



HELPING CHILDREN WHOSE FRIENDS OR RELATIVES DIE

THE IDEA

At some time, we all have a close friend or relative who dies. Losing someone dear to us is a sad thing and we feel very unhappy.

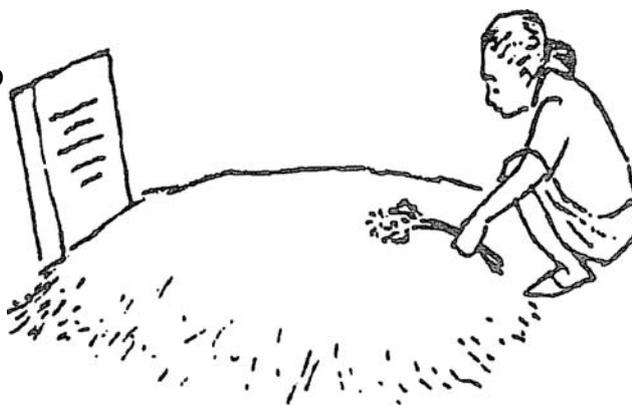
The loss of a loved one is just as painful to children as it is to adults. Children may also be distressed by the grief of their parents or guardians. Other adults, including teachers, should try to listen to children's thoughts and fears. This may be difficult because adults have to face their own feelings about death.

Children can be helped by a home and school environment that gives them affection and security, and where adults and other children listen to them and take account of their feelings.

Talking about death

If a child in the class loses someone they love, the teacher may want to talk about death to the other children, so that they can try to understand how their friend is feeling.

Death means different things in different cultures and religions. People believe it is God's will, or destiny. We will explain death to children in different ways, depending on our own beliefs and culture. Death may be frightening to some or feel like a natural process to others.



What happens in our community when someone dies?

Teachers can help children share what they already know about local customs when someone dies, and understand better why these take place.

Where and how these activities have been used

This sheet has helped to give people working with recently bereaved children some ideas on how to start work in this sensitive area. It has encouraged people to recognise that the subject cannot just be ignored.

In the many areas afflicted by war, famine or disease, including HIV and AIDS, the need to help children deal with the death of friends or relatives is increasingly important. Child-to-Child activities help children to be creative, to participate cooperatively with friends, and to make an important contribution to the community. They help to build up the children's sense of confidence which is so important as the children try to adjust to their loss. They also develop children's empathy in caring for others.

Start off with children's own experience

What do our families do when someone dies? Does it depend on the age of the person, or whether they are a woman or man? Is there a feast or a ceremony? Who takes part in it? Are children included? Do people wear special clothing? For how long? How do these customs help people to express and share their feelings?

Encourage the children to find out more

Children may be able to ask older members of their family and community customs following death. Old people have many memories of death and children can find out what the different ceremonies that accompany death mean. Is it difficult to carry out these ceremonies now?

Tell others

Children can tell what they have found out. They can create songs and stories based on what they have discovered, and perform them in school. In this way, children share what they have learnt about death within their own culture.

Learning from stories about death

Children can find out if there are stories about death in their culture. In small groups, children can tell these stories to each other, and their friends can draw a picture about the story.



Here is a story from the Winnebago people of North America which tells of helplessness in the face of death:

Hare for the first time hears of death. He starts to cry and runs toward his home. As he runs, he is attacked by the thought that everything will die. He casts his thoughts everywhere, upon the rocks, the mountains, under the earth, towards the skies. Wherever he casts his thoughts, all becomes shattered and stiffened up in death. When he reaches home, he wraps a blanket around him and lies down crying. There he lies in his corner, silent.

In this story Hare is overcome by his sadness and helplessness. Recognising and sharing feelings like these can help children (and adults) feel stronger in the face of death. Other stories may show how people go through grief and learn to cope.

Stories from newspapers, or from children's and teachers' own lives, can be a starting point for discussion and for children to think about ways of helping others. Avoid using the story of a specific child in the group if it will raise painful feelings. Here is a story about a child one teacher knew:

Matthew was six years old. His grandmother had always played with him, but now she was dying of cancer. When his grandmother was taken into hospital, Matthew's mother said that she had gone on holiday. Each day he waited outside her door for her to come back. One day he saw her things being taken out of her house. He did not know why. No one explained properly.

After a while, the teacher at school noticed that Matthew was not working well. He kept looking out of the window and did not know when the teacher asked him a question. He did not go out at playtime any more, and seemed to be tired and withdrawn.

