

# Preparing for bereavement: a primary-school topic

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Should primary schools help to prepare pupils for bereavement, either to themselves or others? The author argues that they should, but that they are either reluctant to do so or fail to recognise the numerous chances of introducing the topic in a natural manner.

You are the head of a primary school. It is 8.15 on Monday morning. You are just preparing for the morning assembly when the phone rings. It is Mrs. Brown, the mother of Peter, a very jolly, cheeky, 8-year-old boy in your juniors. She is very upset and can hardly talk. She tells you that Peter was hit by a car last night and that he died early this morning.

What do you say? What do you do? How do you tell the school?

This scenario is closely based on the experience of one York school only three months ago.

Some may argue that the chances of this happening are extremely low. Yet, in the UK in 1984 alone, nearly 2,000 children at primary school age, nearly 12,000 parents of primary school children, and nearly 150,000 grandparents of primary school children died. Consequently it is very likely that, during the span of a normal career, a teacher will encounter the death of a child or a child's parent, and it is inevitable that the death of grandparents and other close relatives will occur.

Children also encounter death in other ways, and from the age of two years they are able to understand death's irreversibility (Bowlby, 1980). These encounters

include the more familiar deaths of children's pet animals, the dead mouse which the cat brought home, the fledgling which, despite well-meant efforts, didn't survive, the squashed hedgehog, the sprayed fly, and the Sunday roast.

In addition, any child who watches television will observe horrific deaths in fictional dramas or on the news. Recent news items include Hillsborough, where 95 people were crushed to death, Lockerbie, where 270 people were killed, famines, floods and murders.

If it is an aim of education to be relevant to the child's life, and to prepare them for their future experiences, I feel that the omission of any discussion of death is unjustifiable. In fact, the additional advantages of these discussions would be manifold.

## Advantages

Firstly, the educational value which can be gleaned from such discussions would be priceless. Lessons on life cycles, old age, mortality, religion, charity, road safety, personal security, and emotions such as sadness, love, loneliness, empathy and respect could be introduced with relevance.

Secondly, discussion of death in the open, supportive environment of the classroom would allow children to investigate their doubts and fears in a frank and realistic way. This would minimise the confusion and unfounded terrors which a child may establish when adults refuse to answer his questions and he is left to make sense of his encounters with death alone (Tatelbaum, 1983).

Thirdly, an open discussion of death allows the child to form a concept which he can use to make sense of subsequent encounters with death. This 'preparation' would be especially useful in times when a close relative dies, because the child would not need to ask as many questions which the surrounding adults may feel unable to endure or to answer.

Finally, the child will grow to recognise the class and the teacher as approachable in times of trouble or need. Consequently, he may volunteer information which will alert the teacher to possible dangers or difficulties in the child's life.

## Interviews with teachers

Prepared for a negative response I phoned local schools and asked for an appointment to discuss the feelings of staff members on death and bereavement. I was surprised that the teachers seemed keen to talk to me and showed no reservations about discussing such a 'strange' topic.

I conducted interviews at two schools with no specific religious leaning, at one Roman Catholic school and at one Church of England school. I also interviewed a lecturer in the Department of Education (University of York) who had had several years' experience of teaching at primary and secondary schools and schools for special educational needs. My questions included:

*Do you talk about death to the children? Give examples.*

*If a child asked you 'What happens when people die?' what would you say?*

*Do you personally believe this?*

*Do you know of any children's books in which something or someone dies, or in which a dead person is remembered?*

*Do you have any of these books in your school?*

*If a child in your class died tomorrow, would you wish that you had done more to prepare your class for this?*

*Have any of your school's children or parents died?*

*If so, what were the circumstances? What did you do? Do you feel that you were able to cope adequately?*

*Do you feel that enough support is offered to bereaved children and their families?*

*Did you receive any relevant training for teaching or coping with Death and Bereavement?*

Since the number of interviews conducted was very small I cannot make any conclusive judgements from my findings. Nevertheless, it is possible to comment upon the views of these teachers which may be held by many other teachers too.

## Talking about death

All the teachers interviewed said that they talk openly about death and did not attempt to cushion the children from it.

## News items

They had all discussed the Hillsborough tragedy with the children. Both of the religious schools had prayed for the dead and the bereaved families in school assemblies.

