

EDCI 554 A01 - Essay #3

Acknowledging Death in Kindergarten

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### Acknowledging Death in Kindergarten

Death is an everyday occurrence that is an intrinsic part of life. Although most children have some experience with death, western societal norms avoid inquiry about death leaving children with the illusion it is a forbidden topic. Avoidance perpetuates misconceptions and mystique surrounding death. Death is a natural experience that should be explored, discussed and linked to the Kindergarten Curriculum. Kindergarten children who have prior knowledge on the topic of death will find it easier to process death experiences.

Kindergarten children are naturally inquisitive and wonder about death. McGuire, McCarthy and Modrcin (2013) contend knowledge and “anticipatory guidance”<sup>\*</sup> about death will help children understand and cope when it happens. Exposure to death through media, fairy tales and stories, family, pets, friends, and the natural world is inevitable. Children’s misconceptions about death may create greater trauma than factual knowledge. Informing children in developmentally appropriate ways helps them comprehend death and prepare for personal death experiences.

Informing parents about inclusion of death in the Kindergarten program may lead to controversy but is essential. Parents should be aware of intentions beforehand and of relevant discussion points afterwards. This allows parents to be informed and to carry on conversations at home. This becomes an opportunity to educate families about developmentally appropriate conversations addressing death.

<sup>\*</sup>According to Mosby’s Medical Dictionary (as cited in McGuire, McCarthy and Modrcin, 2013), anticipatory guidance is the “psychological preparation of a person to help relieve the fear and anxiety of an event expected to be stressful”.

Beginnings and endings are entrenched in our daily existence. Intentional links to life and death in the Kindergarten Curriculum (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2010) can be made through lessons on healthy living and relationships, identifying human needs, considering differences and similarities in families, identifying the concept of change through life cycles of plants and animals, and through personal connections to aging during intergenerational programs. Developmentally appropriate books depicting death events should be part of the classroom library. Additional unforeseen death occurrences experienced outside the classroom can be shared and discussed – with permission from the child and family involved – providing opportunity for empathy and shared grief.

Specific religious and spiritual beliefs on death and dying are the prerogative of the family. Discussions considering possibilities shared by children are an appropriate way to introduce diverse cultural perspective and tolerance for beliefs of others. Educators can guide questions and impart factual information but must not judge or impose their own personal spiritual/religious beliefs.

Knowledge of developmental stages, personal development, and individual student experience is imperative. Vianello & Marin maintain children can understand death by age four or five; Piaget and Nagy suggest age eight as the time to teach about death arguing this is the age at which children are able to understand the finality of death (as cited in McGire, McCarthy & Modrcin, 2013). I believe introducing death to kindergarten children is appropriate if executed prudently. Even if children are not able to understand the finality of death at kindergarten age, experiencing the death of a relative, friend or a pet affects them. Teaching about death will help children understand their emotions and sense of loss. One should consider Piaget's pre-operational stage of

development taking into account how magical thinking, egocentricity, causality, and reversibility affect students' perceptions about death (Goldman, 2006; Huntley, 2002; Wolfelt, 2013). When students lead the inquiry it enables learning to proceed at a pace they comprehend and accept. Student questions and discussion should both prompt and limit the inquiry.

Open, honest and clear language conveyed in a caring manner is vital (Fitzgerald, 2003; Morrissey, 2013). Children should not be told anything that is not true. Terms used should be accurate so messages are not misconstrued. Adults must not be verbally evasive and misrepresent death as "gone to sleep" or "lost". This is crucial as literal interpretations lead to false hope the dead will wake up or be found in the future (Fitzgerald, 2003; Huntley, 2002).

As children experience death they should be allowed to grieve as part of the healing process. Acknowledgement of their feelings – whatever they are – and unequivocal adult support enables children to process death and grief. Sharing mutual grief in an honest fashion models acceptance of grief and the ensuing emotions that surface. Trying to protect children by suppressing emotions may be damaging and inhibit the grieving process.

Children should be assured all emotions are acceptable. Variations on grief are dependent on personality, maturity, relationship to the deceased, pre-death conversations/encounters with the deceased, and familial/external management of the death experience. Kindergarten children can appear resilient, even indifferent to death. They move in and out of grief feelings (Fitzgerald, 2003) in alignment with Piaget's

egocentric theory. It is important to allow children to experience emotion and grief in their own way.

Children need to honour death and those who die. Remembering and documenting the life of deceased through stories, photographs, special places and keepsakes give children a means of self-expression and an outlet for grief. Saying goodbye through letters, drawings, and ceremony helps provide closure. Expression through song, dance, drama, physical activity and play help children work through thoughts and feelings about death. Preserving memories helps children come to terms with the finality of death.

Death signifies the natural end to life and should be acknowledged. Kindergarten educators should retain objectivity as they encourage questions and discussion about death in a safe and caring environment. Goldman (2005) asserts that although we cannot control death experiences, we can empower children to be capable and caring by trusting their wisdom and nurturing them (cited in Goldman, 2006). We must listen to children and guide them with care using direct and open communication. We must use our wisdom and courage to support children in their journey exploring and understanding death. Only then will they understand that death is an intrinsic part of life.

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