



Bereavement Support Services

BEREAVEMENT FOR CHILDREN

Beaumont



*A simple child
that lightly draws its breath
and feels its life in every limb
what should it know of death!*

–Wordsworth

Cathy Romeo, Co-Author, *Ended Beginnings;*
Healing Childbearing Losses,
1984 Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.,
670 Amherst Road South Hadley, MA 01075



EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN

Jeanne M. Harper, Thanatologist, Marinette, WI
Children are forever asking questions about death – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Yet grownups tend to believe that death is not a proper concern for them. In a study conducted in 1974, Robert Kastenbaum found that three quarters of the respondents felt children seldom, if ever, thought of death, are better off not thinking of death, and should be protected from death-relevant situations. This vision of childhood as a “kingdom where nobody dies” seems to be an adult invention for adult purposes. If you simply listen to children engaged in spontaneous play and conversation you will hear explicit death-talk.

INFANCY THROUGH EARLY CHILDHOOD

At this age, children lack conceptions of death. Certain experiences and behaviors, however, suggest a parallel to the state of non-being or death. “Peek-a-Boo” and other disappearance-and-return games provide early clues as to how children begin to grasp what “all-gone” means. A young child, 18 months old tries to place a dead bird back in the tree, or a leaf on the stem. Each such attempt gives a definite impression that the child is taking a small step or two toward conceptions of separation, finality, and death. The child, from birth to 3, can experience a tremendous sense of loss and grief – reaction to separation – but death as a concept does not enter the child’s thinking. These experiences are foundations for the conceptions of death seen later in the child.

FROM 3 TO 5

Children at this age deny death as a normal and final process. Death is like sleep: you are dead, then you are alive again. Or it is like taking a journey; you are gone, then you come back again. Every day they may experience instances of what they consider “death”, such as when Daddy goes to work or Mother leaves for work or the store. Because of their limited frame of reference, questions like, “Where did he go?... When will he come back?” are quite difficult to answer. Because children do not understand death they may react with intense anger and experience severe rejection, especially when the death of a significant other occurs.

A workshop participant shared that when her husband (age 32) died, her 4-year-old showed his anger with, “I wish you had died instead of Daddy.” This statement deeply distressed the mother because she did not realize that such displaced anger is common at that age. Her son was responding to HIS grief, not attacking her personally.

Young children have unlimited faith in their omnipotence, in their ability to make things happen – simply by wishing – and in their ability to un-do things at will. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in 1973 found that children see death as reversible: “Temporary death wishing” is like a child stating he will make you dead because you said “no more cookies” and that makes him mad, so you are dead! Then an hour later the child brings the parent back to life when he needs something else or wants to be read to.

This belief in the reversibility of death serves as a comforting protection. Children begin to accept death as happening to other people but only when they are old... and they will never get old!!!

FROM 6 TO 9

Six-to-nine year olds see death as final, yet they still believe it won't happen to them. They have a strong tendency to personify death, to give it "person" qualities, to create a boogyman. Inclined to be "wild" and boisterous, they are impressionable to the violence they see on television. Many children have an almost obsessive interest in death, and at times they sound morbid... just listen to their stories around midnight at camp or on sleep-overs. As they try to develop a perspective on what death is all about, it is very scary for them.

At this stage, children are also interested in their own bodies and how they function biologically, and so their death-related questions may be, "Will it hurt Grandma if I jump on her grave?" Misinterpretation of facts or events can occur as they seek to isolate what causes death or what death means. For example, if Grandma died in the hospital, then being-in-the-hospital equals death...so no way am I going to the hospital to have my tonsils out!

FROM 10 TO 12

Pre-adolescents view death not only as final, but also inevitable. Death will happen to them, too, no matter how fast they run or how cleverly they hide. By ten or twelve, children have become "social beings" so their questions of death are, "Who will take care of my friend now?" "Who will feed my pets?" "Who will help you?" They tend to feel responsible if somehow they had something to do with the death. But, to protect themselves or hide their fear, they create stories or jokes about death.

ADOLESCENTS

As the work of Piaget, Anthony and others has suggested, children approach adolescence equipped with most of the intellectual tools necessary to understand both life and death in a logical manner. They have completed development of concepts of time, space, quantity and causality which gives them a framework within which the idea of death can be placed: Death is one of many processes; it can be understood in relation to "natural law."

To integrate the concept into their total view of life, however, they must face its personal implications. They fluctuate between "knowing" death is final and inevitable and believing that personal mortality is an unfounded rumor. Their defiance of death may explain some of their risk-taking behavior, their games of Chicken and Russian Roulette, their reckless driving, drug use, and hitch-hiking. Symbolically, they seem to be saying, "We have so much anxiety over death that we play with it." Underneath it all they are seriously seeking the meaning of life. An attitude of defiance – "I dare it to happen to me" – replaces the joking of the preceding stage, as teenagers attempt to understand philosophically and psychologically both life and death.



