Death Education in the Elementary Classroom: A Teacher’s Guide to Understanding and Helping

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This paper was written for elementary education professionals to use as a guidebook when dealing with the topics of death and dying in the classroom. While there are an abundance of resources available to teachers, the majority of them are hundreds of pages long and can be overwhelming to a person who is already too busy. An effort has been made to compile only the most pertinent information about the subject.

This project begins with a discussion of children's understanding of death during three different stages of development and a discussion of the stages of grief that children will experience. A list of various, typical reactions is included. Along with explanations of the areas of death education that should be covered in the classroom is a list of guidelines for teachers to follow. Included near the end is a list of resources available for use with young children, as well as those that are appropriate for adult use. Finally, there is a section dedicated to acknowledging some of the questions and problems that have not been dealt with and the author's final thoughts on the project.
For Sarah, for being strong and finding your fire again.
For Heather, we miss you more every day.
For Timmy, for helping me and being an invaluable friend.
-E.R.

An Indian Prayer

Do not stand at my grave and weep.
    I am not there.
    I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
    I am the diamond glint on snow.
    I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
    I am the autumn rain.
When you awake in the morning hush,
    I am the swift uplifting rush
    Of birds circling in flight.
    I am the stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
    I am not there.
    I did not die.

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My Story: An Introduction

The topic of this thesis has brought quite a few different reactions from people when they find out what I’m doing. I do admit, it is a rather solemn and depressing topic. Surely I could have found something more upbeat and just as important for my final collegiate paper. Yet, that is not the way I look at this project. It’s not really just another paper. It has actually been a very important tool for me as I work through one of life’s hardest processes - the grieving process. Let me begin at the precise moment at which this topic began to become an obsession with me.

On a cold January morning in 1996, I received a phone call from my mother, who tearfully told me that my little sister’s best friend was killed in an awful car accident the night before. Heather was gone, at the age of eighteen and during the middle of her high school senior year. What did that mean to me? First, I was completely speechless and shocked. Then, as I sat there with the phone in my hand, it slowly registered that my sister, Sarah, was probably going through hell right now. She was a freshman at IU and was on campus at the time. Heather was four hours away! What would Sarah do? Was she alone? Was she finding a ride back home? Was she already on the road? Was she going to do something stupid out of rage or hurt? She’s a very smart girl, but she feels things very deeply. This had to be cutting through her with an unbelievable amount of pain. I can’t say that I knew Heather extremely well, but I will say that I knew in my heart that she was one of the most important people in Sarah’s life at the time. There wasn’t a vacation or weekend that I was at home that Heather wasn’t calling or stopping by to find Sarah. She was bright, cheery, and she was really good with our little brother. What about him?

The funeral was definitely one of the largest my small hometown has ever seen. You see, Heather wasn’t the only child lost that icy Friday night. Another friend of hers was also dead. Two young girls were dead, and another was in the hospital. There were
so many students that wanted to go to the funeral that the principal and families of the girls finally decided it would be best to hold the services in the school auditorium. It would be too dangerous to let all of these grief-stricken kids out on the icy roads. I was immediately relieved that the school officials were going to recognize the students’ needs to be involved. But, in the back of my mind I couldn’t help but wonder how hard it would be for many of them to walk by those auditorium doors or enter them again afterwards.

It really didn’t seem to matter what decisions were made at the time, though, because nothing anyone could say or do could take the dull, lost look out of Sarah’s eyes. She wasn’t the only one who was grieving, but she was the one person for whom I felt responsible. As a big sister I perceived it to be my job to help her. But help her do what? Make it all better? Bring Heather back? Wake her from this horrendous nightmare she was having? I wished it were that easy, because I felt completely helpless. Should I plan on calling Sarah all the time like Heather used to? “Used to.” Those words weren’t right. They had just spoken to each other a week ago! Would I spend my entire summer as a beach bum? That’s what the two of them were the summer before, when everything was still whole and intact. Bad luck has always had a way of finding my sister, but she has always been a free spirit, able to jump back, full of fire. That fire was gone and it was an incredibly scary feeling to think about and only begin to realize what she was feeling. The pain I was feeling was immense. I couldn’t make my mind stop wandering from one thing to another. I wasn’t even close to Heather. If this is what I was feeling, how could Sarah be handling what she was feeling? Why did this happen? What do I say? What could I do? What did she need?

Then I was left alone with my ten-year-old brother, who had adored Heather. Heather, on the other hand, never acted annoyed by his want of her attention. What was he thinking and feeling now? How was I supposed to make this better for him? Could I make it make sense? Would he understand that this was forever? Would he understand
that this wasn’t fair, but that this was the way that it was? I really don’t remember what it was that I said to him in those first few weeks. But, I do remember wondering to myself what I was going to say and do for him. I remember a lot of hugs and just holding him, or maybe he was holding me. He is a very insightful and sensitive little boy. He had dealt with death before, but this time it seemed so different. He seemed to understand when my great-uncle had died four years earlier. Our uncle had been sick, so it wasn’t an unexpected death, but it was still hard for everyone. Timmy never showed any signs of being fearful of getting sick and dying. I thought he had understood that everyone had a time to die. His question, and mine, was how could it already be Heather’s turn? She was still in school, still a kid. She wasn’t sick, she was healthy. All of his comments were correct. He left me thinking nonstop about all the things Heather would never get a chance to do. I was also left feeling very scared. I vividly remember Timmy saying that he was a little glad that Sarah was not at home that weekend because she might have been with Heather and would have died, too. Of course, Sarah saw it the other way. Had she been there, Heather would still be alive. Whatever way you look at it, his little comment hit me very hard somewhere deep inside. He was right! It wasn’t until a few months later that I realized that this is why I was so obsessed and worried about this death. It was too close to home. It could have very easily been my little sister in that truck. This pain could be so much worse and I’ve been so lucky not to have lost anyone as dear to me as Sarah has lost to her.

Then I went back to everyday life and attended one of my weekly classes for my Death and Dying colloquium. My next new emotion hit me during class. If I can’t even talk to my own brother about Heather’s death, what would I possibly say to my students if it was their classmate or loved one who was dead and now gone to them? Not only that, but I wasn’t even sure what I could say legally. Discussions with Sarah and Timmy on this topic had often lead to some religious and philosophical aspects. Is she in heaven yet? Or, is she part of nature now? Could I legally entertain these parts of the
discussions in the classroom? I knew they were sensitive areas for teachers. I also knew all about what I could do legally in the areas of behavior management and classroom management, but not concerning death education. I actually started to panic right there in class. I wasn’t prepared for this part of teaching!

I decided that this was what I would do my thesis on. I needed to know this stuff. I knew it would be hard to stay on such an emotional and at times depressing subject. Taking into account that the grief over Heather was still fresh and not even dealt with completely yet, I’m surprised I stuck with it. The guidelines and information that follow were composed through a lot of reading, a never-ending stream of tears, and many weeks of trying to find anything that would allow me to avoid thinking about or working on the project. I was able to learn a lot, both about the subject and about my own feelings and reactions to it. Not only has this paper been a learning tool for me intellectually and emotionally, but it has also provided me with a heightened social awareness of what most people need and look for when they have gone through what Sarah has gone through. She was fortunate to be given the opportunity by Heather’s parents to speak at the funeral. This activity was a great source of comfort and release for Sarah. She was able to constructively express her feelings both about Heather and to Heather. When she was alive, Heather lived by the words of one of her favorite quotes. Sarah spoke of that phrase and still refers to it often. It has meant a lot to me and I would like to share it with you.

"Don't walk in front of me... I may not follow. Don't walk behind me... I may not lead. Walk beside me - and just be my friend."

- Albert Camus

Remember these words as you approach children about the subject of death and as you read the following information. Children, just like adults, need a friend.
Someone to be there and share their loss. Teachers have that opportunity six hours a day, five days a week. I encourage you to take advantage of it.

Throughout the paper when I speak of children, a child, or a teacher, I am including both the male and female genders. In an effort to make the reading of this paper more fluent I will use only the female pronouns in these instances.
How Children Understand Death

Most individuals first encounter death during their childhood years (Dickinson, 1992). This initial experience may be with the death of a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a pet, or even a plant. Children of young ages often do not fully understand the concept and realities of death. The manner in which the death is handled, talked about, and grieved is of great importance for them. Children will react differently to death at different ages and each reaction will be unique to each child. Because death is a very important part of living, it is imperative that adults deal with it in a way that is appropriate for the child. One of the adults who will play a vital role in a child’s education of death is the classroom teacher. A teacher’s statements and answers to questions can have a major impact on the child’s perception of death. Therefore, before you, as a teacher, can begin to make plans for effectively teaching death education, it is necessary that you possess an understanding of how children of different ages actually perceive death.

Doctors and psychologists have identified three age groups of children who perceive death at different levels. The ages used are done simply to offer a guide or time frame. As you read through these three levels, keep in mind that all children are unique and that their age is not the only factor in determining the level of understanding. Remember to take into account any past experiences with death that the children have had, their family background, and their maturity level.

Children Ages Six and Under

Children in the first group are of preschool age and younger. Children as young as one and two may not understand the meaning of the word death, but they do react to loss. They are able to sense changes in the emotional atmosphere around them and the responses of significant others. The reactions of very young children to these sensed changes may include irritability, variations in crying or eating patterns, and bowel or
bladder disturbances (Grollman, 1990). Adah Maurer is an advocate of the view that even infants are already experimenting with the “pre-idea” of death. She suggests that by the age of three months infants have begun to experiment with the contrasting states of being and non-being as they engage in the game of peek-a-boo (cited in Grollman, 1967, p. 94).

