

HELPFUL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ADAPTING *THE DRAGONFLY DOOR* INTO A PLAY

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Illustration by Cameron Clark,
age 8

Guiding Principles:

- Provide clear and concise information & communication:
 - CHILD may be worried he/she did or said something that caused the death.
 - ADULT CONSIDERATION:
 - A child's grief is intermittent.
 - Keep information honest and brief.
- Provide emotional support:
 - CHILD may worry the same thing will happen to them.
 - ADULT CONSIDERATION:
 - Consider type of death – anger may delay grief response.
 - Remember even very young children experience loss.
- Provide **love & reassurance**:
 - CHILD needs to feel safe and secure.
 - ADULT CONSIDERATION:
 - Create a safe place where open communication and self expression can take place and ultimately provide the child opportunity to master the necessary behaviors needed to live within his/her new circumstances.
 - A child's response to grief mirrors development – it will continue to evolve every 3-6 months. Questions will continue to have more depth as children seek further understanding.

Loss defined:

- Disruption in family routine.
- Emotional unavailability of parents.
- Financial resources threatened.
- Isolation among peers.
- Separation.
- Personal.
- Physical.
- Turbulent.

Make sense of the loss:

- Commemorate the loss.
 - Create rituals around the individual's date of birth, or another special day.
 - Light a special candle during times of family gatherings.
 - Share memories and acknowledge similarities a loved one may share with the deceased individual (example: "I see you are really enjoying that book, I remember how much your brother loved to read.").
- Identify context.
 - Continue living and loving with renewed sense of value and life meaning.
 - Discover ways to help extend the legacy of the individual that died.
- Acknowledge strong reactions to the loss.
 - Recognize opportunities for self expression through meditation, dance, art and/or music.
 - Validate emotions and communicate the importance of talking about the deceased individual and sharing feelings of sadness, anger and confusion.
- Make room for healing.
 - Create moments of joy.
 - Encourage time for reflection.
 - Support healthful eating and living habits (rest, exercise, social activities).
- Promote resilience.
 - Be available to listen.
 - Provide optimal support.
 - Recognize the "work" of grief may be complicated and exhausting.

ELEMENTARY - developmental considerations	Recommended suggestions to facilitate healing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this age children are outwardly expressive, meaning they may “act out” a death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting out the events of a death are normal developmental behaviors as children master the experience and create opportunity for gradual understanding. • Be mindful of a child’s response to death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As intermittent grievers, children may move seemingly quickly from joyful to sad and back to joyful again. • At this age the children are concrete thinkers = explanations should avoid abstract references. • Prepare children attending funerals or other gatherings of the adult reaction to death. Children may be confused if they witness intense emotions. • Children at this age do not have enough life experience to appreciate the entire depth of the loss. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children understand death is final at this age, however, they will not fully appreciate exactly how many ways the death will impact their life. • Consider the need for safety as children at this age are still in egocentric development. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an environment of trust where questions are allowed and self expression is encouraged. • Don't be afraid the answer a question with, "I don't know" or "I'm not sure, what do you think?" • Remind the children how many people love and care for them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the play infuse learning of the fragility of life? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accentuate how many ways Nym and Lea share how they care for one another. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Help the children articulate ways they can show friends and family how they care for one another. ○ Incorporate the special ways the individual being honored in the play cared for others. • Help children identify feelings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nym feels bad (<i>guilt</i>) - the last time she saw Lea they were fighting. • When she cannot find Lea she is <i>sad</i>, she wanted to apologize. • Nym is <i>confused and scared</i>. Children at this age believe their behavior/words can actually impact a situation positively or negatively. • Reassure children the death was not caused by words or feelings. • If animals are used – create a similar persona of the individual that died. • Incorporate memory work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have children identify a memory of the person. • The final page of the book, Nym is comforted by memories of Lea... use this opportunity to weave in the noted memories of the individual being honored in the play. • Keep the play relatively short (15- 20 minutes) – attention span is limited. • Prepare children of the “adult response” to death (intense display of emotions). • Use the words dead, death, dying. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Words such as “went to sleep”, “passed on”, or “lost” are confusing for this age group and may contribute to fears associated with bedtime or being away from an adult for long periods of time.