ADULTHOOD

The person who stays alive psychologically continues to modify ideas about death throughout adulthood. As a young person starting a family, as a middle-aged citizen with many deep commitments and obligations, and as an elderly individual moving toward exodus, yesterday's child encounters qualitatively different life situations. Certain basic concepts tend to remain firm – death is inevitable and final – but the full range of implications demands re-examination.

The stages through which an individual moves are at best approximations. While social, economical, and cultural variables play a part, age seems to be the most significant factor in developing a concept of death, as Jean Piaget contended. For the parent, teacher, or counselor working with children/ adolescents/ adults who are grieving or groping toward an understanding of death, familiarity with the developmental sequences is important.

HOW THEN DO WE TALK TO OUR CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH?

As adults, we often have trouble helping children handle their grief or talk about death. Sometimes the difficulty arises from our own unresolved feelings about death, sometimes because we are enmeshed in our own sorrow. Evading discussion with remarks that children are “too young” may bring a degree of false comfort to adults, but refusing to answer a child's questions or failing to deal with their feelings can cause unnecessary pain, if not emotional damage.



THE GRIEF OF CHILDREN

Susan Woolsey, Maryland SIDS Information and Counseling Project and the National SIDS Clearinghouse

One of the most difficult tasks following the death of a loved one is discussing and explaining the death with children in the family. This task is even more distressing when the parents are in the midst of their own grief.

Because many adults have problems dealing with death they assume that children cannot cope with it. They may try to protect children by leaving them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the death. Thus, children may feel anxious, bewildered, and alone. They may be left on their own to seek answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those around them. All children will be affected in some way by a death in the family. Above all, children who are too young for explanations need love from the significant people in their lives to maintain their own security. Young children may not verbalize their feelings about a death in the family. Therefore, by holding back their feelings because they are so overwhelming, they may appear to be unaffected. It is more common for them to express their feelings through behavior and play. Regardless of this ability or inability to express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply.

SOME COMMON EXPRESSIONS OF CHILDREN'S GRIEF

Experts have determined that those in grief pass through four major emotions: fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. It should be remembered that everyone who is touched by a death experiences these emotions to some degree – grandparents, friends, physicians, nurses, and children. Each adult and child's reactions to death are individual in nature. Some common reactions are:

Shock

The child may not believe the death really happened and will act as though it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.

Physical Symptoms

The child may have various complaints such as headache or stomachache and fear that he too will die.

Anger

Being mostly concerned with his own needs, the child may be angry at the person who died because he feels he has been left "all alone" or that God didn't "make that person well."

Guilt

The child may think that he caused the death by having been angry with the person who died, or he may feel responsible for not having been "better" in some way.

Anxiety and Fear

The child may wonder who will take care of him now or fear that some other person he loves will die. He may cling to his parents or ask other people who play an important role in his life if they love him.

Regression

The child may revert to behaviors he had previously outgrown, such as bedwetting or thumbsucking.



Sadness

The child may show a decrease in activity – being “too quiet.” It is important to remember that all of the reactions outlined above are normal expressions of grief in children. In the grief process, time is an important factor. Experts have said that six months after a significant death in a child’s life, normal routine should be resuming. If the child’s reaction seems to be prolonged, seeking professional advice of those who are familiar with the child (e.g., teachers, pediatricians, clergy) may be helpful.

EXPLANATIONS THAT MAY NOT HELP

Outlined below are explanations that adults may give a child hoping to explain why the person they loved has died. Unfortunately, simple, pat, but dishonest answers can only serve to increase the fear and uncertainty that the child is feeling. Children tend to be very literal – if an adult says that “Grandpa died because he was old and tired” the child may wonder when he too will be too old; he certainly gets tired; what is tired enough to die? “Grandma will sleep in peace forever.” This explanation may result in the child’s fear of going to bed or to sleep. “It is God’s will.” The child will not understand a God who takes a loved one because he needs that person himself; or “God took him because he was so good.” The child may decide to be bad so God won’t take him too. “Daddy went on a long trip and won’t be back for a long time.” The child may wonder why the person left without saying goodbye. Eventually he will realize Daddy isn’t coming back and feel that something he did caused Daddy to leave. “John was sick and went to the hospital where he died.” The child will need an explanation about “little” and “big” sicknesses. Otherwise, he may be extremely fearful if he or someone he loves has to go to the hospital in the future.

WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN

As in all situations, the best way to deal with children is honestly. Talk to the child in a language that he can understand. Remember to listen to the child, and try to understand what the child is saying and, just as importantly, what he’s not saying. Children need to feel that the death is an open subject and that they can express their thoughts or questions as they arise. Below are just a few ways adults can help children face the death of someone close to them:

SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO EXPLAIN DEATH TO CHILDREN

- Sometimes when a baby is just starting to grow, something happens that makes it stop growing.
- Sometimes something makes a baby die before it is born. We're not sure why but it's nothing anybody did or didn't do.
- Sometimes with little babies something makes their bodies stop working. It's nothing anybody did or forgot to do. Doctors are not sure why it happens.
- You know how a watch can stop ticking and nothing can get it to work again, that's what happened with the baby. The baby's body stopped working and so it couldn't live.
- In the spring, mommy plants seeds in the garden and sometimes not all the seeds grow up to be plants/flowers. A baby is like a seed that gets planted inside mommy's stomach. Sometimes something happens that keeps the baby seed from growing.
- Death is like a broken toy and although we would like to fix it, it will never work again. The same is true for the baby, as much as we want him/her to be with us we just can't do anything about it.
- Remember when your pet _____died and we had to say goodbye to him. We never saw him again but we think of him often. That's what it's going to be like with the baby. We won't ever see him/her again but will think of him/her all the time.
- No one dies because God is angry with them. A person dies when an important part of their body wears out and stops working.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

- Explain honestly
- Predict sadness
- Offer continued nurturance and love
- Include children in the rituals of mourning
- Convey the permanency and irreversibility of death

Sources

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Manning, Doug, Don't Take My Grief Away. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984. Rando, Therese A. Grief, Dying and



SUGGESTED BOOKS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Bernstein, Joan E. *Loss and How to Cope with Death*. N.Y.: Clarion, 1981. Ages 10 and older. Includes death among other subjects.

Brown, Margaret Wise. *The Dead Bird*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1958. Ages 4-8. A classic. Children dealing with a death and then going on with their lives.

Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*. Holt Rinehart, Winston. All ages.

Corley, Elizabeth Adam. *Tell Me About Death, Tell Me About Funerals*. Santa Clara, CA: Grammatical Sciences, 1973. Ages 6-10.

Dodge, Nancy. *Thumpy's Story: A Story of Love and Grief Shared, by Thumpy the Bunny...* Prairie Lake Press, P.O. Box 699-F Springfield, IL 62705. Age 7-77 or to read with younger children. The story of Thumpy the Bunny, experiencing grief over the loss of sister Bun. This book allows children and parents a situation to talk about and share their grief.

Thumpy's Story: A Story of Love and Grief Shared, A Story to Color by Thumpy, the Bunny. Prairie Lake Press, P.O. Box 699-F, Springfield, IL 62705. Age 3-103. A coloring book with the complete text of the original story. Gives young children a chance to be active in expressing their feeling about their lost sibling while encouraging questions.

Dodge, Nancy, and Jane Marie Lamb. *Sharing with Thumpy (Workbook), My Story of Love and Grief*. Prairie Lake Press, P.O. Box 699-F, Springfield, IL 62705. Age 9- 99 or for younger children with adult assistance. Children are encouraged to draw and write their own story about how loss affect them.

Grollman, Earl A. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976. The first section of the book can be used for reading out loud and has nicely done illustrations. It gives examples of questions and fears children have. A resource bibliography is included. The parents guide suggests uses for the book and also helps parents themselves come to terms with death.

Jackenback, Dick. *Do You Love Me?* N.Y.: Clarion, 1975. Ages 5-9. Jackson, E. *Telling A Child About Death*. New York: Hawthorne, 1965. (Adult)

