

A kindergartner (let's assume the child's name is "John") had a car accident and was transported to the Emergency Room. However, John died before reaching the hospital. The very next day, at school, a child came into the classroom and talked about John's death with several classmates. Then the teacher entered the classroom and quietly removed John's desk and chair. A child asked the teacher why she removed John's desk and chair. The teacher announced in the class that John moved to another state so that he won't be with them any longer - A Real Life Scenario Told by a Teacher.

This scenario reflects a teacher's fear and reluctance of addressing the subject of death with young children. Death is everywhere in children's lives whether adults are aware of it or not. Children frequently talk about it in daily routines. They use death related terms when they play computer games or videogames (e.g., he is out of power. he is dying) as well as indoor/outdoor games (e.g., if you cross the line or step on the line, you are dead, if you got three from a die, you are dead). Children also experience death from their favorite fairy tales and mass media. Children's popular fairy tales often describe death in a story line. For example, "...the protagonist may die from the bite of a poison apple, be devoured by a hungry wolf, or be left in a forest to die because there is not enough food for the family" (Richardson, 1993, p.6). Since mass media is an essential part of children's lives in contemporary society, they see animal and human deaths animated on TV cartoons or in their favorite movies as well (Kim, 2001).

Studies indicate that, regardless of the easy access children have to hearing and seeing the death of living things, both teachers (e.g., Henney & Barnhart, 1980; Pratt, Hare, & Wright, 1985; 1987) and parents (e.g., McNeil, 1983; Kim, 2001) are reluctant or less confident to discuss death with children.

The concept of death is a kind of social knowledge that should be woven into the social and cultural contexts the assistance of a mature social agent (e.g., parents, mature peers, or teachers). However, it appears that both parents and teachers encounter

difficulty when addressing the subject with young children (Richardson, 1993).

Furthermore, parents and teachers intentionally avoid dealing the topic of death (e.g., We don't talk about that kind of things. Let's not talk about it. Don't say that...) when children directly ask questions involving children's significant others' death (e.g., Is grandmother sick? Is she dying? When will she die? ...). It is natural for young children to ask about death since they have seen it in their everyday surroundings. By negatively responding to young children, it sends them a hidden message that discussions concerning death are not good and should be avoided altogether. Without receiving appropriate guidelines from a social agent, children construct the knowledge of death from imagination by recalling the scenes displayed from accessible media such as TV, video games, or computer games. Since those media usually illustrate death in a violent manner and connect it with evil or bad behavior consequences, children often grasp the concept of death with far more fear and confusion than reality (Seibert & Drolet, 1993).

Cartoons, for example, often illustrate the protagonist as a good character who confronts evil. Eventually, the main character wins and the evil characters are killed or destroyed. This common story line easily leads children to acquire misconceptions on death (e.g., only bad one dies or death is a result of being bad). Children's surrounding environments generally lead children to wrongly perceive death as the result of bad behavior.

Though young children are commonly misguided by accessible mediums, parents and even early childhood educators claim that children are not ready to understand death because of their immature cognitive development (Kim, 2001; Wass, Raup, & Sisler, 1989). This mainly originates from Piagetian perspectives. According to Piagetians (Kim,

2001; Schramm, 1998), adults should wait until children become eight or nine years of age to explain and discuss death. However, it has been argued by Vygotskians and bereavement psychologists that “children are active participants in the process of social construction of knowledge and children’s understanding can be socially and culturally facilitated” (Kim, 2001, p. 34). As death related scenes increase in children’s lives, it becomes essential for social agents to scaffold children’s understanding of death. Children’s social and cultural contexts expose them to see, hear, and talk about death. If adults ignore these dynamic social and cultural situations children are already in, Richardson (1993) and Kim (2001) claim that those children will be left alone to construct their knowledge by using their imaginations and fantasies about death.

According to the clinical data on children’s bereavement collected by bereavement psychologists (e.g., Bluebond-Langner, 1977; Powell, 1994; Richardson, 1993), very young “children as early as two or three years old,” are capable of understanding the concept of death. These studies also indicate that children who do not receive any death related information or educational intervention would become exposed to dangerous level of trauma when they actually confront the death of relatives, siblings, or parents. With silence in homes and schools concerning death, children are continuously exposed to misguided, false, and abstract images of death through accessible media without realistic alternatives.

