

What will I tell my child that her daddy is no longer with us? How do we explain death?

Child: Mommy, did daddy die? Mom: Yes, dear.

Child: Where did he go? Mom: He got sick and now he is up in heaven. Now you go off and play with your toys.

Rationale

Death is an inevitable part of life, so why is it so difficult to discuss with others, let alone with our children? It appears that in the Western world, there is a difficulty even saying the word “death”. This is particularly ironic given that children are exposed to death from a variety of places, television shows, movies, as well as many violent video games. So how do we help children to make sense of the death of a significant person in their life in a meaningful way? The activity Treasured Symbol is a wonderful way for students to share their stories and to explore their feelings. It helps them to build relationships and community in a non-threatening fun way through storytelling.

Formatting Sessions

In dealing with the death of a significant family member, co-facilitating a pull-out group works well as you bring your own personal stories to complement the group and it is easier for group management. A typical group size is six students, Grades 1–6, both sexes, who have experienced the recent death of a significant loved one. The group meets the same time and day of the school cycle for one hour with a total of five sessions. Consistency is very important so the students can mentally prepare themselves for each group session. Once parents have given their consent for participation, the affected students meet in the group for the first time. The dynamics are such that the students outline the rules for the group, with the assistance of the co-facilitators, if necessary.

Activity

The rules should include confidentiality, no put-downs of self or others are allowed, putting up your hand before you talk, one person speaking at a time, each being respectful of one another and only sharing what you are comfortable in sharing. At this time the co-facilitators and students explain and share some examples of what the treasured symbols could be. This is very important because you want the students to have a voice in order to navigate through their uncharted waters. By encouraging students to decide what the rules are and contributing to the discussions they become more invested in

the group, have more control and feel empowered rather than being simply passive listeners. The thought is that if the students are more invested, they will participate more and have a better understanding of the impact of the death of their loved one.

The dynamics of the group session is you begin with a check-in with the students and to ensure that they have brought in a treasured symbol for discussion. The facilitators are also encouraged to participate in this activity. If a student has not, they are encouraged to share a story with the group that is meaningful to them.

Activity Analysis

After the check-in, we begin by asking the students to draw a simple picture representing a positive memory of their departed loved one. Afterwards, everyone has a chance to share the story of their drawing with the group. Next, you are ready to move on to the main activity, Treasured Symbol. One of the co-facilitators shares the story of their treasured symbol to help get the activity started. They share their story to illustrate how it is meaningful to them, which provides positive role modeling for the students. Next, we ask for volunteers from the group and one by one the six students, as well as the other co-facilitator, share their story of their treasured symbol. When this is completed, we end the activity with a snack and share with one another how this activity has helped them to have a better understanding of the death of the significant person in their life.

The activity, Treasured Symbol, was chosen because in one of the schools where I work there were four families affected by the death of one parent (three mothers and one father), one student's grandmother died and another a grandfather died all within months of each other. Not having an appropriate avenue to express their emotions, some of the students reacted with aggressive behaviour, heightened anxiety or had just withdrawn. The fear was that students might develop a negative view of the world in which they had little control given their losses. To counterbalance their feelings, using the activity of treasured symbol provided a more inclusive and collaborative process for the students in which relationships among the students as well community relationships between school and the home were strengthened. It encouraged students to be imaginative and creative, which helped them in building their self-esteem, which strengthened their identity. When students develop a stronger identity they feel more empowered to explore their emotions.

One of the concerns we as facilitators had with this group activity was that the students were of various ages (eight to twelve years, four females and two males) and we wondered what the students' reactions or responses would be to one another in sharing the story of their treasured symbol. We wondered whether they would be respectful of one another, would they even have the courage to share with one another their own story and would the younger students understand some of the language the older students were using. In addition, we also needed to be culturally sensitive as one of the students was from a Third World country and we thought their understanding of death might be very different from those of us born in Winnipeg. To our amazement, all of the students took great joy in sharing their story and the older students listened as attentively to the younger ones and vice versa. The group had developed into a cohesive community of their own. There were a variety of stories shared. They included how one student felt when his mother gave him his father's necklace so he would have something tangible to remember him by. Another, the student had a picture of her mother out at the family cottage and the student related some of the fun times she had. A student whose father gifted her mother's ring to her described how this, to her, was a touching portrayal of love by her father. A student, who told of the story of the glass of sand that her mother had brought with the family when they immigrated to Winnipeg, elicited much discussion within the group on learning about another culture. Another example of a wonderful story was where the student's grandmother had given her a glass heart, which was placed in a box. Her grandmother was a significant person in her life and her story clearly demonstrated the emotional connection they had for each other. The last student to share his story brought in his grandfather's miniature violin, which was given to him and exemplified a special bond between them. He was the youngest member of our group, but his story was both heartfelt and meaningful and every member of the group was interested in looking at his treasured symbol.

Storytelling with this group was very helpful to the students for a variety of reasons. As facilitators we were able to provide a safe and respectful environment, which provided a forum for the students to express their emotions freely and in a healthy way. The students were able to access the memories of their past, sort out the meanings of them in order to help them to move on. Students were also able to identify with some of the feelings described by the other students and found that they were more alike than different from one another, which provided them with an emotional connection,

comfort and further reinforced the group's relationship. When asked at the end of the activity what worked for them, they were all in agreement on how much they had gained by participating in this group. It was now easier for them to talk of their experience with death because they were able to share their stories in a safe venue, they had gained a better understanding of how in sharing their stories they felt more empowered and gained a closer connection with the students at school.