Small children may also develop a strong fear of being abandoned. Dr. Lester Grinspoon noted that “fear of separation from parents begins about the age of one and may last until seven or eight” (cited in Grollman, 1990, p. 36). After a death has occurred, these young children may not want to go to school, sleep over at a friend’s house, or leave their parents for any reason. They have quickly associated dying with separation. Grollman (1990) noted that psychologist Maria Nagy researched children’s perceptions of death and found that preschool children have three recurring questions about death. These are: What is death? What makes people die? What happens to people when they die; where do they go? (p. 36).

Nagy found that preschool children will also have a difficult time believing that death is final (Grollman, 1967). Depending on which euphemisms are used to tell the children about death, they may simply view it as that the person is sleeping and will wake up or that they went away and will come back. Even when these euphemisms are not used, children of this age may still have a hard time grasping the finality of death because of what takes place in their daily life. They may hear older siblings tell ghost stories and they watch as cartoon characters continually rise again after being killed. For preschool children, death and life are interchangeable (Grollman, 1990).

Seibert, Drolet, and Fetro (1993) have found four developmental characteristics that affect children’s understanding of death between the later ages of the preschool years. First, children of these ages have a limited concept of time. They are unable to see death as final because anything longer than tomorrow is quite unreal to them. Second, their egocentricity does not allow them to see the world from someone else’s
point of view. This enables children to completely disregard a death that doesn’t touch their world directly. They often surprise adults with what appears to be a matter-of-fact acceptance of death. However, although they may be accepting the words, the words have no real meaning. On the other hand, they may also believe that inanimate objects are alive. This clouds their understanding of the physical differences between life and death. Fourth, by engaging in magical thinking they believe that they have the power to “fix” things. In other words, death is reversible and avoidable.

It is roughly in the age range from four to six that children often misinterpret superficial or irrelevant signals as being linked to death (Grollman, 1967). If someone they know dies while in the hospital, then it becomes necessary for everyone they love to stay away from the hospital in order to not die. These false associations, combined with the egocentricity aspect mentioned above, can also lead children to believe that they somehow caused a death. For example, a child misbehaves and later that night Daddy is killed in an automobile accident. The young child could come to the conclusion that she caused Daddy to die by being bad.

These feelings of guilt are not exclusive to young children. Adults also have difficulty when they experience a sense of guilt in similar situations. Guilt is a natural part of the grieving process and will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section. It is extremely important for you, as a teacher, to keep in mind that young children do not possess the cognitive ability to understand that the two events are not related.

**Children Ages Six Through Ten**

The second age group of children includes ages six through ten. Many changes may occur in children between the preschool and early school age years. Even though they do not fully understand all the implications of death, they have made some progress in their general understandings. For example, they are now able to differentiate between animate and inanimate objects. They continue, however, to believe that the clouds, wind,
stars, sun, and rivers are alive (Huntley, 1991). During these years, children gradually accept the idea that death is final. Huntley (1991) explains that they “may accept the facts that someone died and death is final, but they do not fully understand that death must happen to everyone, including themselves” (p. 15). Kastenbaum, however, believes that “many six- and seven-year-olds seem to suspect that their parents will die some day, and that the same fate might be in store for them” (cited in Grollman, 1967, p. 102). They may associate death with burglars, witches, and monsters. They may also seem to think that violence is the only way that death occurs. This is a major cause of the predominant fear of bodily injury during this stage. Huntley (1991) notes that “death anxiety is greatest during this period” (p. 16). According to Seibert et al. (1993), children in this stage are also very interested in the physical details of death. They have a million questions for adults. “They want to know about the causes of death, the rituals associated with death and the physical aspects like coffins, tombstones, and funeral homes” (p. 37).

**Children Ages Ten Through Twelve**

The third age group of children are those between the ages of ten and twelve. Children of these ages are beginning to make the transition to a more adult concept of death. Seibert et al. (1993) concluded that “by the end of these years, many have reached an adult-like understanding of death” (p. 17). As they reach this adult understanding they realize that death is final and that it is a process operating within each of us. In other words, death is internal and universal (Lonetto, 1980, p. 134). Children have now concluded that the wind, sun, and stars are not alive even though they move. Although they are beginning to gain experience with life and death, most early adolescents are better able to understand the facts surrounding the death of someone than they are the feelings. They are still very interested in the biological details of what has happened.
Huntley (1991) says this is also a time in which many children begin to experiment with ideas and theories.

Fears of suffocation gradually replace the fear of bodily injury that was predominate for them a few years earlier. Huntley (1991) notes that these children begin to think about their own death, which causes them to worry about pain and suffering. Children around the age of eleven will begin to use abstract symbols in their drawings. These may include broken hearts, tears, or barren trees as symbols of lifelessness, loneliness, and sadness that death leaves behind.

Lonetto (1980) concluded from his research that “the common concerns shown across the age groups are seen in children’s expressed awareness of self-mortality, in their distinct fears of death, in their interests in the rituals of burial, and in their feelings about the inevitability of death. Yet, despite their new complex understandings and emerging beliefs in self-mortality, these children still see death as taking place far in the future and it continues to remain in the domain of the ages” (Lonetto, 1980, p. 57).
**Stages of the Grieving Process**

"Sorrow makes us all children again."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

This statement by Emerson could not be put any better. Sorrow is a very powerful and strong emotion. It is an emotion that can be very hard to understand and cope with. It has the ability to make the most confident and secure of adults feel as helpless and frightened as a small child might feel. Children often find themselves in situations in which they don’t possess a lot of control. They rely on parental figures to take care of and provide for them. The hopelessness, helplessness, and instability that accompany sorrow may leave adults feeling as if they, too, have no control anymore. Grief is one area where there really are no differences between children and adults. Children experience the same range and stages of grief that adults do. As both work through the process of grieving, they may express emotions that seem out of the ordinary. They may exhibit behaviors that seem unacceptable or weak. They may be referred to, or refer to themselves, as having a break down. Don’t encourage this incorrect terminology. People do not “break down.” Old cars and computers break down. People grieve. Don’t forget that as you read through the process of grieving.

The following steps of the grieving process have all been commonly identified by many experts and doctors and are not arranged in any set order. Many people experience them in a similar progression to the order found below. However, all individuals will grieve in their own way and at their own pace. They may move quickly through one stage and take months or years on another. They may also be dealing with two stages simultaneously. The most important thing that a teacher can do for a grieving child is to be familiar with these stages and look for them as the child’s behavior changes. While it should remain policy that a child is held accountable for her actions, it should also be put into practice that she should not be punished for feelings that are a natural part of the grieving process. Be patient and understanding, yet firm and consistent.
Denial and Shock. According to Grollman (1990), “Denial is a natural reaction to loss and takes many forms (p. 47). Death often comes as a surprise and shock to people. The information and reality of the loss may be too great for them to deal with at the time. Denial offers an instant relief from that pain. Grollman (1990) cites an incident in which he observed a young girl receive the news of her father’s death. She made the comment “Oh,” and preceded to ask for permission to play outside. He immediately thought the child to be unloving and uncaring. However, he went on to say that “it wasn’t until later that I realized that the impact of death does not immediately penetrate the minds and hearts of survivors. For example, a most difficult time for bereaved people of all ages is not at the time of death, when they are surrounded by friends and family - it is months and even years later when they are able to realize the full impact of being alone” (p. 48). As an educator, be prepared for statements similar to the following.

“I can’t believe it. He can’t be dead!”
“My mommy didn’t really die. She’s coming back!”
“When my brother comes back, he’s going to teach me how to catch.”

It is important that you continually tell the child the reality of the situation. Don’t give her any more reason to believe in her denial. In a gentle way, remind her that Mommy is not coming back, but you can see that she misses her mother very much. Don’t reprimand the child for this denial, but don’t give into her statements either.

Panic. One of the characteristics of a young child is egocentricity. This self-orientation often leads her to worry about her own needs after the death of a loved one. The amount and degree of worry depends on the previous relationship with the deceased, but “is particularly high for a child who has lost a parent” (Huntley, 1991,
When it is a parent who has died, it is not uncommon for the child to ask who will take care of her when the other parent dies. Questions from a child during this stage may include:

*What is going to happen to me?*
*Will you die, too?*
*Am I going to die now, too?*

When a child is experiencing the panic stage, it is very important that everyone around her, including the teacher, assures her that she will be taken care of by someone who loves her. Reassure her that you don’t think that she, or you, will die for a long time.

**Anger.** Like adults, it is very natural for children to feel very angry either about the death of a loved one, or even at the deceased. This anger may stem from a feeling of abandonment, disappointment, or helplessness. For a classroom teacher, this anger may require some direct intervention. According to Huntley (1991), “children usually direct anger outwardly. A child may express anger at a dead parent for leaving when he needed him most. This is especially true when the child perceives that the deceased had a choice in his or her death. Children may also direct their anger at the doctor or God, placing blame for not doing enough to save the loved one” (pp. 27-28). Many times this anger will be expressed indirectly while at school. It should be the teacher’s responsibility to accept and understand the child’s anger, while helping her to figure out ways to appropriately express it. Explore this confusing feeling with her and make sure she knows that it is an OK feeling to have. Be prepared for statements or questions such as the following:

*I hate my brother for dying and leaving me all alone!*

*Why did the doctor let my mommy die?*

*I’m never going to think about him again. He’s the one who left me!*
Guilt. “If only...” are two words that may come out of a child’s mouth after the death of a loved one. Once again, because of her egocentricity and her tendency to create false associations, a young child will easily see the death as being her fault in one way or another. Poor timing may also contribute to these feelings. Huntley (1991) tells the story of a thirteen-year-old, Mary, who had a bad relationship with her father before he was killed on the job. Before he left for work on the day of his death, they had been involved in a big fight over something trivial. “Mary said, ‘I told him I hated him and wished he wasn’t my dad. And then he died. I feel so guilty.’ Mary knew that her angry words did not cause her father’s death, and yet at some level she felt responsible for the accident. ‘If only I had told him that I loved him. I feel so bad that I yelled at him’” (p. 28).