When a child possesses scientific knowledge about death, this assists him or her understand death as a part of natural life cycle. This understanding helps the child when they actually encountering the death of a significant other (Kim, 2001; Smilansky, 1987).

When teachers or parents talk about death with young children, however, children's cognitive development cannot be overlooked.

1) That's not your fault.

Young children naturally think if something bad happened in their lives, it was because they did something wrong. Children at this early stage (preoperational stage; about 2-6 years) are characterized as "magical thinking" and "egocentric thinking." Adults should be cautious about children's cognitive thinking stages. According to Brookshire and Noland (1985), children in this stage should be clearly told that their thoughts or behaviors don't impact someone's death (including pet's death).

2) He/she died...

Another consideration is using "euphemism." For some reason, people are less likely to use a direct term when describing death. They rather use the euphemism for death (e.g., sleeping, having a long trip, going back home...). However, it is problematic when adults use euphemisms with young children to describe "death." According to Lee (2005), children would never be capable of understanding the meaning of a euphemism. It is strongly recommended not to use such terms as alternatives for describing death (Richardson, 1993). For example, if a parent uses the word "sleeping" to explain death, children would never want to go to bed or they would feel anxious going bed. Children think they might die while they are sleeping. The same logic applies to the euphemism of "having a long trip" or "going back home." Thus, using the direct word "death" is strongly recommended when explaining death to young children.

3) *Let's talk about death.*

Though both teachers and parents reported that they are not comfortable dealing with young children about death as a concept (see Henney & Barnhart, 1980; McNeil, 1983; Kim, 2001; Pratt, Hare, & Wright, 1985; 1987) discussions concerning death can be easily integrated in children's daily lives. Adults need to closely observe children's play and listen to their stories in order to catch the proper moment (e.g., stepping on insects, death of pets or loved ones, wilting flowers, television death in cartoons, drama, and news reports). Let children talk about death with peers and adults themselves. Adults can function as facilitators to extend and elaborate the concept of death. A range of emotions can be raised from the discussion process. However, this strategic moment can have enormous impact as a teacher/parent assists children in understanding death by relating their real life experiences. This practice allows children to evoke unexpressed grief.

4) *Let's read about death.*

Using children's books is also an effective way to introduce children to a realistic treatment of death. Children's literature is commonly integrated into the early childhood classroom environment to "address concepts which are not possible to experience directly, or not desirable to experience directly" (Seibert & Drolet, 1993, p.86). Thus, when a teacher discusses death with young children, integrating children's books is recommended. One significant consideration would be to select a book that provides a positive presentation of death. Lots of children's books have been written to help children understand the concept of death and to assist them in coping with a loss (see the

following list of books). When children read a story about death, it is necessary for adults to offer an open discussion on the topic in a more factual manner.

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Michaeleen Mundy
Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie
Lifetime by Harris Robie
I Miss You: A First Look At Death by Pat Thomas
When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death (Dino Life Guides for families) by Laurie Krasny Brown
The Tenth Good Thing about Barney by Judith Viorst
The Fall of Freddy the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia
Good-bye Mouse by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen
Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs by Tomie Depaola
What's Heaven? by Maria Shriver
35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child by Dougy Center for Grieving Children
What on Earth Do you Do When Someone Dies? by Trevor Romain
Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert
The Next Place by Warren Hanson
Beginning: Encouragement at the Start of Something New by Warren Hanson
Older Love by Warren Hanson

As Vygotsky's theory illuminates, it is critical for mature social agents to be involved and to scaffold children in building their knowledge in social and cultural contexts. Appropriate social and cultural interactions with mature social agents offer children opportunities to learn and understand the concept of death. Thus, as a major social agent, both parents and early childhood teachers need to actively facilitate discussions with young children regarding death related issues instead of denying children's knowledge of death. Death education contains multi-focus educational contents. It is important to provide concrete information to children through the schools or early childhood settings as well as beliefs taught in a church or in religious temple. For this reason, when teaching young children about death, it is essential to involve parents.

In fact, parents would be the best social agents, able to use the combination of both school education and religious beliefs to provide the children with the skills to better

understand death and its concepts. Death educators recommend adults “take advantages of the daily opportunities that abound in a child’s world, like dead insects, corpses of small animals found outside the home, cartoon characters that are annihilated, plants that turn brown etc...” (Richardson, 1993, p.48). Yes, let’s talk about death with young children by seizing teachable strategic moments in daily lives.

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