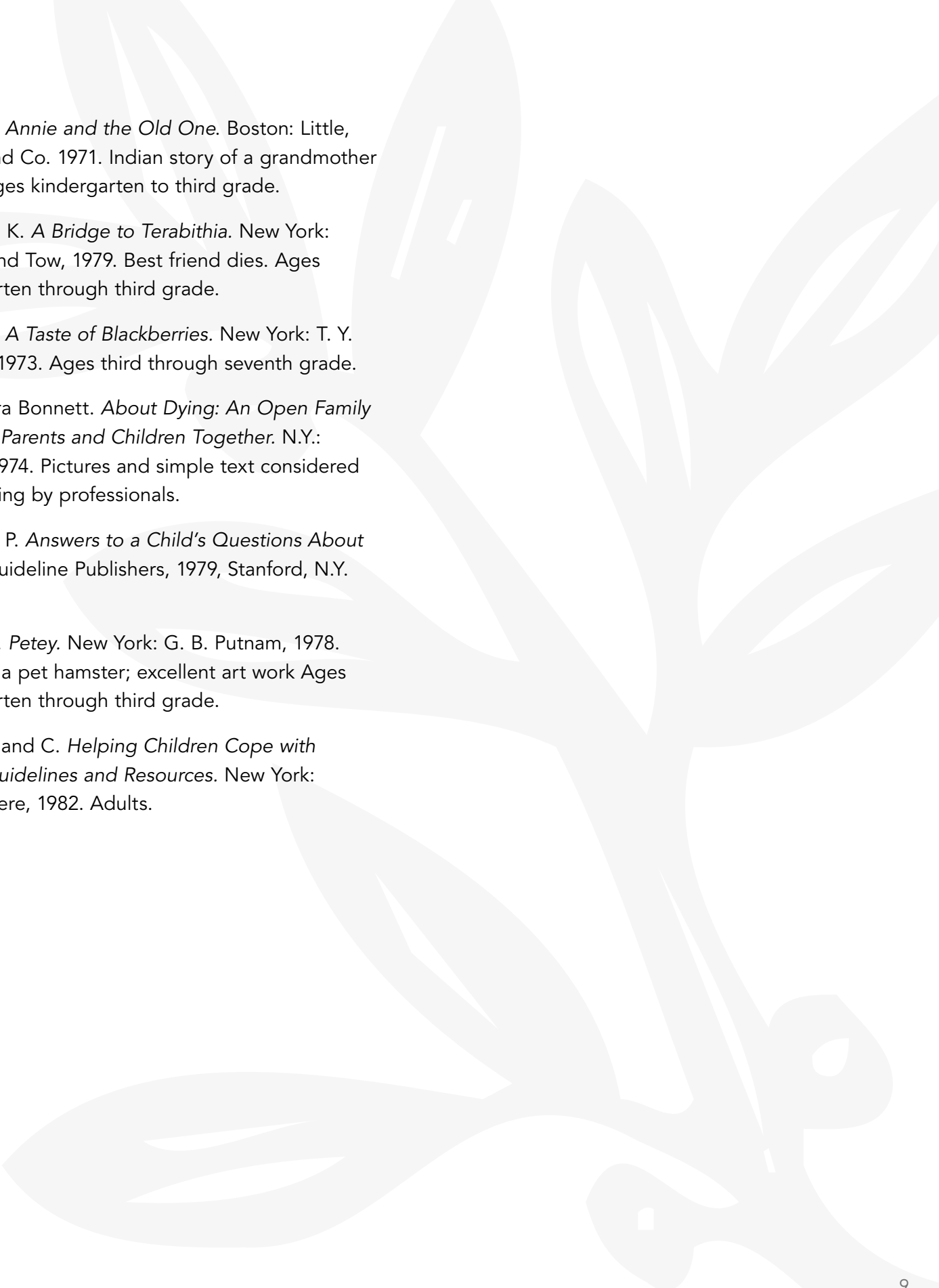
Johnson, Joy and Marvin. *Children Die, Too* (Adult), *Newborn Death* (Adult), *Where's Jess?* (Preschool), *Tell Me, Papa* (4-10). Centering Corporations, Omaha, NE.

Kid's Book of Death & Dying: By and for kids by the unit at Fayerweather St. School. Edited and coordinated by Eric E. Rofes, Little Brown & Co., 1985. Fourteen children offer facts and advice about death. The interviewed children who experienced death of sibling or parent. They also interviewed funeral director, doctors and veterinarians to get specific answers regarding the death process. A useful resource for parents discussing death with their child.

LeShan, E. *Learning to Say Goodbye: When a Parent Dies*. New York: Macmillan, 1976. Ages 3-7.

What Makes Me Feel This Way? New York: Macmillan, 1972. Ages 3-7.

Mellonie, Bryan, and Robert Ingpen. *Lifetimes*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983.



Miles, M. *Annie and the Old One*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1971. Indian story of a grandmother dying. Ages kindergarten to third grade.

Paterson, K. *A Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: Harper and Tow, 1979. Best friend dies. Ages kindergarten through third grade.

Smith, D. *A Taste of Blackberries*. New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1973. Ages third through seventh grade.

Stein, Sara Bonnett. *About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together*. N.Y.: Walker, 1974. Pictures and simple text considered outstanding by professionals.

Stellman, P. *Answers to a Child's Questions About Death*. Guideline Publishers, 1979, Stanford, N.Y. 12167.

Tobias, T. *Petey*. New York: G. B. Putnam, 1978. Death of a pet hamster; excellent art work Ages kindergarten through third grade.

Wass, H. and C. *Helping Children Cope with Death: Guidelines and Resources*. New York: Hemisphere, 1982. Adults.

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