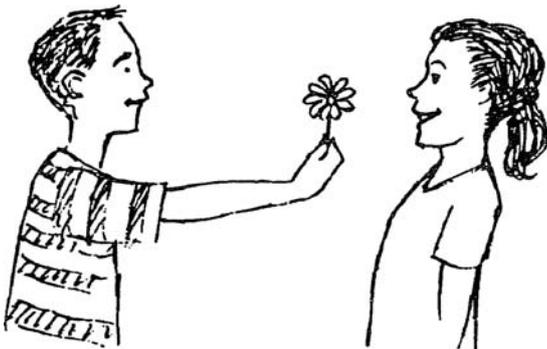
After the story, the teacher asked the children, 'Would it help Matthew to know that his grandmother had died?' 'If Matthew was in our class, how could we help him?'

Children helping each other

A friend is someone who stands by us in good times and bad. Can the children tell about a time when they:

- Needed a friend and had one.
- Were a good friend to someone else.
- Needed a good friend and did not have one.

When a child is unhappy after a death, their friends need to be very gentle, good listeners, and patient. The child must be allowed to show sadness by tears and other ways. Children should not be surprised if their friend takes a long time to get over this sadness. Other children can help by just being with them, hugging or holding hands, or doing something simple to show they care for them such as giving them a small gift like a sweet or a favourite toy.



Giving a gift



Sharing everyday activities

Children have different feelings after a death, not only sadness. Children often feel angry, frightened, confused, and unable to accept that someone they love has died. They may find it difficult to do their school work. They may have these feelings for a long time after the death. The feelings will be strong and difficult to cope with. When children show these feelings, people may think that they are behaving badly.



Teachers and other children can help by being patient and understanding these feelings. There may be one person in school that the child likes and trusts more than others. It can help the child to talk to that person, as long as they really listen and accept what the child says.

Later on, children are likely to experience other losses, for instance if a good friend moves away to another place. At that time, all the feelings connected with the death of their loved one can return.

Children helping families

Children can help other families when someone has died. For example, they can help with housework, shopping, or looking after younger children.

When a family member of one of the children dies, the whole class can write a letter to say how sorry they are, and all can sign it. It helps older people to know that children have remembered their loss.

Showing feelings through creative activities

It may be difficult for children to talk about their feelings when someone they love has died. Teachers can encourage children to express feelings in other ways, such as drawings and poems.

Here are extracts from a poem by primary school children in Uganda who live in a community where there have been many deaths of friends and family members:

*Aids! Aids!
Who created you?
You are finishing us all
You kill the young and the old
You are finishing our lives
What is your mission?
Aids! You are a threat to the population
Why do you rob a man of his good life?
Last week you killed our father
The other month you killed our mother
Now you are killing our brother
Leaving us orphans.*

It is good to allow time and space for children to express their grief and anger. When they are ready, they can also do creative activities which start to look forward with more hope. Do not hurry them – it will take time.

When children have lost someone they love

- Talk to children and be friendly. When we ignore them or the death, this adds to their sadness and painful feelings.
- Listen to them. It does not help to say we know how they feel – it is very difficult to know how someone else feels.
- Be patient – we should not make them think they should get over their feelings quickly.
- Encourage children to join in play and other activities, but do not force them to do so.

REMEMBER

Don't say things like, 'You'll soon get over it', 'Just think of all the good things you have', or 'Everything will be all right'. This suggests that the child should deny their feelings.

Don't avoid talking about the person who is dead. The child will want to remember them. The children can make Memory Books and Memory Boxes to contain their memories of the person who has died. (See Activity Sheet 9.3 for more ideas on this.)



Follow-up

When children have been helpful to their friends in the ways suggested in this sheet, it is important for older family members, teachers and youth leaders to show that they have noticed. Quietly thank the children for what they have done, e.g. 'I saw you went specially to play with Mary. It was very thoughtful of you. I am sure you have helped her.'

USING THIS SHEET

This sheet may be useful for teachers, religious training groups, and out-of-school children's groups. It could be used when a child has had to stay away from class because of a death, but even when there has not been a recent death in a child's family, teachers can use this sheet to help discuss with children how they could help.

Child-to-Child and children in camps

Often children who stay in camps, as a result of political changes, wars or disasters, will have lost friends or relatives. The publication *Child-to-Child and Children in Camps* helps give special suggestions on how the Child-to-Child materials can be used, and Child-to-Child activities carried out.

Children affected by HIV and AIDS

Children in communities affected by HIV and AIDS may face many bereavements. Parents and guardians can help to prepare children and counsel them to cope. Activity Sheets 9.1 and 9.4 give ideas on helping these children and their families.