A child will desire to change the past in an effort to correct a “bad thing” that she did to cause the death. Continually reinforce the fact that she was in no way responsible for the death. Talk about and explore her feelings when these thoughts are conveyed to you in the classroom. Don’t ever ignore or agree with a child about this incorrect way of thinking.

Regression. The death of a loved or cherished one will cause great disruption to the child’s routine. She may be overwhelmed by the loss of security in her world. Without the ability to cope, a child may regress to behaviors that were until recently considered just part of the past. Bed wetting, increased dependence on adults, and uncertainty may exhibit themselves in a child who had previously already given up these characteristics. Fantasy may become very real for this child. Increased support is very crucial at this time. In an effort to restore some security to a child’s world, try to follow the normal routine as close as possible. “Do your best to avoid changes that will increase stress” (Huntley, 1991, p. 29). If it is necessary to make changes in the school schedule, take the
time to talk about and explain the changes ahead of time. The last thing a child needs is another surprise.

**Bodily Distress and Anxiety.** A young child may also experience some symptoms similar to those of the deceased at the time of death. This could be for a couple of reasons. "The child may be seeking additional attention, or she may be confused and frightened about death and fear she may die, also" (Huntley, 1991, p. 29). If a parent or family member has not filled you in on details and reasons behind the child’s "illness," talk to the child and try to gain an understanding of why she is experiencing these symptoms. Reassure her that you love her no matter what and that you always will. Clarify the medical terms that may be confusing her. Make sure that she understands the difference between a common cold and a chronic illness that may lead to death. Always keep in mind that she may be in a level of understanding that prevents her from making clear separations between incidents. Think like a child. "Daddy was sick and died, and now I’m sick and will probably die too!" Don’t let a child go on with this kind of scary thought.

**Clinging or Replacement.** Separation anxiety is often expressed by a young child in the form of clinging. A child in this stage may not want to come to school and have to leave family at home. Or, if the death that occurred was one of a classmate, the child may not want to leave school or be separated at any time during the day from a classmate or the teacher. Explain the reasons that caused the death (body was not working well) and reassure the child that you do not anticipate anyone else dying for a very long time. If it is a parent or guardian from whom the child is afraid to be separated, help the adult explain to the child where it is that s/he will be during the day. Allow the child a source of security by letting her know that a parent can be reached by telephone throughout the day if necessary. Then, do your best to follow through with this request if the child needs
a reassurance of someone's well-being. After a while, the child should begin to regain a sense of security and not cling as much.

According to Huntley (1991), "a bereaved child might also try to replace the deceased by seeking the affection of another person (p. 30). It may very well be that you, the teacher, may become that needed substitute. Do what you can to assure the child that no one will ever be able to replace the deceased, but that you will do what you can to help her as she needs it.

**Preoccupation with the Deceased.** A young child going through bereavement, just like an adult, may find herself continually dwelling on and preoccupied with the deceased. Even as a young adult, I went through this stage after Heather died. I could find a way to relate anything to Heather. This was especially true once I moved back home and had no choice but to drive by the scene of the accident on a daily basis. This preoccupation may also follow the loss suffered by a move or divorce. Maybe Dad isn't there all the time to fix things or make dinner like he used to. It could also be that things have become a little strained or harder at home in these situations and it is showing itself in the classroom. A child will also find that it seems like there is no way to escape the memories. Remember that the child's world will be completely turned upside down if it was a parent or primary guardian who died. The change in routine alone will be cause for hundreds of reminders every day. Teachers may hear things like:

*I remember when we used to...
My mom always used to make my lunch and put in...
That's where Robbie sat and....*

Keep in mind that a child in this stage may want to get away from all the reminders. However, she does not always have that degree of control in being able to get away. Let her know that it is OK and normal to remember the deceased. Running away
will not make it hurt any less. Instead, provide her with opportunities to share her feelings and memories in a safe and comfortable environment.

Hyperactivity. A child going through the bereavement process may also become hyperactive and unfocused throughout the day. This may also include disruptive behaviors such as incessant giggling or talking. Understand that she may be trying to deal with the death and need help doing so. Take extra care to plan structured activities for the child and let her know that you realize it is a difficult time for her, but you will be helping her through it.

Shortened Attention Span. Paying attention may become very difficult for a bereaved child. Her mind will wonder often, many times settling on thoughts of the deceased and the past. Ease up on expectations for this student during that time. Understand that this is a stage in the grieving process and that is will hopefully pass if dealt with correctly by adults. Let the child know that you understand that it is difficult right now for her to concentrate on her schoolwork, but that it will get better. Always ask yourself, “Is the world going to end tomorrow if Jesse doesn’t turn in all of his assignments over the next few weeks?” Put yourself in the child’s place. If you just lost your mom, dad, best friend, etc., would you feel like solving math problems and writing sentences?

Withdrawal. Once hurt badly, most people have the tendency to become protective of themselves and try to avoid at all costs ever being hurt like that again. According to Huntley (1991), a grieving child may withdraw from the people she loves as a way to prevent from being hurt again when these people die, too (p. 31). She suggests exploring these fears and acknowledging “that there is always a possibility that someone will die sooner than expected, but being able to know and love the person is worth the risk”
Help the child see that she is lucky to have all the other people who love her still here. Encourage her to let this support team help her. Do not ignore this withdrawal in the classroom.

**Assumption of Mannerisms of the Deceased.** In an attempt to remember and bring the deceased back to life as much as possible, a young child may assume certain traits of that person. Statements like the following can serve as clues to a teacher:

*Didn’t I spell that word just like Kelley would have?*
*Look, I’m wearing my hair just like my aunt used to wear hers.*
*When I smile like this I look just like my dad.*

While a child may actually have some of the characteristics she is focused on, it is important for teachers and adults to emphasize to the child that these traits are not what make you love her. “It is the child’s own individual uniqueness that makes her dear to you” (Huntley, 1991, p. 32).

**Idealization of the Deceased.** Many times a child will only remember the good things about the person who has died. While it is nice and comforting to focus on the positive, it is not healthy to idealize anyone. The child may begin to set other people in her life up for perfect expectations that no one could ever fill. Don’t focus on the bad memories, but don’t let her deny that everybody has their faults and no one is perfect. We can love them anyway. This will also prevent the child from feeling that she needs to be perfect, like the deceased was in her mind.

**Jealousy.** According to Grollman (1990), it is also very possible that a child will experience feelings of jealousy around other people who have what she has just lost. A child who lost her mother may exhibit signs of jealousy during a field trip in which her classmates’ mothers have come along to chaperone. The signs of jealousy may range
from crying and feeling left out, to being mean and hateful towards those other students. As a teacher, try to plan for this type of reaction in similar situations. Is there someone special that the child would like to bring on the field trip? Would these mothers be willing to spend a little extra attention on that student to ensure that she does not feel left out? Talk it over with the child’s family and arrive at a decision together, if possible.

**Repressed Feelings Expressed Years Later.** The young child especially may be unable to grieve a loss at the time a death occurs. If her feelings and emotions are not dealt with at the time they will be triggered by something later on in the future that will send the child through the grieving process. As a teacher, it is important to be prepared and try to know the history of your students. Hopefully, if a significant death did occur and the child did not seem to grieve at the time, all of this information will be in her files for your guidance as you nurture her. Remember that each child will grieve differently and at different times. Be patient and understanding.
Common Reactions to Death

"An affliction of the heart may be physical as well as spiritual. Always it is the whole person who must be healed. For what hurts one part hurts the whole."

Alla Bozarth Campbell

Grief is often thought of as being an emotional experience. Although this is true, it is not complete. Children, as well as adults, experience grief through the physical, mental, and behavioral realms, also. As you study the lists provided below, keep in mind that all people react differently and that their reactions are not limited to what is below. The following lists were obtained from the VNA Hospice Home Care/VNA Mary E. Bartz Hospice Center of Porter County, Indiana.

Physical Reactions
- Deep Sighing
- Weakness and fatigue
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased blood pressure
- Increase in activity
- Decrease in activity
- Muscular tension
- Sleep disturbances
- Decreased resistance to illness
- Weight and appetite change
- Neglect of self
- Increased sensory awareness
- Increase in self care

Behavioral Reactions
- Searching for what was lost
- Detached from surroundings
- Disorientated to time and place
- Withdrawn from friends and activities
- Unable to concentrate
- Forgetful
- Blameful of others
- Apathetic regarding activities or future
- Preoccupied
- Crying
- Seeking solitude
- Finishing "unfinished business"
- Seeking and providing forgiveness
- Spontaneity
- Drop in academic performance

Emotional Reactions
- Numbness
- Confusion
- Euphoria
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Yearning
- Despair
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Feeling of being lost
- Anger
- Bitterness - vengefulness
- Peacefulness
- Spiritual connectedness
Areas of Death Education

There are two basic approaches to dealing with the topic of death in the classroom. You may choose not to address the topic until the children introduce it themselves. Or, you may decide to take a proactive approach and introduce the topic with a planned series of learning activities and lessons. The latter approach is the best way to introduce death so that it is non-threatening and less traumatic for the children. However, no matter which approach you decide to use, there are four major areas that should make up the whole of your death education curriculum. As you read through these, keep in mind the following points:

1. Each of these steps is just as important as the others, but you should not try to deal with all four at once.

2. Each of these steps needs to be taken with the children’s stages of development in mind.

The four areas identified by Seibert, Drolet, and Fetro (1993) are: Teaching Facts, Sharing Feelings, Sharing Beliefs, and Teaching Coping Skills. Their work is the basis of the information in the following four sections.

