



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional  
Paper  
Series

---

Volume 2004  
Number 12 *Talking Tough Topics in the  
Classroom*

Article 4


---

May 2004

## Conversations With Children About Death

Molly Sexton-Reade  
*The Dillon Center*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Elementary Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sexton-Reade, M. (2004). Conversations With Children About Death. *Occasional Paper Series, 2004* (12). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1219>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact [kfreda@bankstreet.edu](mailto:kfreda@bankstreet.edu).

**educate**

## CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

molly sexton-reade

*MOLLY SEXTON-READE currently teaches three- and-four-year-old children in a parent-cooperative nursery school. She began her teaching career in 1980 at The Dillon Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. A Bank Street graduate, Molly spent two years in Australia working with children as a volunteer in schools and hospitals. She moved to Connecticut in 1988, and returned to the classroom in 1993.*

Twenty years ago, as a young kindergarten teacher, I overheard a conversation between Tim and William, two five-year-old boys in my class, about what happens when someone dies. They went back and forth about what actually occurs to the body. I was struck by the thoughtfulness of their exchange and wanted to open the topic up for a class discussion. Later that day I gathered a tape recorder and a blank cassette and set about having the first of what would become many conversations with young children about death. Over the years, death has continued to find a way into the curriculum, from the dead bird we found on the playground, through the sudden loss of a beloved custodian, as well as the demise of several class pets. Each of these events has provided an opportunity for learning and exploration.

In a discussion of the ways in which the pre-operational child is influenced by “magical” thinking, G. Koocher (1973) suggests that such “misunderstandings” take on particular importance for the bereaved child. The connection between a child’s understanding of death and his/her grief is at the heart of the matter for me, as a mother and a teacher. When my sons were ages four and one, my husband—their father—died of leukemia. We have worked hard to meet the challenge of this loss. My own efforts at helping them when they were young were enriched by my knowledge of a young child’s understanding of death. Watching one of my son’s preschool teachers struggle with how to speak with him, with me, and with the other families (often choosing simply not to speak of the loss at all), I saw a real need for conversations around death in the classroom.

## **A Developmental Rationale**

Play is an important arena in which children strive to gain competence. In the dramatic play of young children and later in their representational play, aspects of everyday life are rehearsed in an attempt to gain understanding and mastery. As educators, we know that the classroom curriculum must reflect the real experiences and interests of the children. We use their play as a starting point, and then extend it when we include the study of community workers in the social studies program and the study of familiar animals in the science program.

Death is a central theme in children's play. It is the coming and going, the leaving and returning, that is enacted over and over again in the play of young children. John Bowlby's (1973) seminal work on attachment and separation identifies the child's desire for secure attachment to important individuals as basic to human development. Attachment also involves learning to separate from these same individuals. Young children can be seen trying to master this process of attachment and separation and the tensions that it creates in their dramatic play. Death may be viewed as a part of the attachment-separation continuum, and as such, deserves the same level of explanation and concern as the smaller, daily experiences that frame their lives.

The growth in a child's understanding of death, particularly its universality and finality, can also be understood within the context of cognitive development. Piaget's work provides a basis for examining the progression from egocentric thought to the use of other's experiences to create a broader grasp of what death means (Childers and Wimmer, 1971; Piaget, 1963). Children who have reached the concrete-operational and formal-operational levels have a more accurate understanding that death will happen to all living things. When children have experiences with death and the opportunity to express their ideas, they can begin to refine their understanding of its meaning.

As teachers, we also need to be cognizant of the environment in which our students live. Today's children are exposed to information about death through a wide variety of media. They see it on television, hear about it on the radio, and overhear the conversations of adults. We have a responsibility to provide opportunities for children to process this information in ways that are developmentally appropriate. The concerns about the "magical" thinking of bereaved children are relevant in dealing with all children.

