Such extreme variations in experience have a profound effect on a child's understanding of death. When children change homes frequently they may learn just to be adaptable. And when they have difficulty isolating a day when violence and loss are not involved, they may learn to ignore death or pretend it isn't real. They may wear themselves down fighting for change or trying to make sense of the experiences, or they may become angry and violent.

Lessons learned when children's home lives are stable, supportive and nonviolent are quite different. Children are able to confront the difficulties in their lives, explore them freely and learn from them. These positive experiences help children balance painful experiences related to loss and death. Such children are capable of seeing loss and death as a natural part of life.

Children receive messages from their community too. The ethnic background of their neighbors and their geographic location produce different views of life and death. A child from an urban area where cemeteries are crowded and surrounded closely with other buildings would have a a very different idea of burial than a child from a rural western area where cemeteries are sprawled in open country. A child who grows up observing loud, joyful Irish Catholic wakes will have a different expectation than a child who observes a typically somber German Protestant visitation.

Cultural messages are not as obvious as media messages, although their influences are as strong. When a child's culture is the same as your own it is difficult to be objective enough to identify the messages. Our culture is so much a part of us that separating ourselves from it is a challenge. But we need to try. Think about some of the death-related customs of our culture and the language we use to describe loss and death.

Some people believe in putting a death behind them as quickly and quietly as possible, while others believe that open mourning is helpful. Individuals from these two backgrounds will find it difficult to talk to each other. The quiet person may feel that being asked about the de-

Books That Emphasize Coping Skills

The Saddest Time—Part Two
Norma Simon
Niles, IL: Albert Whitman and Company, 1986
Ages 3 through 5

This book has three short stories in it. The second story begins with a school assembly where the principal is telling the children that their classmate Teddy Baker died yesterday. The students are told that Teddy rode his bike into a street and was hit by a car. He died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. His father and mother were with him. The principal also talks about eight years old being too young to die and wishing the accident had never happened.

After the assembly the students return to their classrooms. The students in Mr. Grady's room see Teddy's empty desk and begin talking about Teddy. They remember pleasant and unpleasant things about him; the teacher is accepting of all their comments. Then one student says that his parents are writing a letter to Teddy's parents and asks if the class can do that too. Mr. Grady thinks it's a good idea, and the children begin reminiscing again to think of things to write in their letters. "The more they talked, the more they remembered. They hoped their letters would make his mother and father know how much they missed their friend Teddy Baker."

This is a very short story that directly and honestly tells the facts about the accident and the various feelings children have. It gives a model for action. The teacher is shown letting the children take the initiative about what to do to show their feelings. The reactions of the children are realistic and varied, which will help readers understand and relate to the situation. You will want to remind your children that these are just *some* of the feelings and reactions that people have in response to death. But this story is a very good starting point for bringing out the feelings and ideas of very young children.