Area One: Teaching Facts

Knowing which facts to teach and how to teach them can cause great confusion and anxiety for many teachers. Much of what you will do will depend on the children’s readiness to understand facts. Aside from their cognitive development, it will be of great help to know and be familiar with their history and current daily experiences. When teaching the facts about death, you will find it useful to follow these suggestions:

✓ Identify the children’s level of understanding. In order to do this, look to the children’s recent experiences and the language they use to discuss the death event that
has taken place. Knowing and understanding children’s conceptual and cognitive development will be a crucial key to correctly identifying the level at which the children are at. If the children announce an event with little emotion and then quickly leave the topic, they may be in the three-to-five year stage. Children in the six-to-eight year stage may use great detail in describing and asking about physical details. Older students in the nine-year and older stage will generally contemplate what their own death and the activities following it will look like.

As you begin to teach the specific facts, remember that the facts don’t change for different children. However, what may vary is the amount of information given, the degree of detail released, and the language used with children at differing levels.

✓Tell the Truth. There is nothing worse that an adult can do to children than to lie to them about the death of loved ones. Children, just like adults, rely heavily on being able to trust the people who are significant in their lives. As a teacher and as an adult, how would you feel if you discovered that your principal had lied to you? Would you trust him as much? At all? You don’t want your students feeling the same way about you! The consequences of lying to your students can expand the boundaries of the topic at hand. If children realize that they can’t trust the information you give them about death and loss, they may begin to question other information you’ve given them. Maybe strangers aren’t really as dangerous as you make them out to be! Children always deserve to know the truth. As their educator and interpreter to the adult world, it is your job to decide how much they can handle at once. Children are stronger and more perceptive than we often give them credit for being. Shielding them from reality can produce serious repercussions in the future. As you work to determine the children’s level of understanding, it may be helpful to keep these following questions in mind:

*What do I see as the real question from the child’s point of view?*
*How much information and what degree of detail should be presented?*
*How can I present the information in a matter-of-fact, objective manner?*
Think Like a Child. Adults have the ability to think in terms that children are not capable of yet. We say things and use phrases that, when taken literally, may scare young children. "When adults engage in discussion of such abstract ideas as heaven and hell, children may jump to frightening conclusions. For example, angels are typically depicted with wings when they are associated with heaven. Young children may easily think, 'Since I don't know how to fly to heaven, I will have to go to that bad place - hell'" (Seibert et al., 1993, p. 53).

As educators we are already accustomed to keeping a guard on everything we say and choosing the most precise and meaningful words. This quality needs to be used at greater levels when dealing with the topic of death. In order to avoid unnecessary fear and confusion, it becomes essential for the classroom teacher "to remember the developmental abilities of children at different stages and try to look at things from their point of view" (Seibert et al, 1993, p. 53).

In my own personal experience, I have felt overwhelmed and frightened by the responsibility of explaining or simply addressing the subject of death with young children. What if I say the wrong thing? How much do they need me to say? What if I do more harm than good? Death has always seemed to be one of those taboo subjects. Even though I've read quite a bit and have been interacting with young children most of my life, I still get scared and stumble through some aspects of the discussion. I've been training myself to always stop and think about how something I'm about to say will sound to young children. Is it possible that they may misunderstand what I will say and become scared? Watch the children's reactions and expressions for cues as to how to further handle the conversation or situation. Always be ready to clarify. "Remember, there are no 'right' answers. No one knows exactly what to say, or when. Trust your heart, your intuition, and your relationship with the children" (Seibert et al. 1993, p. 53).
Avoid Judgment. The authors suggest that even though there are no right answers for teachers to give, there is most definitely a right attitude that a teacher should possess in order to be effective when handling this subject. "It’s important to be matter of fact, and to be objective when you present the facts" (p. 53). To some, the word objective may seem harsh and unfeeling, but it’s really not meant to be that way. Remember to never indulge in approval or disapproval. Don’t make a judgment about children’s beliefs or feelings. The job of the educator is only “to emphasize that individual variations exist and are determined by individual beliefs” (p. 54).

Use Appropriate Language. It’s very important to state things in a way that will enable children to understand clearly and avoid confusion. It may seem like it would be better to shield them from death’s severity by using euphemisms, but this will often create fear or apprehension in young children. Always think like a child when choosing your language. Would you want to go to sleep if you just witnessed the funeral of someone you were told was now “sleeping peacefully?” Would you feel left out if your father “took a trip to heaven” and didn’t take you along? These and any other euphemisms will usually be too abstract and have the ability to confuse and actually hinder children’s understanding of death and loss.

Area Two: Sharing Feelings

Feelings can be a very scary word for some adults. To talk to children about how they feel about death and loss can be extremely difficult for even the most comfortable of teachers. You may find yourself wondering how children actually feel about the subject. If you were fortunate enough not to have experienced a significant loss as a child, then it will be unlikely that you will recall how you felt on the subject when you were younger. So, how do you relate to children? How can you begin to help them understand a
concept that you yourself may still be struggling to grasp? The following three guidelines should help answer these questions.

✓ **Acknowledge, Explore, and Accept Feelings.** Acknowledgment of children’s feelings may be a very difficult task for an adult to handle. We often tend to respond to children who are sad or hurt by trying to “make it all better.” This was my first instinct regarding Timmy and Sarah after Heather died. We can also be guilty of ignoring their feelings altogether or getting too involved. To simply acknowledge a children’s sadness or pain is to say, “I can see (or hear) how sad you are. I get sad, too. It’s OK to be sad” (Seibert et al., p. 55). It’s not necessary to “solve” their feelings. Acknowledging their feelings empowers children to explore their feelings further. This empowerment is a supportive act that will help children tremendously. Don’t you feel better when you’ve had a chance to get things off your chest? Isn’t it comforting to know that someone else knows and cares about your feelings? Once you as the teacher have clearly acknowledged how your students are feeling, you are free to explore and work with these feelings together.

✓ **Create an Open Atmosphere.** It’s extremely important to create an environment that is conducive to sharing. The children need to feel that they will be listened to, comforted, and that everything they say will be accepted at face value. The atmosphere can only be “open” if it is understood that the teacher’s feelings will be discussed, also. Although this may be uncomfortable for you at first, it will become easier after a while. Remember, in order for you to be able to accept and be comfortable talking to children about their feelings, you need to have already done the same with your own. Once again, you are a role model, this time for expressing and sharing feelings. Seeing that someone they admire or look up to has the same feelings as they do will help the students know that their feelings are OK and normal. Even if you express feelings that are different
from theirs, it still gives them a new way to look at things, or at least a security in knowing that not everyone will always harbor the same feelings about a particular topic or situation.

When discussing or addressing feelings at any time in the classroom, remember above all, that you need to accept them as they are. There are no right answers for adults or children when it comes to grief. There is, however, one exception to this rule: If any of the children express any signs of feeling responsible for a natural loss or death, make sure you reassure them that "it is not your fault!"

✓ Be a Role Model. Educators are role models for everything they do in the classroom, and often even for things they do outside of it, too. It has already been mentioned and explained that words are an important tool for teachers. Yet, sometimes it is not enough to just use words. Sometimes the right words can't be found. In these instances it is important for teachers to model appropriate physical gestures that may offer comfort to a child (or classmate) who is saddened. Never underestimate the power of touch, yet always remember that the degree and type of touch will depend on the relationship between the two people involved. Trust your instincts. If you instinctively start to give a hug, don't pull back in fear or worry that this is not what the child needs. You must have sensed or saw something that compelled you to offer a hug. Give it supportively!

Area Three: Sharing Beliefs

Discussions of and sharing beliefs is much like sharing feelings. There are a wide variety of beliefs that need to be acknowledged, respected, explored, accepted and discussed. This aspect is very diverse and may seem taboo to many educators. Can it be done in a way that allows you to effectively help the children understand, while not stepping on anyone's toes? The following guidelines will help you to accomplish this task.
Different Roles of Parents and Teachers. Whereas feelings and facts are fairly universal, sharing beliefs is an area where teachers will find themselves in a role quite different from the parent’s role. Parents are free to discuss their family’s specific personal beliefs and religion. It is a teacher’s job to present to the children a variety of beliefs held within the community, country, or world. They must do this without showing favoritism for any particular belief.

With the new push for multiculturalism in today’s schools, most teachers will hopefully have already taken the responsibility of presenting a balanced view of beliefs. It is critical for teachers to use this approach when dealing with death and loss. They should be aware of the different beliefs present in the community and pay special attention to those represented by the students in their classroom. Children will become angry and confused if their beliefs are not recognized or included in the classroom discussions.

Small Steps, Open Atmosphere. Explore children’s beliefs in small steps. Don’t try to find out everything at once. Take it easy and move at the children’s pace. Just as with sharing feelings, it is essential to create an open atmosphere when discussing death. If presented in a natural, comfortable way in the classroom, death will be perceived by students as a natural part of life. If you whisper and act uptight or scared by the topic, then children will begin to feel that death and dying are “off-limit” subjects and stop asking questions and begin to feel uncomfortable.

Young children are very perceptive. They can sense tension and stress in an adult’s voice. This becomes an automatic shut down for the students. When your voice is natural and your mannerisms appear comfortable, children will feel that it is OK to ask questions. This will also help them to feel comfortable expressing their own theories on death. When they do share, remember that it is not your place to judge. Denying
children’s beliefs reduces their self-esteem and cuts them off from exploring their thoughts and feelings. They can’t grow unless they can practice and explore. It is your responsibility to be a facilitator.

