

## **"Where has my mummy gone?"**

### ***Introduction***

When invited to contribute to the newsletter on the topic of little children and their reaction to death and loss, the overwhelming difficulty seemed to be in keeping this reasonably concise.

There is so much that is known now about children's grief and this includes the reactions of the very young, who from their early days will be aware of the absence of a close carer.

For little children of three or four years old death is incomprehensible. For many it will hold a fascination. Some will have experience of a family member dying, or will have heard of this happening in other families. Insofar as they are able to understand what it is that has actually occurred, they will bring this fascination, as well as their curiosity and anxiety with them into any pre-school setting they attend.

Often, they will talk to those familiar and trusted adults they come into contact with, as a means of beginning to make sense of the inexplicable. It may be the case that the child's family finds it too difficult to be open to all they need to know, particularly when they too are grieving. Consequently, their questions and comments can be directed to pre-school workers who may be the next most important adults in their lives.

Carers themselves may also seek support from outside the family unit as a way of gaining information as to what is best for the child. Often, other family members will discourage honesty and openness as a way of protecting both the child and themselves. Once again, this can leave the child feeling lonely and confused, wondering what happens next as suddenly the unimaginable becomes part of their world and creates insecurity where it probably did not exist before.

In order to support children effectively, it is important to understand the grieving process for young children and the ways in which they express their thoughts and emotions. In this way the task of answering

difficult questions becomes clearer and the adult can act as an advocate for the child accordingly.

### ***What do small children understand about death and dying?***

It is only recently that it has been widely accepted that very young children can grieve. Until this time many felt that children needed to understand the permanence of death as well as their own sense of mortality before they could grieve. However, although the permanent and universal nature of death develops later and becomes more concrete by about seven to eight years' researchers now accept that much younger children can grieve.

The change reflects the fact that other factors also influence understanding. Some children will have already experienced other, 'bit losses' such as divorce or family breakdown, which will have similar outcomes in rearranging the normal routine for a child.

The nature of non-permanence in itself makes it very difficult for a child to get to grips with a death. Many will search for the deceased over a long period of time; children may take carers to a cot to look for the dead sibling or ask continually when mummy is coming home. Very young children do not have the vocabulary to describe the emotional pain they may be experiencing, and this can manifest itself in somatic complaints such as tummy aches and pains. There may also be regression in behaviour or newly acquired skills such as toileting. Children may become very cling; afraid to leave the other carer or overly attached to a particular toy that offers some comfort.

Some children attending pre-school settings may have begun to engage in 'magical thinking' whereby they believe that they have influence in everything that occurs around them. They may be filled with a sense of guilt that they caused daddy's death by being naughty or that by being good they can bring that person back to life.

### ***Play***

Play, such as it is, at this stage is a reaction to the child's sense of confusion and insecurity. It is a retreat from which they can emerge as a

routine returns and life around them becomes less chaotic. In play they can escape for hours into a world of make-believe.

From this point, the child's play may become more active in their attempt to replay and achieve some degree of control over their fears and anxieties. Research from the past has demonstrated that play is actually a child's 'work' in the way that they bring meaning and understanding from situations.

There are examples of children playing out scenes of car crashes and re-enacting funerals. In both instances, this form of play can go on for several months as the child seeks to gain understanding and an accommodation of what has happened before they can move forward. Whilst this form of play can be disturbing to the adults close to them, it is a necessary step for the child and is best supported.

### ***How to Answer Difficult Questions***

There are many ways in which adults can begin the process of supporting a child when a death occurs by looking at the everyday opportunities around them. It is out of the 'everyday' losses that young children gradually build on their understanding about the nature of death.

Often, the death of a pet can be used as an example of this. Children are often fascinated with the dead body and will want to touch or look closely at it. This is their way of putting together the facts with the reality of the situation. It is also a good opportunity to talk about what happens to our bodies; one child, when told of his granny's death, asked if she had been squashed flat because he had seen a dead hedgehog earlier that week!

It is important as with many difficult topics to find out how much the child knows about the subject. Often, children will be reassured that the death was not their fault. Listening to the child, "tell the story" offers an adult a good opportunity to straighten out misunderstandings and in doing so relieve the child of any unfounded worries.

Many adults still feel that children should be spared the emotional pain of a death and seek either to avoid the subject or use euphemisms to

describe what has occurred. Children can take these descriptions quite literally. It may not be comforting to hear that mummy is watching over you. Similarly, avoiding references to sleep is important. On one level it can disturb children to think that they too may not awake from sleeping, conversely it may in the pre-school setting, falsely reassure them that the dead will awake as in 'Sleeping Beauty'.

Young children also respond very differently when told of a death. Some will react with answers which can offend adults and lead them to feel that the child is uncaring. "Who will buy the Christmas presents?" could be a child's way of saying, "will life go on and how will it affect me?" whilst at the same time it could also be an egocentric response which developmentally, is very common in children of pre-school years. Continuity is however, a key factor in reducing the long-term risks of bereavement in which case it could be very important for a young child to know from the outset, issues about routine, that may seem insignificant to others.

Many children will not display any emotions whatsoever and continue as though little has changed. This does not mean that they are not aware of the situation. The apparent lack of emotion reflects both an inability to express feelings verbally and the energy to stay with overwhelming thoughts. This behaviour is often referred to children 'dipping in and out of puddles' whereby they dip in and out of their grief as and when they feel able.

In order to being to understand the impact of the loss children, like adults, need the opportunity to say goodbye to the person who has died. It may be that the grieving family finds this very hard and may seek support from the pre-school setting as to how to deal with this.

Even when carers cannot bring themselves to include a child at a funeral, it is worth encouraging them to ask the child if they wish to make a contribution such as drawing a picture or making something. In this way children have been given some choice in the matter and this makes them feel included and worthy of consideration.

When someone special dies, children, like adults, must find a place for their grief and their memories and move onward. This process is made harder by the fact that any relationship they would have had with the

deceased would have changed as they got older. It is important in the pre-school setting to recognise times when this could be the case and find ways in which to help the child 'get in touch' with the person who has died. Often, they will need some help in finding ways in which to remember the deceased and so scrap books and photo albums can help.

For young children the death of someone special will, at some levels, always be incomprehensible and the task of supporting them can feel impossible. Do not let this deter you. Supporting bereaved children does not mean having all the answers. It does mean however, that if the issue arises, you should be prepared to recognise the impact of a death through the eyes of a child and act as their advocate accordingly. It is hoped that this article has gone some way to assist you in this process.

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