to talk about loss and grief for fear of upsetting the children. However feeling the pain of grief is part of the grieving process and is important for emotional health. With multicultural classrooms, the children will be members of families with a range of different religious beliefs and cultural practices regarding loss and grief. Rather than be fearful of this, teachers can use this to their advantage - teachers can enlist parent help and explore these cultural and religious differences together thus developing more understanding of each other.

A teacher's own loss experiences may make this a difficult issue to discuss and this is why it is so important for teachers to explore their own feelings

about loss before they start to teach in this area.

While there is no 'best time' for anticipatory education about loss and grief, it needs to be done in an environment of trust where children feel free to express their feelings. Teachers need to recognise that there may be children in any class who have experienced the loss of and grief for someone who was close to them.

Teachers need to reassure the children that tears and strong feelings are natural and normal and let them know that they can talk to teachers and other staff should the need arise. And teachers need to have let other staff and parents know that we are dealing with this issue.

#### What could be taught about loss and grief?

There are many aspects of loss and grief that can be explored in classroom setting particularly in planned sessions within a PSE program. Some questions which could be explored include 'What is loss and how does it make me feel?', 'How can I help my friend who has just experienced a loss?', 'What is death?', 'What happens at a funeral?'. Using children's literature that deals with loss and grief is an excellent way to introduce the topic. To quote Richardson and Ratcliffe (p.1)<sup>8</sup>

“ Literature offers excellent opportunities for children to become involved in real to life situations, issues and problems in a non-threatening way ... Literature can assist in the development of

empathy, an understanding of self and others, relationships and problems. It can enable individuals to respond to issues at both intellectual and emotional levels."

Greenall, in an article in Ward (p. 239)<sup>6</sup> commented that,

" books about death provide us with pegs on which to base our explanations to children, but they also enable both the children and ourselves to explore a potentially frightening topic in a less threatening way."

Selecting a book about the death of a pet is a useful starting point as many children have experienced this or can easily relate to it. Some teaching ideas for dealing with the death of a pet are shown here.

Helping children with books or 'bibliotherapy' is acknowledged as an effective way to help a child who has suffered a loss. By reading the book, the child may see parallels between his or her life and the characters and situations in the book. Also, the child may be able to experience catharsis, a release of emotions during and after the reading. In addition, the child may gain insight by identifying possible solutions to his/her problems and may develop strategies to cope with their loss and grief.

For example, through children's literature teachers can discuss:

- ★ the reactions and feelings of the main characters as they respond to the loss (eg. refusing to eat, feeling guilty). This can be compared with the child's own reactions to loss and the class can discuss how else the characters could have responded
- ★ the support others give to the character. This can be compared with the support given to the child and the class can discuss what else would have been supportive
- ★ the problem solving strategies the character uses as she / he starts to accept the loss (eg. need to talk with someone, need to release emotions, need to have questions answered, questions such as 'What is it like to be dead?' and 'What happens at a funeral?') This may provide a model for the child to relate to

By listening to each other as they relate their experiences and feelings, children learn about the normality of the grief response and that they are not alone in feeling this way. Also, as children may feel more comfortable talking about the characters rather than themselves, it may

## DEATH OF A PET - SOME TEACHING IDEAS

- ★ After doing some work on pets, read a story about a pet that dies (See the reading list for some suggestions for books dealing with the death of a pet)
- ★ Ask the children / discuss
  - What happened to the pet? (death, burial - be prepared for some curiosity about the effects of death)
  - Have you ever had a pet that died?
  - How did it die, did you bury it etc.?
- ★ Ask the children / discuss
  - How did the people / child in the story feel?
  - What made them feel better?
  - What helped them with their feelings?
- ★ Ask the children / discuss
  - How did you feel when your pet died? (discuss these with the class, being accepting of their feelings and stressing that these feelings are normal. Perhaps make a list of these feelings on the board). You can share your own feelings about the death of your pet.
  - Did anyone do or say anything to help you at this time or did you do anything that you found to be helpful? (Make a list of their suggestions). Share your own suggestions of what you find helpful.
  - Was anything said or done that was not helpful?
  - How could you help someone who is upset because his/her pet has died? Discuss and compare the feelings and coping strategies of the characters in the book with their own responses.
- ★ To finish the session, have a relaxing activity to diffuse any tension and stress in the group. Remind the children that if they feel upset about the things they have been discussing, they can come and talk to you

encourage children to discuss loss and grief.