*The children are used to discussing disasters and death. Several children are from Bangladesh and so we have talked about the floods.*

*I asked them who they thought the Hillsborough Fund money was for, since it would be no use to the people who were dead.*

## Pets dying

Deaths of school pets were always reported to the children.

*I would explain the death in terms of birth and death, beginnings and endings, and lifecycles.*

When a boy's ladybird died after having been fiddled with throughout the previous

day the teacher said: "I'm not surprised the way you've treated it! If you had done that to me I think that I would have died too!"

*Injured birds and fledglings are often brought in. If it dies, as is usually the case, the children are just told that it has died.*

No indication was given that such events were discussed in depth, or used to investigate the child's feelings about death. The general idea was to be honest but brief so that the children are kept appeased, but so that the planned lesson can then commence.

#### People dying

In case of family bereavement it was normal to inform the class of the reason that a child was off school, and for the teacher to suggest that the class behaved sensitively when he returned. This was also the case when a member of staff had to take time off school due to a bereavement.

Whenever a school child died a special assembly was conducted. The child's parents were usually invited to this. The assembly was used to talk about and to remember the child, and to pray.

When a child's grandparent or other close relative died, the teacher seemed more at ease with the situation and more willing to involve the class in a sharing of ideas and experiences, but only if they felt that this would not be upsetting to the child concerned.

*Elanor (6) is a quiet child. When her grandparent died we decided not to tell her class since the teacher felt that this would not be helpful to Elanor. If she had been a more forward child she might have announced the news during the children's 'reports.' Then it would have been possible to open up a discussion.*

#### Remembering

It has been shown that happy memories of the dead person can be beneficial to the child whilst coming to terms with bereavement. Two teachers were aware of this and had actively encouraged bereaved children to write, talk, or draw about their experiences and memories.

This mode of expression has been recommended for bereaved children by Judy Tatelbaum (1983).

*When he came back I asked him if he would like to write about his Dad's funeral in his school diary. He readily wrote a whole page which was an unusually large amount for him.*

*At the end of term I handed back the paintings and David's was there. I said: 'Here's David's painting'. The children were very concerned about what to do with it. One boy said, 'I would like to take it home because he was my friend and it would help me to remember him'. The class thought this was a good idea, so he took it home.*

#### Answering children's questions

The teachers answered the children's questions about death in line with their own beliefs. This meant that in both of the religious schools, where all of the staff were practising the relevant faith, the children were offered the religious viewpoint.

A teacher at the Catholic school always told children that people go to heaven and that animals 'are in God's care'.

A teacher at the C of E school said that she would say, 'Many people believe that they go to heaven to be with Jesus. Heaven is a place which is happier than here.' She would also tell the children that she likes to think that animals go to heaven. She would then ask, 'What do you think?' and allow the class to state their opinions too.

Some teachers would not introduce the idea of heaven in any discussion of death, but they would not dissuade a child who believed in heaven. If asked 'Do you believe in heaven?' they said that they would tell the child that they did not, or didn't know, in accordance with their own beliefs.

It appears that all the teachers interviewed were prepared to state their own views but barely mentioned that other opinions exist. The teachers' reluctance to introduce and discuss other widely-held beliefs could be seen as a form of

indoctrination. This is one of the dangers of limiting the discussion of death. By briefly answering the children's question it is probable that this sort of bias will occur, and that any bias in the children's questions will not be redressed. If the children studied death through structured lessons it would be less likely that important issues would be completely overlooked, or that bias would be unintentionally introduced.

#### Introducing death

*It is a difficult subject to simply introduce into the classroom cold. I would find it hard to bring in without a death having occurred.*

This implies that the occurrence of death is the only way that the subject can be relevantly introduced, but this ignores popular rhymes or the large number of children's books, suitable for a large age range, which tackle death from many different angles. On one visit to York City Library I was able to find ten books in which death featured. The librarian could name nine books in addition to these, *all* of which were suitable for children aged below 12 years.

I asked the teachers if they knew of any books for children in which a death occurs. Three teachers were able to name three books each, one teacher could only name the Bible, and two teachers didn't know of any. In all, only one teacher could remember reading one of these books to the whole class, and one had lent a book to a child whose grandparent had died. No indication was given that discussion followed either of these events.

All of the teachers said that there were no books about death in their school library, although on two occasions teachers remarked 'We should think about that' or 'I think we should get some Lion books in the school, actually'.

In all the cases studied, relevant literature was not used to promote discussion on the subject of death.