✓ Acknowledge the Importance of Death. Loss of any kind is important. Whether the person we loved has died, moved away, or simply stopped spending time with us, it is an important loss and change in the relationship. Trying to shield our children from the difficult situations and feelings that accompany a loss will often only cause more pain for them. Their feelings and beliefs are just as important as the loss. We may not want to talk about the loved one we’ve just lost because it is too painful, but we need to let the children know that it is OK to talk about them. If a classmate dies or moves away, we don’t want the rest of the children to think that we won’t, or don’t, miss the child. Talk about the child and let the class ask questions. The experiences they have with grief and loss, no matter how painful, will help them with life’s future experiences.

Area Four: Teaching Coping Skills

The final area that needs to be addressed when teaching about loss and death is coping skills. Keep in mind two key elements when handling this area: involvement and memories. Children experience the same range of feelings concerning loss and death that adults experience. Both of these elements are helpful as coping mechanisms for children and adults.

✓ Involve Children in Activities. Many people feel a sense of helplessness or loss of control when they lose someone they love. This makes sense, of course, because most often there is nothing they can do to replace their loss or prevent it from occurring. These feelings of hopelessness are many times associated with depression and sadness. One of the best ways to counteract these feelings is to take action. Do something!
As teachers, we know that the best way to help children through the transition of starting a new school is to get them involved in activities. We help them make new friends and feel included. This involvement increases their self-esteem and helps to ease the pain of the loss suffered because of the move. The same rule applies for children who have experienced a loss through death. Once again, we are the role models for our feelings and the actions we take to deal with them. We have to involve them in the events leading up to and following the death. The appropriate activities that may be utilized by an educator all depend on the circumstances of the situation and who it is that has died. It is never the teacher’s place to intrude on a family. However, it is her job to help the children while at school and out-of-school if the help is requested. The closer the loss is to the classroom, the greater involvement a teacher has in helping children. Children are able to make cards and flower decorations, prepare and deliver food, make a memorial notebook or picture, and even help decide on some of the specific funeral arrangements. To many children it won’t matter how tiny the involvement is, just as long as they are being included and have something to focus on.

Remember to always think in terms of children’s developmental levels when planning activities to offer. You should never force children to participate, but always offer the opportunity. When they are ready, they will take you up on the offer. Make sure to tell them your plans, why you are doing what it is you’re doing, and how it makes you feel. Even if you did not know the deceased, you are still grieving with the child. Show them you care.

If it is a classmate who has died, the teacher has a greater role to play in planning activities. She now has an entire classroom of children to help through the grieving process, plus get through it herself. Keeping in mind the developmental levels of her students, she must decide if it would be beneficial (and possible) to take them to the funeral. Or, would it be better to have a private service or ceremony at school. When dealing with elementary age students, it is most likely that the latter decision will be most
appropriate. Once the decision is made, however, let the students help you with as many of the details as possible. Remember, this is for them, as well as for you.

No matter what decisions and plans are made, always ensure that you have enough adult support. It would be too much for one adult to try to comfort and talk to twenty children during a ceremony. Seek additional support through the guidance counselors, school nurse, principal, school staff, and other teachers. You may also be able to use other parents as a source of support.

Always keep in mind that you do not have to sit around and wait for a tragic death or loss to occur in order to teach these skills. Planned activities can also be beneficial for the children. They won’t have the influence or impact that a real situation would have, but they can help prepare the children for when such a loss really takes place.

✓ Use of Memories. As adults we have the ability to set our memories aside until we are able and ready to cope with them. Children cannot and should not do this. They need their memories right with them to help with a loss. When children lose someone who loved and cared for them, they may feel as if that love and care are gone completely. Keeping memories alive will help them understand that feelings don’t disappear. Grandma may not be able to hug, kiss, bake cookies, or play games with them anymore, but they are still loved and will be cared for.

Even unpleasant memories will help children deal with a loss. Regardless of the nature of the relationship and experiences with the deceased, that relation has now been changed and it will affect children. Do not ever tell children that a relationship with the deceased is over. It is not over. They still have memories and through those memories may “interact” with the deceased.

Another point to consider when thinking of negative experiences is how the children will perceive your reactions. If someone who was very unpleasant and mean dies, and no one talks about him/her at all, then the children may transfer that
consequence to their own pending death. "Michael was bad before he died and now nobody ever talks about him. Is that what will happen when I die? Won't anyone remember me?" These thoughts may also arise even if the deceased was someone well-liked and pleasant. Not talking about memories may also lead the children to believe that death, as well as life, are insignificant. After all, it doesn't seem very important if it's never discussed or remembered.

Using memories as a coping skill for death and loss will help the children’s self-esteem. They may continue to feel good about themselves and the deceased by remembering past experiences. Memories will also help to fill the empty spaces or void that is left by the death of a loved one or friend. Memories have become the basis for the relationship to continue.
Specific Loss Situations

Parental Death

Losing a parent is one of the hardest things a child will probably ever have to go through. It is a loss that completely changes and turns a child’s world upside down. A certain sense of security is lost when a parent dies. For a young child this loss means the loss of the attention and love that was once received from the deceased. According to Grollman (1995), “the manner in which a child copes with this devastating loss depends a great deal on the surviving parent or guardian” (p. 12). If a surviving parent tries to act like nothing is unchanged or different, a child will become confused because she knows that things are changed and very different now. If a parent becomes very hostile and angry all the time, a child may mimic these reactions as a way to cope with the loss and the anger. When a parent grieves openly and continues to give love and support as always, then the child will gain the knowledge and confidence they need to deal with their grief (Grollman, 1995).

Bertoia and Allan (1988) point out that the circumstances of a parent’s death will also play a big role in how the child is able to cope. “Where the parent has a terminal illness and the child is aware of the declining health, there is an opportunity to assist with anticipatory grieving. The emotions experienced because of bits of information overheard at home will be powerful just from anticipating what the loss will be like” (pp. 34-35). They go on to explain how giving a child explanations and information in these situations can help to keep the child’s levels of anxiety and fear to a minimum. This type of death also allows the opportunity for some quality time with the parent before death.

If a parent dies suddenly, then immediate support will be needed for the child upon her return to school. This is most often the job of the counselor, but it falls upon the shoulders of the teacher, too. “Class discussions may be helpful if the bereaved child is being isolated or rejected because of the death. Other children will be experiencing
fear, and without some information, may think such a loss will happen to them” (Bertoia et al., 1988, p. 35). Remember not to ignore the death and situation. Many children will need help grieving and saying good-bye. Activities such as talking, writing letters, or drawing pictures may help children work through some of their thoughts and feelings.

It is imperative that you as a teacher keep in contact with the surviving parent or guardian for the welfare of the child. You need to have an idea of what is going on at home just as the parent needs to know what is going on at school. During my substitute teaching experiences I came across a six-year-old child whose father had died two weeks before. The teacher forgot to warn me of the situation and I did not find out about the death until the little girl, Megan, raised her hand and announced that she missed her dad. I replied that “it is sad when we miss people we love. I miss my mom and dad sometimes, too. Would it help you feel better if you had a hug?” As I made my way through the group of children on the floor to get to her, many of the other children announced that Megan’s dad had died. Red alert! Oh, no! What do I say now? Well, I really didn’t have time to think about it. I continued on with my hug and told Megan that I would love to talk to her about her dad if she wanted to talk. She did. I explained that I first had to tell the others what they should begin working on and then we could go anywhere in the room to talk. She wanted to sit by herself until then so I let her go.

During our ten minute conversation it became clear that her dad had died of cancer and it had been a long process. Megan was able to tell me many things about cancer and chemotherapy and dying. I was relieved to see that she had been included and not left in the dark about her father’s illness. Upon talking to the teacher weeks later, I learned that both parents had come in for a special talk at the beginning of the school year to inform her of the situation and Megan’s reactions so far. This teacher said that they kept in contact regularly and tried to prevent any surprises from occurring for Megan at school or at home. Communication is the key!
Sibling Death

The fact is that a child is not supposed to die. She is to live a long life and grow into adulthood before death should become an issue. Unfortunately, this fact is not always the rule. When a child dies, the surviving siblings are left to witness their parents’ grief and pain. There is often a lack of support for these children because much of the focus is left for the parents. The death of a sibling can bring about fears of their own death. “If my brother can die, so can I.” Many younger siblings may also revert back to babyish behaviors in an attempt not to grow up and reach the age of the dead sibling at the time of death (Grollman, 1995).

As a teacher it is important not to perpetuate a child’s desire to make everything all better again by “replacing” the dead sibling. It will be hard for the parents to successfully do this because of their own pain and wishes. The surviving child needs some anchor where she is recognized for being her, not “Gina’s little sister.” Also, in the case of a sibling who is dying of a terminal illness, the child in your class may become a little neglected as all the parents’ time and energy is put into helping the sick child. Bertoia and Allan (1988) state, “As the focus stays on the sick child, the healthy sibling may begin to express concerns in a safe place such as school, where there will be no further burdening of parents (p. 36). Help the child as much as you can to still feel important and needed. Don’t let her idealize the dying or dead sibling, and don’t let her become quiet and withdrawn. Grollman (1995) brings up an important point for adults when he says that they “must be attuned to the ambiguity of children’s feelings - sadness over the loss of a companion and playmate, relief that a competitor is gone, anger over being left out, fear that they are now vulnerable to death (p. 13). Let the child know that all of these thoughts and feelings are normal and does not make her a bad person.
Grandparent Death

How the death of a grandparent affects a child depends largely on the relationship with that grandparent before death. If the child hardly knew the grandparent, then it is likely that the death will have little affect on the child. The more involved the grandparent was in the child’s life, the deeper the sorrow and greater the loss will be. In today’s world, there are more and more children whose primary care is provided by a grandparent. A child in this situation will probably go through what a child who has lost a parent goes through when the grandparent dies. Be ready to acknowledge this possibility. Grollman (1995) notes that “bystanders often misguidedly try to offer a child comfort by saying, ‘You’re so lucky. Your grandparent lived a long time’” (p. 14). This may give the child the impression that she should not mourn. Let her know that no matter how old the deceased was at the time of death, it is still OK to grieve.

