Approximately 2 million people die each year in the United States. If each individual death affects only five other people, there are close to 10 million people grieving a new death each year in this country (Walsh-Burke, 2006). Children who have lost a loved one through death can be in very difficult situations. While they are attempting to cope with the shock and confusion of a death, other family members who are themselves grieving often find it difficult to assist grieving children.

Although people can grieve any number of losses (for example, pets, favorite toys, relationships), for the purposes of this article, grief is defined as intense sorrow as the result of the permanent loss of a relationship through death. It is imperative that educators assist young children and their families with this crisis.

There are few opportunities for discussions on the topic in teacher preparation programs or during professional development trainings for in-service teachers. Thus, teachers may not feel adequately prepared to help children deal with grief (Steward, 1993). Consequently, when families are mourning a death, children may be left to deal with their emotional pain without benefit of a caring, supportive adult.

Although addressing issues of death, dying, and grief in early childhood programs may cause some educators to feel ill at ease, it is essential to remember one’s professional responsibilities to young children and families.

The reality is this: Children already know about death. Children encounter death often. Their awareness with death and dying may come from real-life and/or vicarious experiences. Whether their familiarity comes from video games, children’s literature, cartoons, feature films, while watching the evening news, or from personal experience in their very own homes and/or communities, one thing remains constant: Death is tangible.

Children encounter death often.

Tasks of Grieving Children and Families

Early childhood teachers are often the first and, in many instances, the only social service professionals to interact with children and families following the death of a loved one. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to understand that grief is very much an individual matter and each child will experience a unique grieving process. People’s personal journeys through grief are as unique as their fingerprints. No two children or families will grieve in the same way. Cultural practices and traditions vary...
greatly. Insights about them can help early childhood educators determine the most appropriate ways to respond.

Although the grieving process is individual, four universal tasks for grieving children have been identified (Fox, 1988):

- understanding
- grieving
- commemorating
- going on

**Understanding**

Adults recognize that their loved one is no longer alive. They understand death is permanent and the person is not coming back. Young children, who are just beginning to grasp these ideas, often seek answers to questions such as, “What happened?” “Why did she/he die?” “Did it hurt when they died?” “How did he/she look when they died?”

Without the benefit of supportive adults to address such questions, children fill in the gaps with their imaginations or replay images they may have seen in media to create their own versions of events. The ideas children create may well be far more disturbing than the truth.

Using direct, age-appropriate language to honestly answer questions children may pose can help children understand what has happened. This is one example of what a teacher might say in response to a tragic situation.

Child: “What happened to Cynthia?”
Teacher: “Cynthia’s family was in a car accident and she died.”
Child: “Why did Cynthia die?”
Teacher: “Cynthia’s body was hurt so badly her heart stopped working. When a person’s heart stops working they die.”

Child: “Will Cynthia wake up and come back to school?”
Teacher: “No. When a person dies she cannot wake up.”

**Grieving**

In this next stage, children work through their mourning and come to accept the reality of a death. Cornerstones of this task, all of which are extraordinarily challenging for young children to do, even with the support of a comforting adult, include:

- feeling the pain and sorrow of the loss
- adjusting to a world in which the deceased person no longer participates
- refocusing the emotional energy of mourning onto other relationships

**Commemorating**

Through formal or informal means, children can be helped to celebrate the life and legacy of the deceased by keeping their memory alive. Children may choose to draw or paint, sing songs, and/or offer flowers, toys, or trinkets to pay tribute to their loved one who has died.

**Going On**

Young children eventually, sometimes gradually, sometimes quickly, fully engage in life again. If the first tasks have been resolved, children understand they can continue with life and still remember the person who died. Children may find subtle or direct ways to seek permission from caretakers and family members that it is okay for them to go on with their own lives.

Joshua played T-ball for 2 years and his father always took him to practice. It was their special time together. After Joshua’s father died, his Uncle Eric offered to take him to T-ball practice. Joshua shook his head, saying, “Do you think Daddy will be mad if you take me?”

Two weeks following Angelica’s grandfather’s funeral, her best friend invited her to a birthday party. Angelica beamed but suddenly looked at her grandmother and said, “My papa died.”

**How Teachers Can Support Grieving Children**

Rando (1984) notes there are several factors that may impede a child’s grieving process:

- the parents’ inability to mourn;
- the adult caretaker’s inability to tolerate the child’s pain, so the child does not have “permission” to mourn;
- the lack of a caring and secure environment; and
- the absence of a caring adult who can stimulate and support the mourning process.

As young children negotiate through their grief, the teacher’s primary role is to console them and follow their leads.

- If children want to talk about their feelings, early childhood
educators can listen sensitively, with compassion and understanding. Words that acknowledge children’s pain, such as “It hurts so much,” “Crying is one way people show sorrow,” or “You really miss her,” are comforting. Gentle touching may also be appropriate in some cultures.

If children choose not to discuss the death, and instead want to play with their classmates as if nothing happened, the early childhood classroom serves as a nurturing environment that supports that choice as well.