Deaths usually occur unexpectedly — nearly all deaths of primary-school children or their parents are the result of accidents or suicides (Goldacre, 1985), and consequently are sudden. On these

occasions a study of death would be difficult to introduce sensitively, may seem inappropriate, and additionally the teacher may be too upset to embark upon such a study. The most beneficial time to tackle the subject would be *before* the child experiences a close death, and, since no one knows when this will be, the best time to start would be now! Follow-up work in line with the development of the child's cognition and emotions could be included as the child's education proceeds. After all, this is normal procedure for explaining the equally important subjects of conception and birth.

Most teacher education omits a study of bereavement completely, and those courses which include it usually place it within a non-compulsory component. There is no mention of death in the National Curriculum, although a great emphasis is placed on birth and good health. These omissions reflect the attitude of our society. It is only when a study of death is included in the curriculum that its inclusion can be ensured — goodwill and commonsense cannot be depended upon to see it introduced.

#### Learning to cope

I have already mentioned the importance of preparation for death in helping the school to cope. Nevertheless, even then, the task of coming to terms with a death is never easy, and the teacher would benefit from an understanding of the child's perceptions of death and their own feelings about death. More than this, the support and advice of other teachers and qualified bodies would be invaluable.

Barnardo's CRUSE and its Orchard Project are able to organise complete courses which cater for teachers' needs (Speck, 1985). They also give advice on many subjects, including the teacher's

PRIMARY health related behaviour can now be surveyed using a new questionnaire piloted by the Unit. It is a specially-designed instrument suitable for pupils in the 8-12 age range. Free sample and explanatory pack available from the Unit.

and the child's understanding of death, the grief process, the constructive actions of adults towards a grieving child, and ways of recognising a child whose grief is not progressing normally and may require special counselling.

The Compassionate Friends offer support and advice, and they also publish a leaflet called *When a child in your school is bereaved*.

During my research one teacher had heard of The Compassionate Friends, but none had heard of CRUSE or knew what help either organisation could offer. It was particularly disturbing to find that the Child Guidance Clinic was also unaware of the support and help available.

A social worker at the Child Guidance Clinic informed me that they offer support and advice to any teacher who feels that they need help with a school bereavement. Again, the teachers were unaware of this facility. Disappointingly, the social worker was disinclined to contact schools in order to clarify this point. One teacher commented:

*There is no support for the school in cases of bereavement. When a boy died of meningitis no one came forward to give me advice. What did I know about meningitis? I really would have welcomed a phone call from the health service.*

### Beyond the realms of teaching

In cases of bereavement, teachers are expected to do jobs which are far beyond the realms of teaching and for which they are usually completely unqualified. Several of the teachers whom I met said that they frequently found themselves counselling parents, and they felt inadequate, for they had received no training.

In addition, the schools were relied upon to refer children who may be suffering from psychological disorders, including those caused by unresolved grief. John Bowlby (1980) and Patricia Goldacre (1985) state that children who lose parents by death are more likely to become psychiatric casualties. Of course, if a child is behaving *very* strangely he may be referred, but the untrained eye may not spot the first signs of trouble, or even be able to help the child through the

stages of grief, thereby preventing some of these disorders. It seems that many of these children slip by unobserved, and are prone to become 'extremely emotionally distressed' in adult life (Bowlby, 1980).

It is not possible for a teacher to be trained to do everything, and I feel that much of the work that needs to be done with bereaved children and their parents is the role of social workers. Of course, social workers will only be able to recognise cases if they are in regular contact with schools. It does not seem an unreasonable use of resources to have a school social worker who visits each primary school once a fortnight so that they can answer any questions and be made aware of problems as they arise. In this way, 'trivial' events can be looked at in more depth and cases could be highlighted at a much earlier point.

For death and bereavement to be dealt with adequately, it would be necessary to increase the awareness of teachers, improve the schools' knowledge of helpful resources already available, and increase liaison between schools and the social services. It is through these three channels that children can be helped to come to terms with one of the most natural events in human experience.

### References

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- Speck, P. (1985), Counselling on death and dying. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 13, 1, 89-97.
- Tatelbaum, J. (1983), *The courage to grieve*. London: Heinemann.

*The following addresses may be useful:*

- The Compassionate Friends, 6 Denmark St., Bristol BS1 5DQ (0272 292778).
- CRUSE, Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR (01-940 4814/9047).

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