Death of a Friend

When a friend dies, a child may go through the emotions of fear of her own death, or guilt that she in some way caused the death. Was there something that she could have done differently that would have prevented the death? If the child witnessed the death, such as in an accident, she will have difficulty returning to the scene. There are many ways that teachers and other adults can help ease a child through this pain. “In school, concerned adults can help children understand what has occurred by discussing the reason for the now empty chair. Drawing, writing, or dramatic play exercises can help them express their feelings. They may commemorate the event by dedicating the yearbook to, planting a tree, or placing a bookshelf in the school library in the student’s memory. Parents and teachers must remember that effective grief work is not done alone, that the only way out of grief is through it” (Grollman, 1995, p. 14).
Death of a Pet

The death of a pet is often the first experience that a child will have with death. The death of a classroom pet will cause its share of grief. Bertoia and Allan (1988) state that “this loss is an ideal opportunity to help children learn about death, to promote the understanding of what death involves, and to initiate discussions of death rituals and why society has them” (p. 37). Take advantage of these situations because they offer an avenue for teachers to deal with the subject in a non-threatening somewhat less painful way. Talking about the death of a pet will be a lot easier for a child than talking about the death of a family member or friend. Your students may need some extra attention for a day or two, or as memories are sparked throughout the year, but most interest will dwindle within a day or two. Grollman (1995) urges teachers and parents not to rush right out and replace the dead pet. “They need time to grieve before trying to form a new bond with another animal” (p. 14).

Death of a Terminally Ill Child in the Classroom

This will be one of the hardest situations a teacher will ever have to face and deal with. Watching a child die, whether she is your own child or your student is something that no parent or teacher should have to go through. What do you do when one of your students is dying? You remain strong and supportive for the child and keep things as normal as possible. Bertoia and Allan (1988) state that “for most very sick children, school is part of the normal, healthy world, and they are usually determined to continue in it as long as possible (p. 33). For the child who knows and understands that she will die, school work may be one of the few things she can still do successfully and it becomes extremely important. Help her keep this success.

There will be very difficult stages of the decease or treatment and it is important for the teacher and family to remain in contact. It should be up to the family to set the limits on what is told to their child’s classmates. Make sure that your guidance counselor
is deeply involved. You cannot and should not do this alone. Bertoia and Allan (1988) explain how to handle a child’s weakening condition. They say to allow necessary changes in work routines and assignments as the child’s condition requires them. Be flexible and understanding with prolonged absences and allow for partial days. When the point comes that the child needs to be homebound, the authors offer the suggestion of homebound teaching support. “Once a child is to remain out of school, try to establish weekly visits by small, rotating groups of children from the classroom” (p. 33).

“By including the child as part of the class throughout the treatment phase and during the course of the illness, the class as a whole can deal with the situation in a positive manner. Generally, class members will become very supportive of the child in class and protective on the playground” (Bertoia and Allan, 1988, p. 34). Help make this an academic learning situation as well as an emotional one. Both the child who is ill and the rest of the class will be interested in what is going on in the child’s body. Don’t leave them in the dark.

When the child dies, give the other children the opportunity to plan and carry out some memorial service activities. Allow them to write letters and express their feelings and grief as needed. If appropriate, have them correspond in some way with the deceased’s family. This may help the family as well as the children.
Teacher Do's

Now that you have an idea of how children understand death, of the stages of grief that they will go through, and of the components of death education, it is time to cover and recover the basic “do’s and don’ts” of handling the topic. Some of these were covered or mentioned during the discussions of the areas of death education and grief, but will be mentioned here again for reinforcement. Keep in mind that these are basic guidelines and should be considered separately for each individual situation and child.

Before I get started listing and explaining some of the “do’s,” I would like to share with you the story of a teacher I read during my research. This teacher’s article was published in the February 1995 issue of Teaching K-8. Pamela is a first grade whole language teacher in Massachusetts. As part of her daily curriculum she uses a daily story process, in which she often shares her life with the students as a way of promoting authentic writing. This would include writing about what her two sons and husband were doing. One year on the first day of Christmas break, her 16-year-old son was killed in a car accident. Upon returning to the classroom she received lots of support from her students. She says that “some people might think this was too much for 6-year-olds to handle, but it gave us all a better understanding of something many of them had already experienced at different levels. Almost all of them had lost a hamster, dog, guinea pig, or even a family member. They gave me strength. Eventually I was even able to laugh with them - something I thought I’d never do again” (p. 63). She then goes on to explain how she handled her son’s death in the classroom. She brought in pictures of her two boys and explained that one was alive and here on Earth and that the other was dead, but that his memory was in her heart. She then focused on the importance of memories and wrote on the board,

“When someone you loves becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure.”
Pamela always allowed the children to ask questions and cautioned them that there would be times that she would feel sad and that it was OK for her to cry. She writes of this aspect that “it was amazing how tactful the little ones could be. Their questions showed a sensitivity many adults don’t always display (p. 63).”

For this teacher it made more sense to continue to share her life with the students even after the tragic death of her son. She couldn’t hide from them the fact that he was dead no more than she could hide her emotions from them everyday. She became a role model for them on how to work through grief. They saw that it was OK to cry and that people in bereavement have good days and bad days, too. Don’t overlook the fact that they helped her just as much as she was helping them to learn about life. You would be amazed at how much children have to offer you. Remember her positive approach as you look over the following tips:

- **Do** take the word “death” off the taboo list. Use this word and “dead” and “died” when talking about the deceased.

- **Do** understand that all people mourn and grieve and that each child will do it in her own way and at her own pace.

- **Do** allow children to release their emotions. Let them call the emotions by their rightful names. “I am angry!” Offer and help them with devising appropriate outlets for the expression of these feelings.

- **Do** tell the truth. Children need to know as much of the real facts as they can handle at the time. Telling them falsehoods will only make it worse for them later. It may also destroy their trust and confidence in you.

- **Do** keep in contact with a child’s family throughout their difficult time and even months later. Remember that it is better to work together as a team for the child than to
go blindly into areas that you are unsure of. The family should be a source of great support and information that will enable you to better help the child. Encourage them to keep in contact with you on a regular basis.

Do take advantage of teachable moments. If a child finds a dead bird at recess, don’t ignore or reprimand the child for being interested and curious. Explain to the child that it is not a good idea to play with it because of germs, but do acknowledge her questions and comments.

Do remember and pay attention to the children’s level of understanding and match your explanations accordingly. The more developmentally appropriate the explanations are, the better understanding the children will have of the topic.

Do verify and clarify what it is you believe you have just told them. What may make sense in your mind may sound completely different to little ones’ ears. Don’t leave them with more misunderstandings and confusions than they already have.

Do be a good listener. Be supportive when listening to children and gaining information about situations, feelings, and thoughts.

Do be sensitive and caring as you communicate with them about this difficult subject. Act lovingly and supportively. Show your affections.

Do be careful of anything you might subtly “teach” them. If the classroom pet dies, do not rush right out and get another one. You don’t want your students to believe that it is always that easy and simple to replace a loved one who has died.

Do be aware, familiar, and comfortable with your own feelings and thoughts. You won’t be of much use to children if you are struggling with your own emotions.
Do encourage questions. Children need to ask questions in order to learn. If you answer them honestly and to the best of your ability, the information you give them will probably be far better than any answer they may incorrectly devise on their own.

Do be aware that a family’s religious and cultural beliefs determine what is appropriate for a child to hear about death. Even if these beliefs conflict with that of the teachers, it is still the teacher’s responsibility to respect and honor the parents’ wishes. I can’t stress enough how important it is for you to keep in contact and work closely with the family.

Do keep in mind that it is not unusual for school personnel to see recurrences of grief stages on or near anniversaries of a death, birthday, holiday, or special developmental event in a child’s life. Be understanding and supportive during these rough times.

Do be aware that there does come a point when a bereaved child may need professional help. Keep these characteristics in mind as you watch to make sure that the child’s grieving is healthy and natural. Osterweis and Townshend (1988) note that “reactions that persist or become extreme may indicate significant problems” (p. 22). They list these characteristics (p. 23):

- Persistent anxieties
- A desire to die
- Compulsive care-giving and self-reliance
- Exaggerated clinging to the surviving parent
- Apparent absence of grief
- Strong resistance to forming new attachments
- Compete absorption in daydreaming to the point of dysfunction
- Onset of antisocial acts such as stealing
- Extreme idealization or degrading of the dead parent or sibling
- Continued overactivity with aggressive and destructive outbursts
- Hope of reunion
- Persistent self-blame and guilt
- Over-identification with the deceased
- Continued overactivity with aggressive and destructive outbursts
Do encourage the expression of feelings. Model your feelings for your students. Let them know and feel secure in crying and expressing their anger appropriately. Bottled up feelings will only become destructive for the child.

Do encourage children to participate in the events that take place after a death has occurred. In the classroom this may often take form in the way of creating memorabilia about the deceased. Artwork, songs, journal entries, and discussions are all ways in which children can participate in honoring the deceased while at school. You may also be someone children look to when trying to decide whether or not to attend funeral services or visit the gravesite. Encourage them to do so and explain what it is they may be seeing. However, under any circumstances do not ever force or guilt children into going. It needs to be their decision to go.

Do try to maintain the normal routine for the children. If it is a classmate who has died, do not remove all of her things before the children come in the next day. That may send the message that the dead child is no longer of importance and should be forgotten. Try to keep the schedule the same for a while. The children will be dealing with a lot of stress and anxiety already. Give them the comfort of knowing what is to come next in the school routine. They should also be involved in taking care of the deceased student’s belongings as the time becomes appropriate.