Children’s feelings as they embark on their personal journeys with grief should take precedence over any expectations that adults have for how they should behave in response to the loss (Brodkin, 2004). Few early childhood educators are trained counselors or therapists. By firmly understanding their roles in assisting grieving children and families, early childhood educators can respond appropriately. Stokes (as cited in Black, 2005) offers a three-tiered model to support grieving children:

- **Tier 1** is support provided by teachers, school nurses, counselors, parents, friends, and others. Support is based on caring and friendship, but is not intended to be therapeutic.
- **Tier 2** is therapeutic intervention, which is provided by trained staff and volunteers who have expertise in grief counseling.
- **Tier 3** provides therapy for severely grief-impaired children by highly skilled clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and family therapists who specialize in grief counseling.

Proactive teaching strategies are offered here for supporting children before and during the grieving process by increasing children’s awareness of death and the dying process.

**Recognizing Complicated Grief**

When children exhibit a marked change in behaviors that persist over time, they may be experiencing “complicated grief.” Behaviors that may indicate children have complicated grieving include:

- lasting tendencies of aggression or withdrawing which were not typical for the child before the death;
- lasting changes in sleeping and eating patterns, and considerable loss of interest and/or performance in daily activities;
- sad moments lessening and being replaced with even darker moods (Brodkin, 2004).

Therapeutic intervention is appropriate for the treatment of complicated grief. With the awareness of a well-informed early childhood educator, the grieving child’s family can be referred to the most appropriate community services.

**Supporting All Children**

All young children will at some time experience a major loss. To help them better understand the cycle of life and develop some effective ways to cope with grief, teachers can embed the topic of dying and death in a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Several suggestions for doing so are offered here.

**Tailor the Curriculum to Children’s Development**

When planning and implementing each experience early childhood educators offer to young children, it is important to consider the children’s
developmental stages. The same is true with issues of death and dying. Christ (cited in Black, 2005) states that generally children age 5 and younger do not understand death is permanent and irreversible. It is common for children in this stage to:

- ask repeatedly when the deceased person is coming back,
- be frightened by adult’s grieving, and
- expect a replacement for the deceased.

Children ages 6 to 8 have begun to understand that death is permanent and, in some cases, may even assume blame and guilt for the death. They may think that their actions contributed to the death of a loved one.

Mariah and her sister Mariama had an argument over who would play with their new gaming system first. Mariah became angry and hit Mariama in the stomach. Two months later, when Mariama had an asthma attack and died, Mariah asked her parents if it was because she hit Mariama too hard.

While spending the weekend with his grandparents, Kevin broke his grandmother’s most prized vase when bouncing a ball in the living room. Grandma was very upset and yelled at Kevin for not following directions. Kevin had never seen his grandmother so upset. Months later, when she died of a heart attack, Kevin believed it was because he made his grandmother so angry she died.

Children in this stage of development may grieve through stories, pictures, and remembrances. Sensitive adults honor children’s wishes to keep these mementos of a loved one near at hand as a source of comfort.

Two avenues that connect the topics of death and dying within an early childhood curriculum are: (1) including death awareness in the curriculum and (2) integrating good books to support hurting children as they work through their grief.

Increase Awareness About Death

Teachers are encouraged to develop age- and culturally appropriate learning experiences that gently enable children to become more aware of death and the dying process. Goals of the curriculum, which could be generated with a great deal of input from the perspectives of diverse children’s families, might be to provide children:

- with everyday learning explorations, such as about plants and animals, that enable them to realize that death is a natural part of the life cycle;
- with learning experiences, such as reading books, which help them realize that grief is a natural response to loss;
- with opportunities to remember, validate, and commemorate the deaths that have affected them.

Corr (1984) advocates there are two distinct components of the curriculum: teachable moments and nurturing moments. As with all teachable moments, the early childhood educator uses experiences that occur naturally to engage children in discussions about death and dying. These may be experiences that directly impact children, such as the class hamster dying, or finding a dead bird in the sandbox. Additionally, valuable teachable moments may come from experiences that occur naturally to engage children in discussions about death and dying. These may be experiences that directly impact children, such as the class hamster dying, or finding a dead bird in the sandbox. Additionally, valuable teachable moments may come from experiences that occur naturally to engage children in discussions about death and dying. These may be experiences that directly impact children, such as the class hamster dying, or finding a dead bird in the sandbox. Additionally, valuable teachable moments may come from experiences that occur naturally to engage children in discussions about death and dying. These may be experiences that directly impact children, such as the class hamster dying, or finding a dead bird in the sandbox. Additionally, valuable teachable moments may come from experiences that occur naturally to engage children in discussions about death and dying. These may be experiences that directly impact children, such as the class hamster dying, or finding a dead bird in the sandbox.
concerns of students in any group may be concerning death and dying. What questions do they have? What fears are they experiencing? What are their understandings, misconceptions? When the interests of students frame their learning, deep meaning is assured.

Nurturing moments occur when children are “upset in such a way that they need an opportunity to vent and share their feelings and gain support from familiar people around them” (Gott, 1984, p. 52). The responsibility of the teacher is to acknowledge and validate the emotions that children express.