## Conclusion

By supporting children who have experienced loss and by discussion loss and grief with the whole class through the use of children's literature, teachers are helping children develop a life skill that will allow them to better manage loss when confronted by it.

### Loss and grief classroom books

#### Pets and Loss

- Gleitzman, M. (1996) *Water Wings*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan.
- Stanley, E. (1992) *China's Plum Tree*. Fremantle: Sandcastle Books.
- Viorst, J. (1971) (1988 ed.) *The tenth good thing about Barney*. New York: Aladdin.
- Wild, M. (1993) *Toby*. Norwood, Sth. Aust.: Omnibus Books.
- Wilhelm, H. (1985) *I'll always love you*. Seven Oaks, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton.

#### The Loss of Older People (Grandparents, Parents and other Adults)

- Blacklock, D. & Woolman, S. (1995) *The Lighthouse*. Flinders Park: Era Pub.
- Burningham, J. (1984) *Granpa*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Curtis Stilz & Harrison, G. (1988) *Kirsty's Kite*. Sutherland: Albatross books.
- Fox, M. (1984) *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Sydney: Omnibus.
- Fox, M. (1989) *Sophie*. Melbourne: Drakeford Pub.
- Gleitzman, M. (1989) *Two weeks with the queen*. Sydney: Piper.
- Hathorn, L. (1994) *Grandma's Shoes*. Ringwood: Viking.
- Nott, P. (1994) *Uncle Paul has AIDS*. Nightcliff, NT.: Little Gem.
- Wagner, J. (1977) *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Caf*. Ringwood: Puffin.
- Wild, M. (1995) *Old Pig*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
- Wild, M. (1989) *The very best of friends*. Sydney: Margaret Hamilton.
- The Loss of other children (friends, siblings)**
- Buchanan Smith, D. (1987) *A taste of Blackberries*. Ringwood: Puffin.

- Crew, G. (1992) *Lucy's Bay*. Nundah, Qld.: Jam Roll Press.
- Dean, A. (1991) *Meggie's Magic*. Ringwood: Viking. Penguin.
- Gleitzman, M. (1989) *Two weeks with the queen*. Sydney: Piper.
- Hunt, N. (1991) *The Dove Tree*. Milson's Point: Red Fox.
- Kidd, D. (1997) *I love you Jason Delaney*. Sydney: Harper Collins.
- Paterson, K. (1977) *Bridge to Terabithia*. Ringwood: Puffin.
- Divorce**
- Krasny Brown, L. & Brown, M. (1986) *Dinosaurs Divorce*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Wild, M. & Hannay, L. (1992) *Sam's Sunday Dad*. Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Wilson, L. (1995) *I have two dads*. Carlton: CIS.
- Change**
- Browne, A. (1990) *Changes*. London: Walker Books.
- Morimoto, J. (1995 edition) *My Hiroshima*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- Viorst, J. (1995) *Alexander, Who's not (do you hear me? I mean it!) going to move*. Gosford: Scholastic.
- Rosen, M. & Williams, S. (1993) *Moving*. Ringwood: Puffin.
- Woodhouse, J. (1994) *Metis*. St Lucia: UQP

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1. McKissock, M. & McKissock, D. *Coping with grief*. 3rd ed. Sydney: ABC Books, 1995.
2. McKissock, D. *The grief of our children*. Sydney: ABC Books, 1998.
3. Corr, C. & Corr, D. *Handbook of childhood death and bereavement*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1996.
4. Worden, J. W. *Children and grief*. New York: Guilford Publications, 1996.
5. Feest, G. Can schools afford not to have a counsellor? *Education and Health* 2000: 18: 1: 3-5.
6. Ward, B. *Good Grief. Exploring feelings, loss and death with under elevens*. 2nd ed. Bristol: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1993.
7. The web address is [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)
8. Richardson, B. and Ratcliffe, B. *Being and belonging. An approach to personal development through literature*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991.