Why isn't the gerbil moving anymore? Discussing death in the classroom.

Gerald P Koocher, *DePaul University*
"Why Isn't The Gerbil Dying?"

Discussing Death in the Classroom

by Gerald P. Koocher

"It's a bird that died of old age." Robert, age 12.

The title question has been known to strike terror into the heart of even the most experienced first grade teacher when the death of a classroom pet is discovered by a curious 6-year-old. The issues raised are more distressing when a classmate or a classmate’s parent dies and questions are asked. The simplest path is that of silence, or of trying to dispose of the questions as swiftly and painlessly as possible, but often that may solve only the teacher’s problem.

By the age of five virtually every child has had some contact with death and some curiosity about it. Perhaps it was the death of a pet, a dead bird found on the street, a “squished bug,” or the death of a family member. In any case, it is only logical that this curiosity will be carried over to the school setting, and it is important that the teacher—as well as parents—be prepared to cope with questions that come up.

What happens when questions go unanswered or are only partially answered? The best example I can think of is a boy named Mark. I first met him about five years ago at a university-affiliated psychological clinic. Mark, who was then five years old, had been brought in by his parents who were concerned about his refusal to go to bed at night. Although he had no history of bedtime problems previously, Mark had begun to throw bedtime tantrums two weeks earlier. He would cry and refuse to go near the bedroom, and, when finally overcome with sleep, he would often awaken with nightmares. His behavior and emotional development were all within normal limits aside from his rather phobic reaction to bedtime preparations. Neither parent was able to offer any insight into the possible precipitants of this behavior.

During one of the play sessions I had with Mark, he told me the story of a man who “…got a heart attack, fell out of bed, and died.” He explained that he had overheard his mother telling this story to someone over the telephone. Putting events together with the help of his parents, I learned that a family friend had recently died of a heart attack, and Mark did indeed hear his mother describe the event to a friend over the telephone. Mark had no idea what a heart attack was or where one came from. He certainly knew what falling out of bed was, though, and if doing that could “… make you get a heart attack and die” then no one was going to get him into a bed.

With this information I was able to help ease Mark’s concerns in short order, but the concreteness of his concerns remains an impressive example of the misconceptions children can develop about death. Mark also provides a prime example of the harm that can result from not talking about death when children have questions, although in this case Mark had not asked any.

The conspiracy of silence that seems to exist among adults when it comes to discussing death with children has at least three basic roots. First, there is the adult’s own emotional concern which may prevent him or her from confronting death-related issues. This may stem from actual experience or from fear of emotional losses. The second root is a general uncertainty about what to say or where to begin. It is hard to know what issues will be of immediate concern and which will be unimportant. Finally, there is the situation which combines the two mentioned above, when an emotional crisis such as the death of a parent or relative, for instance, forces an anxious adult into the awkward position of having to explain what has happened to a frightened child.

I would like to offer some suggestions to help teachers in planning classroom discussions about death, and in handling the topic when it comes up without planning. Parents, nursery school teachers and others who care for young children may also find some of the suggestions helpful.
Listening to Questions

Many adults make the unfortunate mistake of thinking that children are merely uneducated, miniature adults. This is understandable, since their outward appearance is much like that of the adult (only smaller). As most teachers and parents know, however, the mental equipment of children is not as well developed as that of adults, nor is it as capable of incorporating the experiences of others. The very young child (one under the age of 6 or 7) may not yet be capable of what Piaget calls "cognitive reciprocity." This means, in effect, that he cannot really benefit from learning outside the realm of his own experience. In talking about death, therefore, such children will naturally react in the light of their own experiences and of what they have been told by adults or have seen in the media.

Listening carefully to a child is important, because adults may tend to read into a question much more than is asked. The analogy of sex questions also fits this paradigm. When the 5-year-old asks "Where do babies come from?", he may not particularly care to hear about egg and sperm, birds and bees, etc. Usually, "They grow inside their mothers" is a satisfactory, direct answer. Similarly, when a child asks about what made a pet die, an answer which involves "going to heaven" or "being called to be with God" can be much more confusing than a simple "He didn't have enough water to drink" or "He got very very sick, and we couldn't make him better."

The real key is in addressing the question that is intended, whether or not it is the one that is verbalized. The unspoken question is often "Could that happen to me?" When a parent dies the parallel question is "Who will take care of me now?" Often, these questions are not raised directly, but may come out in such form as "What if I get very very sick?" or "Why didn't anyone give him extra water?"

Children over the age of seven can be more open and direct (some adults would add, more morbid) but many of the concerns remain the same. It has been my experience that children are generally very interested in discussing their ideas about death with attentive adults. In addition, most children show a desire to "master" death in some sense by learning about it and knowing, as much as is possible, what happens to make things die.