Do be aware of and use available resources. Talk to your librarian and find books and films that you may share with the children. Involve the guidance counselor in your plans to help the child or children through bereavement. If you feel it necessary, seek the help of other professionals in the area of child bereavement and ask them to come in and speak with the class.

Do seek the support of other teachers and parents in your school. You may find that there are some individuals out there who could be of invaluable help to you.
• Do check around and see if you can find someone who has been through what the children are going through. Ask if this person is able and would be willing to help you help the students.

• Do keep the lines of communication open in the classroom. Hopefully, this will already be a part of your classroom environment. In that case, simply make sure that they remain open when the topic of death and loss come up.

• Do try to answer only what is being asked at the time. You want to be careful not to give the child more information than she is ready for or seeking. Huntley (1991) cites the example of a child who asks what will happen to Grandpa now that he has died. Instead of delving right into a detailed lecture of how the body will eventually decompose, ask the child a question like, “What do you think will happen to Grandpa?” Her answer will give you a better understanding of the direction in which she is headed.

• Do accept children’s feelings and reactions for what they are - real and normal. Acknowledge their feelings with sayings such as, “I can see that you are very saddened by the death of your hamster. I get sad sometimes, too.”

• Do set limits for children who are bereaved. Although they need understanding and some easing of the rules, they also need to know that they still have rules to follow. Accept the fact that their school work may suffer for a while, but do not let them get away with harming themselves, other students, or property.

• Do help them to understand what the other children may be trying to do to help them. Not only may it be difficult for the children who are not bereaving to express their feelings, it may also be hard for the bereaved child to understand what they are trying to do. Help them communicate with each other.
Do make sure that next year’s teacher is fully aware of the death and the child’s reactions to it up to that point. This will be important for her to know because the child will still be adjusting.

Do continue to always show your love and support. No matter how disruptive or distracted a child becomes, let them know that you still and will always care about them.
Teacher Don’ts

During my research for this particular aspect of the paper, I came across the documentation of an event that perfectly exemplifies my fears of not being prepared as a teacher on this subject. Hannelore Wass recounts the incident as it was reported to him by parents, involving their surviving daughter, Susie. This incident occurred at school some weeks after their son Jamie died. “Susie was in the first grade. One morning she stood before her classmates during ‘Show and Tell’ and told them quietly, ‘My brother Jamie died.’ The teacher was totally unprepared, and her response was silence. She pretended she had not heard and motioned to another child to come forward. But Susie was determined and repeated in a louder tone, ‘My brother Jamie died.’ Now, all the children had heard, and the teacher could no longer pretend. They looked expectantly at the teacher, then at Susie, then back at the teacher who was petrified. Susie demanded to be heard. She shouted the statement at her teacher who promptly came to life, for she was on familiar ground again, took the child by the hand, and said, ‘We do not shout in this classroom.’ She then walked Susie out of the room (cited in Papadatou, 1991, p. 18).

Although the teacher was not the only one to blame in this situation (the family should have notified the school), she was to blame for how she handled it. It is scary to think that I may have done the same thing in a similar situation. Granted, there are going to be times when we are made to face the issue of death when we least expect it. There will even be times when what we try to do to help the child fails to some degree. Don’t give up; let yourself react as a human being. If all else fails, just love the child. Remember this story and the list of following “don’ts” as you approach the subject.

- Don’t use euphemisms to explain death to children. Avoid using terms like gone away, eternal rest, sleeping, passed on, lost, left us, and gone on a trip. These terms can confuse children because they are not able to decipher exactly what they mean.
Don't use stories and fairy tales as a way of explaining or talking about death. This will only lead to more confusion and misunderstanding for the child.

Don't treat a child as though she is now a replacement for the deceased. If it was you who suffered the loss, don't tell your students that they are now like your dead child. They cannot replace a dead friend, sibling, or parent. It’s hard enough for a child to have to deal with the loss of a loved one, but to have to also deal with the feelings of replacing somebody else is just too much. Avoid phrases like “You remind me so much of...”

Don’t be afraid to express your own emotions and share your experiences with your students. As long as you keep the discussion on their level, they will learn from you as you learn from them.

Don’t forget to listen. This is one of your most valuable tools as an educator. Use it to its full potential.

Don’t give your students the impression or let them think that you have all the answers. Let them know that there just aren’t any right answers to some questions. They need to know that it is OK for adults not to have an answer. Be comfortable with saying “I don’t know.”

Don’t avoid the subject of death. It will become obvious to children that you are simply not acknowledging something that they can see. This will give them the idea that death is something only to be whispered about and not discussed.

Don’t tell them something they will need to unlearn later. This goes along with using euphemisms and making up stories. Don’t let children believe that a classmate moved away when she really died. This lie can devastate children, or adults, who later find out the truth.
• **Don’t** speak over the students’ heads or level of comprehension. You are there to help them learn, not confuse and frustrate them.

• **Don’t** discourage or punish your students for expressing the emotions of grief. As long as you possess the knowledge and understanding of how the grief process works, this should not be a problem. Continually monitor the child’s behavior and demeanor and be ready for what may come next.

• **Don’t** put off the education of death. If you’re given the opportunity to use a teachable moment or the death of an animal or plant that will not be as threatening to the students, then use it! The longer children go without being educated on the subject, the longer they have to come to their own conclusions, even if they are incorrect.
Children’s Books

Reading Level: Grades 2-3
This tale of a child’s determination to work through grief by expressing her feelings is a must for any classroom. Nadia’s favorite brother leaves on a journey, never to return. In time it becomes evident that the desert has taken his life. Nadia’s extreme anger helps her to realize she cannot keep her thoughts to herself. She begins to share her brother’s stories with others in an attempt to keep his memory alive. She helps the others also go on with their own lives.

Reading Level: Grades 2-3
This story begins with a mother telling her two daughters about the death of their grandfather, and that he will have a happy funeral. They don’t believe her at first, but she explains that when old age comes to someone who has lived a happy life, then they are not sorry to die. Done in a Chinese-American perspective, this book carefully looks at the sequencing of funeral traditions, the acceptance of tears, and the strength of memory. This book provides an insightful view of the funeral day as it is seen through the child’s eyes.

Reading Level: Grades 2-3
Christopher, a young school-age boy, is on a walk with his dog, Badger, when suddenly the pet is killed by a truck. When the boy realizes that the dog is dead, he is consumed with anger and aggression toward the truck driver. The boy tries to pretend it never happened, but still feels helpless and guilty. This book does a good job of affirming and supporting feelings.

Reading Level: Grade 3
This story shows the wonderful relationship between a boy and his grandma and great-grandma. When great-grandma dies, the boy can’t believe it at first. Then come the tears and questions. He seems to accept death’s permanency rather quickly, however. At the end, Tommy is shown as an adult who still remembers his beloved grandmothers, reinforcing the power of childhood memories.

Reading Level: Grades 2-3
The familiar question “What if?” is the basic theme in this simple book. A little girl talks to her mother about things that scare her, and her mother reassures her each time. Finally, the child asks, “But what if you die?” The mother once again reassures her, saying, “My love doesn’t die.” The trusting relationship is emphasized, and the child’s fears of harm and abandonment are lessened.
Reading Level: Grade 2
David’s grandfather speaks openly to David about death, but Grandpa does not realize that he is preparing David for his approaching death. The preparation is never complete, and David finds himself overcome with sorrow when Grandpa dies. However, David gradually returns to his normal routine of play with his friends. This book shows a very appropriate response to death for the age level.

Reading Level: Grade 3
All her life Molly has heard stories about how she seems to take after her grandpa, and as she grows so does their friendship. Grandpa tells her of death one day when they find a dead butterfly in the garden. The next day Grandpa becomes ill and goes to the hospital. When he dies, Molly feels empty, awful, and frightened. Later she is able to share the story of her grandpa and his funeral with school friends and family. A “Note to Parents” is included.

Reading Level: Grade 3
This book speaks clearly on the issues concerning why “grownups cry, too.” A young boy tells how he has come to understand the reason for, and value in, crying - no matter how old you may be. Two different concepts - that tears are only for children and physical pain - are explored in order to expand upon the many reasons for tears. Death is used as an example. This is a warm story with examples of familiar situations where it is OK to cry and see adults cry, too.

Reading Level: Grades 1-2
This book is dedicated to children who have experienced the death of a brother or sister. It further suggests that the children make their own books about questions and feelings concerning death. This story tells of a little boy’s struggle to define his little brother’s death until his parents begin to explain the facts and emotions involved. The book shares the universality of grief, allows for grieving time, and gives permission to play and share.

Reading Level: Grade 3
This deeply insightful book will benefit both children and adults as they read about how to acknowledge and cope with the stages of grief, denial, fear, anger, guilt, overprotection, and loneliness. Through personal examples the need of honesty and trust is closely examined. If we are willing to learn to accept each other’s feelings, we can continue to grow and live fuller, stronger lives.

Reading Level: Grade 2

A child’s love of a pet opens the story, followed by an explanation that pets can expressing normal feelings of loneliness, anger, and distress. Death is defined plainly and truthfully. The pet will not wake, eat, hear, or move any longer. Emphasis is placed on talking to someone you love about feelings and the fact that happy and sad times are a natural part of life.


Reading Level: Grades 3 and up

Written in the first person through the eyes of a young boy, this story explores a child’s perspective on the sudden death of a playmate. This boy’s best friend, Jamie, dies from a bee sting he gets while poking a stick into a bee hole. The emotional impact on the narrator is deeply significant, as he wonders why it had to happen and if he could have prevented it. He won’t eat until after the funeral because he feels that he needs to make things different, because they are not the same anymore. A discussion with an elderly neighbor helps him to realize that nothing can bring his friend back, and that some questions have no answers. He finally decides that his life must go on.