## Death in the Classroom

Including death in the early childhood classroom involves seizing teachable moments as much, if not more than, planning specific activities. Many classrooms, for example, contain a pet. Part of the rationale for having these animals are the moments they may afford for managing a potential loss. It can be tempting to remove that floating fish quickly before the children arrive in the morning, but when you do so, an important learning opportunity has been lost. We have had several fish die over the years in my class. Often, one of the children first notices that a fish is behaving oddly. I take the time then to alert the other children that something may be wrong. On the day when it can be seen floating, we look closely—to wonder what is going on. I ask the children to observe carefully and to articulate what it is they can see that leads them to believe that the fish is dead. This gives us an opportunity to talk more generally about what death means.

The next step is to determine what to do with the body. While the children are often quick to suggest flushing the fish down the toilet, there is usually one child who wants to bury it. I support the idea of burial as it provides an opportunity to learn about a funeral in a relatively calm setting without the distress that is often part of a family event. Each time I have organized a burial with children they have approached it with solemnity and sincerity. There are always spontaneous expressions of sadness—missing the pet and loving it. The children often return to the grave to show parents, and sometimes to create special markers. All of these experiences illustrate the children's interest in this part of the life cycle and their ability to recognize its importance.

While one cannot set up a timetable to explore death, teachers need to take advantage of serendipitous events. Bugs are sometimes found dead or alive in the classroom or on the playground, and plants or flowers can be found in classrooms in various stages of the life cycle. It would be possible to orchestrate situations which would result in a death, but that is not necessary. My present classroom has become a haven for ladybugs. While these are usually found alive by the children and released outdoors, in mid-January the bugs often die shortly after they have been discovered. These deaths are relatively innocuous, and so provide a chance to talk about what happened without much emotional involvement. We are also able to compare and contrast the dead ones with the newly discovered live ones. In addition, those flowers that are sometimes brought to school by teachers or children eventually will fade and again can be fodder for such a discussion.

## **Death in the Lives of Children**

I believe that including talk about death and its meaning offers three main benefits for all children, especially the bereaved child. First, these discussions offer an opportunity for the child to tell her story without being the focus of the conversation. To be able to share family history can be an important part of feeling that people know who you are, that you belong. Second, as the whole class has the chance to share their stories, the bereaved child may also gain the benefit of learning that she is not as alone as she may have felt before. Third, the child is helped to tease out her own ideas and perceptions about death. With adult guidance, these ideas may be refined and become more accurate. My own boys have very different ways of dealing with their loss. One is more private than the other. I believe even the more private of the two would have gained some comfort from classrooms where death was not a taboo topic.

Classroom teachers must be aware of any loss that has been experienced by the children. This knowledge is crucial to conducting productive and safe discussions about death. I believe it is also important to inform parents about upcoming classroom conversations. For the last ten years, I have been the head teacher at a parent-cooperative preschool in a small town in northwestern Connecticut. Two years ago the mother of Alex, a three-year-old child in my class, died suddenly only two weeks into the year. I knew that I needed to be prepared to support this family in an intimate way. I also knew I needed to offer support to the other families of this class. I wanted them to know that while I wasn't going to make an announcement to the group about this loss, if Alex initiated a conversation, he was going to be free to share his news. My reason for not making a formal announcement to the children was two-fold. I felt that because they had only just begun to know each other, this information might be confusing; also, they did not know Alex's mother. In addition, I felt that the support we could most offer Alex was to provide a safe and friendly place that remained constant in his life. To single Alex out by sharing the information would be counter to that goal. I am not sure it was the correct way to handle it, but it felt right, and that is sometimes all we can rely on.

I did, of course, inform all the parents about this loss. I offered them the opportunity to meet with me one evening to discuss how to talk with children about death and dying. Families have a variety of beliefs, and it is crucial to treat them all with respect. I made it clear that I wanted to know if they had any questions or reservations about the way I was handling the situation. Only a few parents came to the meeting, but we had a good conversation. None of

the parents ever expressed concern about how things were being handled at school. In fact, some parents made special efforts to include Alex in their plans.