Developmental Trends

Children's ideas about death develop along clear developmental lines and can be grouped by levels of mental functioning. A good example of this are the ideas children have about what causes living things to die. In the youngest group (under age 6 or 7) the answers children tend to give to such questions are often magical and quite egocentric. Typically, they might include such causes of death as "Eating a dirty bug" or "Going swimming alone when your mother says no." In middle childhood (approximately ages 7 to 11) children tend to become more concrete in their reasoning, and they will typically cite as causes of death "cancer," "guns," "dope" or "poison." When children reach early adolescence (approximately age 12 and over), they become capable of more abstract formal reasoning and their explanations also take on a more abstract quality. Often they fall into such broad groups or general categories as "illness," "old age," "acci-
strain. Once again, one must listen to the emotional need being expressed and not simply address the direct question.

These suggestions apply as well in the family context as they do in the classroom. Such discussions in the home take on added meaning and may enrich the communication bonds between parents and children.

The best approach in the classroom context is usually one that is guided by the interests and questions of the children. In a science class questions about life cycles and causes of death will come up quite naturally. In social studies the concepts of death and the pyramids of Egypt or burial caves of the American Indians are also natural areas of children's interests.

**Morbidity or Mastery**

Virtually every child who has ever gone "Trick-or-Treating" knows what a skeleton is, and most children over the age of six or seven are able to verbalize the notion that dead bodies are usually buried in our culture. Adults are often amazed by the gruesome details some youngsters are able to recount in talking about what happens after death. It is not unusual to hear stories from an 8- or 9-year-old about how "Your body rots away after you get buried." Thinking and talking along these lines may actually serve a psychologically adaptive function for some children. In a sense the child may be saying to himself, "If I know exactly what's going to happen when I die, then I won't have to worry about it now." While a constant preoccupation with death-related thoughts is an indication that a psychological or psychiatric consultation should be sought, casual references may be quite normal even though the content seems morbid by adult standards. The normal child may use detailed exploration of what happens to a body after death as a means to master his own anxiety about loss and separation.

**Potential Classroom Projects**

Classroom projects with regard to death and dying ought to fit into a teacher's lesson plan in a fashion that is consistent with the teacher's usual style. Such projects may be planned well in advance or brought into class on short notice, if an acute situation creates a need. The teacher might plan to get into the topic using regular course material in science or social studies as a logical context. On the other hand, a sudden event such as the death of a classroom pet or a relative of a classmate could provide a context for a different kind of classroom project. There is a definite place for both types of programs, and each provides its own special perspective on the matter of death and dying.

The first kind of project is a scholastically based one. A class discussion of different cultures in social studies or history lessons could compare funeral practices and religious beliefs about death on a "then and now" basis. In primary grades, science classes could talk about the differences inherent in what is "alive," "not alive" or "dead." This kind of lesson would help to teach the concept that life is an ongoing process and that death is the end or interruption of this process. It is a reality-based, somewhat intellectualized approach to teaching about death that fits well into regular curriculum areas and seldom arouses any emotional stress.

The second type of project addresses more acute situations. It offers a different sort of learning about death and dying, but one which is no less important—the *feeling* component. This kind of classroom project is a logical follow-through to minor or major tragedies of death that come to the attention of a school class. In one case it may be a dead gerbil, in another the death of a classmate's parent or sibling, or of a classmate himself. The assassination of public figures in recent years has also been a focal point for such classroom discussions and projects. Because of the feelings which are naturally involved, such programs should be open-ended and allow each child to participate up to the level of his or her interest and capability.

In the case of a dead classroom pet, an art lesson or short essay-writing period aimed at representing how class members feel about losing the animal could be an appropriate medium. The teacher might offer some guidance in terms of feelings by telling the class how he or she feels. Acknowledging that it is all right to be sad, but remembering the fun we had playing with the

*A vampire bat with a stake through its heart." Ian, age 10.

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gurbl, would be one approach. When a human being is the deceased, the class might focus on the survivors and the teacher could invite the class to write or design brief messages of condolence. Aside from being socially appropriate and helping to teach social behavior, such exercises expose children to their own feelings and allow for an emotionally constructive follow-through to the event. An added benefit is the support that such gestures offer to the families of the deceased individual.

These ideas may also be used at home by parents to help their children deal with similar circumstances. When a child expresses his or her own feelings, parents may suggest ways to communicate them by presenting suggestions for writing a sympathy note or allowing the child to bury a deceased pet. These activities should not be rituals which are forced on the child, but rather ideas to which the child may wish to respond.

Conclusion

I have tried to offer some discussion ideas and starting points, which can be individualized and elaborated upon to fit the specific age and classroom situation of any given group of students. The thoughtful teacher should consider the needs of his or her class and attempt to gauge potential reactions in planning such lessons as those described here. My prime concern, however, is not so much the implementation of discussion as it is the idea of doing something like this in the classroom. If a reader comes away from this article with a single thought, I would like it to be: at home or in school, talking about death is more necessary and potentially beneficial than not talking about it. A classroom can be an important, supportive place in which real learning about death on many levels can take place.