



Pervasive Death:

SQUEALING with delight as his mother covers his face then quickly uncovers it saying, "peek-a-boo," the toddler toys with the "pre-idea" of death. Alternating between terror and delight, risking then regaining complete consciousness, the infant experiences being and non-being. Adah Maurer sees this as the infant experimenting with separation, loss, and death. Games such as "peek-a-boo" are merely the beginning of an individual's long quest to understand the concept of death.

The concept of death continues to develop with the question "why." When the child begins to be concerned with the functioning of things ("why"), he inevitably tries to understand what it means to die. Freud spoke of the death instinct as basic to man. Yet something so basic is unfortunately something that has been consistently avoided. The subject of death is not considered an integral part of the child's elementary education. Relatively little has been done to help the child understand its meaning.

Where does the problem lie? It does not lie with the child. A child approaches a dead bird with the same amount of curiosity as any other new experience or situation. He is willing to talk about its lack of movement and the flies hovering around it. By the age of six, most children realize that people die and that death is irreversible. Many realize that they will also die some day and could even die as children. Television has taught them that

children often die in fires and automobile accidents.

Having spoken to many young children about death, I find them very open and willing to explore its meaning. Yet many adults find it very difficult to discuss death with children. It is a concept that is so emotionally charged that they do not even wish to consider it themselves.

Upon finding a brood of chicks which mysteriously died in her classroom over the weekend, the teacher screamed. She then asked a co-worker to get rid of the dead chicks immediately before the children saw them. When the children arrived at school that morning, the teacher did not mention the disappearance of the chicks. For two weeks she said nothing. Finally her co-worker who had disposed of the chicks approached the subject with the children and found them curious about the whole matter. They had a long, frank discussion.

Search for Meaning

Death is an adult concept needing an adult's intellect to understand, yet it is not unlike other concepts which acquire meaning as the child progresses in his ability to reason and think logically. It is as valid for discussion as love, justice, and morality. I believe the concept of death should be included in the elementary school curriculum in a meaningful way.



An Avoided Concept

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How does a child learn what it means to die? The same way he acquires any other knowledge. According to Piaget, knowledge comes through the twin processes of assimilation and accommodation. New stimuli from the child's environment must be assimilated into his existing mental structures. Birds are animals that fly. When the child finds one lying motionless on the ground with flies around it, the equilibrium of his former mental organization about birds is upset until he accommodates the new idea that birds which are dead lie motionless and become a food for flies. His equilibrium is now back intact until he perhaps confronts human death or at a later age considers the uncomfortable possibility of his own death.

The child learns as he interacts with his environment. If his environment is rich, the child will seek to discover the meaning it holds. The more the child sees and hears, the more he wants to see and hear. An environment which hides death from the child is doing an injustice to his natural development. Death is as natural as life. As innate curiosity stumbles upon death, takes notice, and then tries it on for size (perhaps the child will lie motionless on the ground playing dead), learning occurs. It will continue to occur as we reinforce it through acceptance.

In the elementary school curriculum the concept of death might well be covered in the physiology section of the health and safety

education curriculum. Here the physiological aspects of death could be handled precisely so that a child does not develop notions such as that death is a result of going into the hospital. Although death should be a part of the health curriculum, there are two problems with keeping it exclusively there. First, schools at present have a relaxed attitude toward health education, and the topic might not be covered. Second, death is more than the permanent cessation of all vital functions. Death pervades life and is not fully explained by a neat biological definition. Therefore other curriculum areas could help in the child's quest for understanding.

In the science curriculum, death could easily be handled during the discussion of organisms and the life cycle. The necessity of death in the plant and animal life cycle could be stressed. A relatively recent scientific approach to death can be found in *Life and Death* by Herbert Zim and Sonia Bleeker (William Morrow and Company). This book talks about death as being a natural part of the process of life for plants and animals as well as people. It covers the bodily reactions in death, burial practices, and differences between death and sleep. Schools might consider this thorough and candid presentation in planning science curriculum.

In reading and in the language arts cur-

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riculum, the concept of death could be introduced through a number of books which handle the topic well. For children in K-3 I would suggest *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White (Dell Publishing Co.), *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Brown (Young Scott Books), and *Why Did He Die?* by Audrey Harris (Lerner Publications). Children in grades 3-6 would benefit from *Anne and the Sand Dobbies* by John Coburn (Seabury Press), *The Boy Who Tried To Cheat Death* by Charles Mikolaycak (Doubleday & Company) and *Meet the Austins* by Madeleine L'Engle (Vanguard Press). For brighter children *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (Doubleday & Company) and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell (Houghton Mifflin Company) should be considered.

Having read a book which deals honestly with death, children should be encouraged to write their opinion of the story or book. While writing skills are being exercised, the child is also accommodating any new ideas which he has acquired through his reading. Dramatic expression can be used very effectively to help the child respond to death. Small groups of children could make up their own plays and present them to the class. As many children as possible should be involved in this creative mode of expression so that each child has an opportunity to share his response.

Aesthetic education is also an area for

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possible involvement. From the dramatic presentations just mentioned, each child could draw his own picture of death. Finger painting is an excellent means for self-expression. The children finger paint to the word *death*. Paintings finished, the children now take turns interpreting each other's paintings followed by the individual artist's explanation of his own work. Again small groups and individual involvement are very important. Making collages of pictures and words associated with death is another way of dealing with this concept. Many great works of art portray death. These should be displayed and discussed by the children. Some which you might consider are: *The Dead Christ with Angels* by Edouard Manet; *Death of Marat* by Jacques Louis David; *Descent from the Cross* by Rembrandt; *Pietà* by Michelangelo; *Calavera: Don Quixote* by José Guadalupe Posado; and *Shooting of the Rebels of May 3, 1808* by Francisco Goya.

In a well-rounded music curriculum all types of music should be included. Somber music dealing with grief and death is part of our heritage and should be included in the child's musical experience. The "Crucifixus" section of J. S. Bach's *B Minor Mass* followed by the "Et Resurrexit" section compares somber death with the beauty and joy of resurrection and eternal life. *Funeral Music* by Witold Lutoslawski begins expressing resignation to death followed by a turbulent section of resentment, closing finally with resignation. Children love fantasy, so Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, the story of a puppet's death, would be appropriate for elementary children. Other good selections include *The Funeral March of a Marionette* by Pierné; "Siegfried's Funeral Music" from *Götterdämmerung* by Wagner; and "Juliet's Death" from the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* by Prokofieff.

The late Ethel Barrymore used to say, "I love life. In fact, I can't live without it." Death is part of life and none of us can live without it. It is a truth that we must die. Truth divorced from experience will always dwell in the realm of doubt. The concept of death must not be avoided in the elementary school but must be included in a meaningful way. □

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