

The Young Child's Conception of Death: What Adults Need to Know to Help Children

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The subject of death is often difficult for adults to discuss with children

- Adults often are uncomfortable thinking about death and worry about the kinds of questions children will pose
- Adult experiences and values trigger emotions which we project onto children
- Adults must be aware of the child's developmental level to provide age appropriate information

Concepts of death that are important for children to understand

- Finality
 - All life functions cease: person or animal can no longer move, breath, eat, sleep, feel hungry, tired, cold or hot, etc.
- Irreversibility
 - Person or animal will not come back even though we wish he or she would
- Causality
 - Children need real information, but not too graphic or frightening
 - Without concrete information children will develop fantasies which may be more upsetting and frightening than the reality
- Inevitability
 - Death is a natural phenomenon
 - Since death is inevitable it is proactive to use life cycle experiences within the curriculum

Three questions children will ask about death

- What is dead?
- Will it happen to me?
- Will it happen to you?

Children are egocentric and experience the world based on their own needs

- They need reassurance that they will be taken care of
- They should return to their routines as soon as is comfortable

Should children attend a funeral? Consider:

- Age of child
- Relationship with the deceased
- Presence of an emotionally-available adult
- Type of service

Find opportunities to incorporate life-cycle events into everyday conversations

- Nature experiences
- Use of literature

Help and allow children to keep the memory alive by:

- Story-telling
- Using photographs
- Making pictures and books

The Value of having a Pet in the Classroom

Pets provide opportunities to learn about:

- Growth, development, life cycles
- Physical care and emotional nurturing
- Responsibility
- Integration of math, science, social studies, and language development

What the teacher can do when a pet dies

- With teacher support, allow the children to observe the dead pet
- Gain an understanding of how children process the experience by:
 - Listening carefully to their conversation
 - Reading their body language
 - Observing their play
- At Meeting Time express your sadness, and ask open-ended questions as to why the children think the pet died
- Communicate the essential characteristics of death, on the child's level, using concrete language
 - Finality
 - All life functions cease: animal can no longer move, breath, eat, sleep, feel hungry, tired, cold or hot, etc.
 - Irreversibility
 - Animal will not come back even though we wish he or she would
 - Causality
 - Children need real information, but not too graphic or frightening

- Without concrete information children will develop fantasies which may be more upsetting and frightening than the reality
- Inevitability
 - Death is a natural phenomenon
 - Since death is inevitable it is proactive to use life cycle experiences within the curriculum
- Brainstorm with children ways to remember the pet
- Assimilation of concepts occurs over time -- expect children to revisit the experience
- Allow for role-playing
- Have appropriate books available in the classroom library
- Do not replace the pet immediately

References:

- Furman, E. "Helping Children Cope with Death", in *Reducing Stress in Young Children's Lives*, McCracken, JB, ed., Washington, DC: NAEYC, 35-40.
- Furman, E. 1990. Plant a potato –Learn about life and death. *Young Children* 46 (1): 15-20
- Hopkins, A. 2002. Children and Grief. *Young Children* 57 (1): 40-46