Reading Level: Grades 2-3

This story is about a young girl who has a close, loving relationship with her grandpa. He is with her when she finds the dead bird, and he talks to her about death. Later her grandpa becomes sick and is hospitalized. It is there that she sees him for the last time. The book talks about her feelings of fear, anger, and disappointment. Finally the child is able to reconcile the death, and makes plans to tell her little sister about their grandpa.


Reading Level: Grade 2

This book gives insight into the thoughts of a boy grieving the loss of his cat, Barney. The boy is able to remember the special things about his pet. Later the boy learns that in the ground everything changes, and he thinks about how Barney will change to help the flowers grow. The story is reassuring and it deals in an honest way with grief.


Reading Level: Grade 2

A school-age boy tells of his faithful dog, Elfie, in the first person. As the two grow up together, we hear about the habits, antics, and events that become familiar to anyone who has a great love for a pet. However, the vet tells the boy that the dog is getting old, and Elfie dies in her sleep. The boy grieves the loss with his whole family. There is little reading and the illustrations add a fresh,
light quality to a tear-provoking story. Focus is placed more on love, rather than on loss.

Reading Level: Grade 2
Lew is six-years-old when he wakes up from a pleasant dream about his grandfather who died four years before. Lew’s mother assumed that the young boy would have little memory of him, so she never told her son of the death. The child’s senses have helped him to recall a significant relationship and he is ready to resolve the separation. Lew’s mother also talks about her memories. This story exemplifies the value of honestly sharing memories in order to ease the pain of loss.
Films

These films should be previewed before using with students so that you know what is coming and can anticipate discussions.


*Emily, the Story of a Mouse* (Motion Picture). Briarcliff Manor, NY: Benchmark Films, Inc., 1975, 16mm, col., 5 min. Preschool/Primary.


*The Yearling* (Filmstrip). Wilmette, IL: Films, Inc., 1975, 3 rolls, b&w, 3 cassettes, teacher’s guide. Intermediate/Middle.
## SONGS OF LOSS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Performing Artist</th>
<th>Album Title</th>
<th>Type of Loss</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get Up and Go</td>
<td>Pete Seeger</td>
<td>Young vs. Old Weavers Together Again</td>
<td>Aging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hello In There</td>
<td>John Prine</td>
<td>Prime Prine</td>
<td>Aging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Old Friends</td>
<td>Simon &amp; Garfunkel</td>
<td>Bookends &amp; Greatest Hits</td>
<td>Aging</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Dutchman</td>
<td>Steve Goodman</td>
<td>Somebody Else's Troubles &amp; Unfinished Business</td>
<td>Aging/Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I'm Sixty-Four</td>
<td>The Beatles</td>
<td>Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band</td>
<td>Aging/Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cat's In the Cradle</td>
<td>Harry Chapin</td>
<td>Greatest Stories Live</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flowers Are Red</td>
<td>Harry Chapin</td>
<td>Greatest Stories Live</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child's Lament</td>
<td>Tom Rush</td>
<td>The Best of Tom Rush</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father and Son</td>
<td>Cat Stevens</td>
<td>Greatest Hits</td>
<td>Childhood/Parental</td>
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<td>Forever Like the Rose</td>
<td>Seals &amp; Crofts</td>
<td>Taking It Easy</td>
<td>Death</td>
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<td>Fire and Rain</td>
<td>James Taylor</td>
<td>James Taylor</td>
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<td>Forest Lawn</td>
<td>John Denver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lullaby</td>
<td>Chuck Mangione</td>
<td>Children of Sanchez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gone, Gonna Rise Again</td>
<td>John McCutcheon</td>
<td>Gonna Rise Again and Sing the Good Earth</td>
<td>Death/Grandfather</td>
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<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Don McLean</td>
<td>American Pie</td>
<td>Death/Suicide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Richard Cory</td>
<td>Simon &amp; Garfunkel</td>
<td>Sounds of Silence</td>
<td>Death/Suicide</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Most Peculiar Man</td>
<td>Simon &amp; Garfunkel</td>
<td>Sounds of Silence</td>
<td>Death/Suicide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Song for Adam</td>
<td>Jackson Brown</td>
<td>Jackson Brown</td>
<td>Death/Suicide</td>
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<td>Song Title</td>
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<td>Circles</td>
<td>Harry Chapin</td>
<td><em>Sniper &amp; Other Love Songs &amp; Limelighters</em></td>
<td>Life Cycle</td>
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<td>Walk Like a Man</td>
<td>Bruce Springsteen</td>
<td><em>Tunnel of Love</em></td>
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<td>Sunrise, Sunset</td>
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<td><em>Fiddler on the Roof -- Musical</em></td>
<td>Life Cycle/Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turn, Turn, Turn</td>
<td>Pete Seeger</td>
<td><em>Bitter &amp; the Sweet &amp; Greatest Hits</em></td>
<td>Life Cycle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everything Must Change</td>
<td>Judy Collins</td>
<td><em>Bread and Roses</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Heard It Through the Grape Vine</td>
<td>Marvin Gaye</td>
<td><em>Big Chill Soundtrack</em></td>
<td>Love</td>
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<td>Always a Good-bye</td>
<td>Anne Murray</td>
<td><em>Let's Keep it that Way</em></td>
<td>Love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tears of the Lonely</td>
<td>Don Williams</td>
<td><em>Don Williams/Expressions</em></td>
<td>Love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love Hurts</td>
<td>Judy Collins</td>
<td><em>Bread and Roses</em></td>
<td>Love</td>
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<td>Hurts Like the Devil</td>
<td>Chris Williamson</td>
<td><em>The Changer and the Changed</em></td>
<td>Love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moving Again</td>
<td>Gemini</td>
<td><em>The Long Journey Called Home</em></td>
<td>Moving</td>
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<td>When All the Laughter Dies in Sorrow</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td><em>Chicago III</em></td>
<td>Nuclear Holocaust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thin Ice/Mother/Comfortable Numb</td>
<td>Pink Floyd</td>
<td><em>The Wall</em></td>
<td>Nuclear Holocaust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sam Stone</td>
<td>John Prine</td>
<td><em>Prime Prine</em></td>
<td>War</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agent Orange</td>
<td>Kate Wolf</td>
<td><em>Give Yourself to Love</em></td>
<td>War</td>
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<tr>
<td>I Can't Write Left-Handed</td>
<td>Bill Withers</td>
<td><em>Bill Withers Live</em></td>
<td>War</td>
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Adult Books


Final Thoughts

I sincerely hope that this paper will be of some use to you in your work with children and families. It actually turned out to be longer than I had anticipated, but it is still shorter than many of the great books out there on the subject. There are many areas and questions that I did not address. Some of these could have been separate papers by themselves. These include suicide, designing intervention plans for schools, and delving into more complex issues and relationships that may occur in the classroom. There are many books out there on these subjects for you to use.

This paper has offered me a chance to work through my grief. If written expression is going to work for me, then it will surely work for most children. I’ve learned that life goes on and that this pain of missing Heather will never truly go away because she is a part of my life and memories. Sarah and Timmy are doing well. Sarah still has her fire, although I don’t believe that it is quite as bright as it used to be. It is much easier for her to talk about Heather now and she is focused on her own life for now.

I can’t express to you, the reader, how much better I feel now that I have been educated on this topic. I feel more prepared for my teaching career and more comfortable when the subject arises in the classroom. I have been able to openly handle children’s questions about dead animals or people as I move from classroom to classroom while substitute teaching. I hope that this paper offers you some comfort and invaluable information as you also deal with this topic in your own life and classroom. Just keep in mind that there is much more to be dealt with than what is in this paper. Look for all the resources you can find.

I would like to address one last issue before ending this paper. Earlier in the paper I mentioned that Heather’s funeral service took place in the school auditorium. I also asked the question of whether or not this event would have any outstanding affect on the rest of the students as they had to face that place again the next day and for the rest of
the year. My sister wrote a lot of poetry as she dealt with her loss and pain. One of these expressed to me that she was affected by the place of the service. Keep in mind that all people handle things differently and at different paces. It took Sarah a few months to put these thoughts on paper and they may help you to understand how a child may think after the initial shock of a death has worn off.

School Day

What should lie behind a high school door?
Four long, fleeting years of all our development.
The Rites of Passage of healthy American kids
Very much alive.
Laughter, living, loving, and learning,
It is what should, and once did, lie behind the door.
That day I walked through the threshold
Of my old almamater
Into the nightmare that recurs
Those wonderful days of joy slipped behind a different picture.

In the middle of a school day-
A new class building those precious memories,
While the rest are slowly leveled.
The youngest eating and laughing at their lunch hour,
When all I can swallow is tears.

I sit. In the front row of the enormous, crowded auditorium
Staring numbly at the stage
Where Joe sang in Oklahoma
And Dad scowled as Scrooge.
But I cannot see them anymore
No brilliance, no acting, no art.
I see a man in black, and beside him
The picture that lives beneath my eyelids-
Two coffins, big, beautiful, bedecked with flowers
But the beauty lay within.

I sit as stiff as the seat that supports me, fixed on the right casket.
Solid as a stone, ready to shatter like glass, eyes dry.
Then the music began, the water broke.
My chest heaved to the soft strum of the guitar-
Her favorite songs, my favorite songs.
Lungs collapsing, eyes swelling, fists clenched.
The words cut like swords, this should never have happened.
As I make my way to the podium - I know not what I said-
I think of the last time I stood on that stage
To accept money for my future
But now to honor the passing of hers.
Is this what belongs inside the school door?
It is what lives there for me now.

Be strong. Now it is time to lay her to rest, my best friend.
Walking past the thousands of eyes that follow me
Down the hallway toward the door,
I leave that beloved, hateful place
With the clicking of the lock of the schoolhouse door.

-Sarah Rohe
References