MIDDLE SCHOOL- developmental considerations	<i>Recommended suggestions to facilitate healing</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As this age group seeks normalcy and control they will need assistance identifying: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A safe place to share feelings and emotions. • An appreciation for the “meaning of life”. • An understanding of “why” this happened. • Depending on the relationship of the individual that died - children at this age may resolve to protect idolized characteristics of the individual and may even attempt to mimic behaviors and/or “acts of courage or bravery”. • Middle school-age children are identifying deeper personal preferences for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics. • Art/music • Friendships. • Spirituality. • Normal behaviors exhibited: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of unknown = provide as much information about cause of death as possible. • Intense feelings/emotions due to a fragile and immature psyche. • Share information with all affected individuals as soon as it becomes available. Be honest and available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow enough time for the play to evolve – this age group can tolerate 30 minutes with time afterward to discuss and further enhance learning and healthy coping. • Elicit ideas from the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would they like to see the individual(s) honored in the play? • Level of involvement. • What elements are important to include in the play? • What elements should be avoided? • Nym has lost more than a friend. A death provides opportunity to reveal personal values directly connected to that relationship. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the metaphor of the Dragonfly Door to help this age group explore how they cope with their own vulnerabilities. • A door can be opened and reveal inner strength, renewed friendships, stronger commitments, etc. • The ending of the play is a perfect time to direct the audience toward identifying a personal support system–with family, at school and within the community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is available for me to talk to? • Who do I feel safe sharing my feelings with? • The metamorphosis of Lea acknowledged the loss of the physical presence of Nym’s friend. Consider what other changes occur after a death. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death of a child: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Change in birth order: Is the brother or sister now an only child, or now considered the oldest? ○ Changes in routine, school. ○ Changes in sleeping arrangements- a child who may have shared a bedroom now has to sleep alone. ○ Loss of friends. • Adult death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is the child now the only “man of the house”? ○ Perhaps a change in who cares for the child before and/or after school. ○ Will the family have to move? ○ Will the other parent now have to return to work? • When Nym is searching for memories as comfort – use this time to identify “normal” responses to grief: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying, deep-felt sadness and sorrow. • Fatigue from loss of sleep and/or intense expression of emotion.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Loss of concentration.• Reaching out for additional emotional support from teachers, friends, parents, or online social networks (a supportive “watchful eye” over online activity is seriously recommended).• Shock - overwhelming, almost surreal response as one attempts to grasp how and/or why the death happened. |
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HIGH SCHOOL- developmental considerations	<i>Recommended suggestions to facilitate healing</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adolescents are physically active – engage them in physical activity as an outlet for expressing emotions. • Students at this age have a deeper appreciation of the impact of a death, therefore he or she may choose not to reveal true feelings to family/friends: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid impression of being a burden. • Fear of being mislabeled as “weak”. • Protect loved ones. • They are developing profound relationships and beginning to reach out further beyond their immediate family and social circle of influence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect students to a more global cause that may impact their appreciation of life meaning after a death. • Remind them support is available and prepare them for a potential latent reaction to the death. <i>It is normal for a grief response to occur up to several days after the death.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this age the play can run for 45 minutes or longer. • Incorporate use of symbolism creating “forever bonds”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify one overwhelming quality or characteristic that can represent the true spirit of the individual(s) being honored in the play: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Always smiling” • “Athletic” • “Loved holidays” • Use symbolism to represent that quality throughout the play. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EXAMPLE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A star athlete – use stars in each scene. ▪ Give participants a star symbol as a connection to the individual. • What are some ways I can get/be involved? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect to a cause. • Unite play to events that raise awareness, money, or create opportunity for legislative, system or process changes. • The very act of being involved in the play can be an expression of grief and aid the therapeutic value in creating a soulful connection to the life lost, and may help create a more profound understanding of life meaning.

ALL AGES	<i>Recommended suggestions to facilitate healing</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NORMAL BEHAVIOR: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's reactions to a death will vary depending on their own life experience. • Once children begin the process of healing...a child may recognize advantages when the "Grief Card" is applied: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be cautious of interpreting normal behavior as an everlasting result of overwhelming grief. Continued structure and limit setting is vital to children threatened by loss at an early age. It is proof that someone loves them enough to want them to thrive despite this tragic circumstance. Remember, they are a child first. • WARNING SIGNS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any behavior that is uncharacteristic of an individual and lasting for several days or longer, should be taken seriously. • Watch out for extended periods of exaggerated behaviors such as withdrawal from favorite activities, low performance in school, an excessive need to rebel, a dramatic change in friends, and/or a sudden transformation in appearance. • Younger children may exhibit signs of distress by not eating or talking less. One may also observe children acting out more or witness an increase in temper tantrums. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be patient and understanding. • Enlist the guidance of community grief support groups. • Identify constructive outlets and make them accessible for children to express themselves in a safe and non-threatening environment. • Provide follow-up resources for parents/guardians to facilitate conversations at home. • Enlist the support of school psychologist early in the play – perhaps even warn participants involved in the play of the potential for emotions to rise to the surface. • Participating in the play may reveal hidden fears or deep grief over an earlier death. This reaction may come as a surprise to the individual.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS	<i>Activities to complement learning</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What helps you most when you are sad, confused, or angry? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List everyone's examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have each child write down one thing on a bright piece of paper. • Instruct them to paste the paper somewhere they can view it easily as a reminder of healthy coping behaviors. • Create a memory box: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use magazines, paint or another form of art media to create a collage of memories, thoughts, and/or emotions on the outside of the box. • The inside can hold photos, trinkets, or cherished items to look at and remember.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I know someone just experienced the death of a friend or family member, can I acknowledge that I know with him/her? What if my asking makes them upset? • Is it okay to talk about someone after they die? • Is it okay to ask someone how today is going for them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes when we don't ask, people believe we have forgotten their loved one. Allowing someone to talk about and say the name of their loved one out loud can be very healing. • A group or class can participate in a group acknowledgement of a death – such as a card, planting of a tree, or a special presentation of the Dragonfly Door as a play. All of these acts are kind gestures of support.

- Where can the Dragonfly Door lead you? *What was the contextual framework, the personal connection?*

- Have them identify:
 - Celebration of friendship.
 - Follow-up/through on promises.
 - Join a cause.
 - Leave a legacy.
 - Reminder of the fragility of life.
 - Renewed hope.
 - Volunteer in community.

When exploring life meaning with a child, it is not an intellectual or cognitive exercise but it is a matter of the heart. It is an exploration. It is an exercise in discovery - in both the meaning of life, and what meaning life has for this person... and for you. Jim Greear, hospital chaplain

Other Resources for Teachers and Professionals:

- 1) Loss and Grief Lesson Plan K-3 ([Open PDF](#)) / ([Open HTML](#))
- 2) Science and Life Cycle Lesson Plan K-2 ([Open PDF](#)) / ([Open HTML](#))
- 3) Child Psychologist Comments ([Open in HTML](#))

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