Offering children positive outlets to express strong emotions—such as dramatic play and role playing, unstructured play at sand or water tables, or listening to soothing music—provides children with strategies for coping with stress. If children’s needs are not acknowledged, the situation may only intensify their anxiety, confusion, or isolation. Ignoring their needs will certainly not change their reality.

Offer Grief-Related Early Literacy Experiences

Early childhood teachers know the power and comfort of reading and discussing good children’s books as a means of emotional support and sharing. Responding to literature can involve dramatic play, music, discussions, writing, and visual representations. Younger children often relate to texts with aesthetic responses such as sculpture and painting that encourage their personal expression and self-reflection (Lowe & Johnston, 2000).

Several children’s books explore the topic of death and grief. Eight exemplary children’s books for ages 3 to 8 that portray death, grief, healing, and commemorating the loss of a loved one are listed in Table 1. Read these books aloud with younger children and invite them to reflect on the ideas.

Encourage children’s personal responses to these books’ messages by providing paper, markers, yarn, glue, paper lunch bags, and other art supplies. Young children can be enabled to work through the four tasks of grief and healing through puppet making, drawing pictures or making collages, and remembering their loss in child-made books. Some children’s literature may also prompt children to engage in pretend play with suitable props such as blocks and dress-up clothing. Observe children’s questions and comments, and build on their learning with meaningful, engaging experiences.

Proactive Planning

Early childhood educators are often challenged when working with children and families who are grieving. However, situations that “Combine a child who has been...
kept ignorant about death with an adult who is grief-striken or uptight and you have something less than the most desirable situation” (Kastenbaum, 2004, p. 240).

To most effectively assist children and families who are grieving, caring early childhood teachers can:

- Integrate death awareness education in the curriculum
- Make the most of naturally occurring teachable moments
- Share empathetic children’s literature to facilitate the grieving process
- Increase awareness of community resources for grieving children and families

Bibliography


Janie H. Humphries

is the new President-Elect of SECA and will begin her term in January of next year.

A resident of Louisiana, Janie earned her Ed.D. degree from Texas A&M University in 1986 and is currently a professor of Family and Child Studies, School of Human Ecology, and coordinator of Early Childhood/Child Development Programs at Louisiana Tech University. She has also worked as a kindergarten teacher for both the Greenville Texas School District and Noble Oklahoma Public Schools, and as the director of the Model Learning Center, College of Education at Texas A&M University.

Janie has been with SECA for over thirty years and has served on the Louisiana Early Childhood Association’s Board in various capacities over the past twenty years. A past-president of LAECA and former Louisiana state representative to the SECA board, Janie currently serves as the chairperson of SECA’s editorial Committee.

We welcome Janie as our new President-Elect and look forward to her upcoming two years of leadership as SECA President!
Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Supporting Grieving Children in Early Childhood Programs
Kaarin D. Perkins and Bonnie Mackey

Take a Proactive Approach to the Topic

- Accept that death is natural and does happen.
- Create a nurturing, supportive learning environment.
- Answer all questions in an honest, age-appropriate manner.
- Incorporate death awareness education into the curriculum.
- Establish contacts with organizations that can assist educators with death awareness education. MADD, The American Cancer Society, and hospice organizations often have programs and training materials.

When Death Occurs

- Acknowledge the death to the child and family. A simple, “I am so sorry,” demonstrates compassion to the grieving family.
- Preserve the classroom structure and routines.
- Offer a variety of mediums (painting, pretend play, singing, writing, sharing and discussing books about death) for children to express their emotions.
- Use age-appropriate, culturally sensitive language when discussing death. Metaphors, such as “passed away,” “sleeping,” and “gone on” can be very confusing for young children. Instead, explain, “Yes, when Rosario’s car crashed, it did hurt. But when her body stopped working and she died, it didn’t hurt anymore. She will not be back.”
- Refer children and families to grief support programs. Services are often provided free of charge or on a sliding scale.

Create a Commemorative Quilt

Follow up reading a book such as Cemetery Quilt by Kent Ross and Alice Ross by making a class commemorative quilt. Ask children, staff, and families to identify a loved one (friend, family member, pet) that has died. The commemorative quilt will symbolize that although loved ones are no longer living, memories remain with people forever. There are many opportunities for parent involvement with this learning experience.

Supplies

- 100% white cotton, cut into 10-inch squares
- 100% colored cotton, large enough to mount all squares
- Dressmaker pins (for adult use only)
- Freezer paper
- Fabric markers or crayons
- Iron (for adult use only)
- Sewing machine (for adult use only)

Cut white cotton and freezer paper into squares. Ask a parent volunteer to iron freezer paper on the backs of the cotton squares to stabilize the fabric and enable children to draw on it easily.

Children use either fabric markers or fabric crayons to draw their pictures on the squares. Ask a parent volunteer to follow manufacturer directions for heat-setting the color.

On a large, flat surface, children place their completed squares on the colored fabric in a pleasing design. A parent volunteer pins and then sews them in place.

Attach a fabric or ribbon border to finish the edges and for hanging.

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.