Life is unpredictable. Including death as a topic for discovery in the classroom may well ease the handling of future traumatic losses. Several months after the class conversation that I described at the beginning of this paper, Jimmy, a beloved school custodian, died suddenly. It was a loss felt intimately by the staff and the children. In a small way, having had that class conversation gave me a base from which I could help the children process this loss. I was so glad I had taken that “teachable” moment when it presented itself. We did a lot of grief work that year, including dedicating one of our monthly newsletters to Jimmy, and including in it the children’s memories of him. We ended that school year by creating and planting a memorial garden for Jimmy right outside our classroom door. This was a project that involved staff and children and families. For many years after, the garden remained a tribute to Jimmy and to the love the children had for him.

Death is a multi-leveled subject. It evokes strong feelings and big questions for all of us. By deciding to include it in an early childhood curriculum, I believe a teacher is making a brave choice. Conversations, no matter how well intentioned or designed, may have unforeseen and difficult results. When my younger son, Sam, was four, I was his preschool teacher. We were having a class discussion about fathers. The children were sharing things that were special about their fathers, such as, he goes to work, he plays with me. Sam matter-of-factly volunteered, as I knew he would, that his father was dead. One of the other children began to cry following this revelation. She seemed simply very sad. I comforted her for quite a while. She recovered and I made sure I told her mother about the conversation when she picked up her daughter. I knew how critical it was for my son to be able to share his loss with his classmates, but I should have done a better job anticipating the reactions of the children and informing their parents about the possibility of this revelation beforehand.

If my twenty-plus years of teaching have shown me anything, it is that the topic of death more often than not will find a way to enter the classroom. Sometimes, it is the death of a family pet, sometimes a grandparent, and at times a more unexpected loss. We owe it to ourselves and to our students to be prepared. I believe that a central part of this preparation is allowing the children to have experience talking and learning about death. Work centered around this topic enriches the entire school community, as well. When my son was in second grade, the class’s pet mouse, Lightning, died. I worked along

with the teacher to help the children create a memory quilt in honor of the mouse as a way of processing their grief. At the end of the year, the teacher, a remarkable and gifted woman, returned the quilt to me. She suggested that I use the quilt as a tool to create a safe place for other children to talk about death. Then, earlier this year, our local school suffered an enormous tragedy with the sudden death of a fourth-grade student. I was able to offer the quilt to his classroom teacher as she worked hard to comfort her students.

I have become comfortable including discussions of death in my classroom. The conversations I have had with children individually and in group settings have been windows into their minds and hearts. I cherish those moments, and believe that the children have been offered a chance to share something of themselves and to refine their understanding of the world. As I continue to do this work, I want to be able to be more complete in my endeavors. This year I have Susan, Alex's younger sister, in my class. As I get to know this little girl, I wonder how to create the best environment for her as she continues to deal with the loss of her mother. She often volunteers that her mother is dead. I am left feeling that my next assignment is to find ways for her to express her thoughts and feelings more completely. As a classroom teacher, I am not equipped to work intensively with a grieving child. That work is the task of her family and mental health professionals. The opportunity I am seeking to provide for Susan is more akin to the chances we provide for children to share family news such as the birth of a sibling.

My boys are now well on their way to becoming young men. Their bereavement no longer falls within the realm of early childhood education. But as a nursery school teacher, I remain committed to offering children the chance to share their thoughts and most precious feelings about death and dying. It can be difficult work, but like most challenging experiences, can also be enormously rewarding.

## References

- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and Loss. Vol. II, Separation: Anxiety and Anger*. New York, N.Y. Basic Books.
- Childers, P. & Wimmer, M. (1971). The Concept of Death in Early Childhood. *Child Development*. 42 pp. 1299-1301.
- Cohen, D. & Rudolph, M. (1977). *Kindergarten and Early Schooling*. Englewood, N.J. Prentiss-Hall Inc.
- Koocher, G. (1973). Childhood, Death and Cognitive Development. *Developmental Psychology*. 9 pp. 369-375.
- Piaget, J. (1960). *The Child's Conception of the World*. Patterson, N.J. Littlefield, Adams.