The Death Of A Classmate:

A Teacher's Experience Dealing With Tragedy In The Classroom

By: Beth J. Evans

This past year, one of my fourth grade students died unexpectedly on a Sunday afternoon.

The following morning two of her friends, immediately upon entering the classroom, asked to speak to me and told me that Jill would not be in class for a while. One friend stated that "Jill had passed on" while the other youngster remarked that "Jill has passed out".

Crises do not respect age and, as much as we would like to, we cannot "protect" our students by not acknowledging and dealing with the traumatic events that confront them. We, as teachers, must be as willing and ready to offer the necessary emotional support as we are willing to teach our students academic subjects.

On Monday, my first reaction, a reaction common to all, was one of denial. I explained to the girls that the expression "passed out" is a temporary condition whereas "passed on" means to die. As I defined these phrases I also was trying to deny the possibility that Jill died. Because the girls were so distraught, I assured them I would attempt to get the facts by calling the home and report back to them immediately.

My telephone call to Jill's house confirmed that Jill had died suddenly of what appeared to be a malfunction of her heart. I knew it was important and necessary to work quickly, for the children sensed that something was wrong and rumors had already began to circulate. I had to acknowledge the reality, tell the truth and establish a support system that would meet the emotional needs of the students. G. Kliman, in Psychological Emergencies of Childhood, states that the sooner a child is informed of a tragedy, the more opportunity there is to react with the adult and peer support, and the more organized and supportive the adult structured environment, the better. In addition, not to do this would involve a loss of the children's self-esteem, for I would be giving these fourth-graders the message that it is not important for them to know and to respond as necessary.

After privately talking to the two girls, I gathered the children to discuss Jill's death. I was aware that some children had already confronted death on an intimate level, the death of a parent and, for one student the death of both parents. Thus a discussion of death of a classmate could be a painful, but important, experience. H. Moller notes that school personnel, such as teachers or guidance counselors should provide opportunities for bereaved children to talk about death in order to help children work through their grief.

I informed the students that Jill, a bright, active and well-liked classmate had died and shared with them the few known facts. I shared my shock, sorrow, confusion and anger, and encouraged them

to do so also. Emotions ran high, some cried, some demanded to know how this could happen to an eight year old, and others were angry at the unfairness of losing a friend, classmate and neighbor. During the discussion, the classmates related their personal experiences ranging from death of a grandparent, a neighbor's cat, to the death of a pet dog. The latter youngster was still angry because she was not informed of her pet's death until she returned home from camp at the end of the summer.

I acknowledged that we were entitled to all our feelings, anger, guilt, sadness, the unfairness, the loneliness and the scariness. I emphasized that sharing our feelings would make it easier, but not less painful, for each of us to deal with the tragedy, and face the next few days.

Confronting death leaves us with a variety of responses such as feelings of helplessness, confusion and fear. A. Kliman, in Crises: Psychological First Aid For Recovery and Growth, points out that our psychological defenses at these times can be either adaptive or intellectually, and emotionally immature, and have a harder time distinguishing between reality and fantasy. Therefore, in addition to sharing the truth with them, I wanted the children to participate in the mourning process, providing opportunities to find the most adaptive ways for these youngsters to move from a helpless position to one of coping and mastery of the crisis.

The initial involvement was to collect money and send flowers. It was a true, caring gesture as they collected more than the suggested amount taken from both their snack money and from their piggy banks.

Writing condolence cards to Jill's parents was a very valuable experience, for it was a way to express their grief. The letters were a personal way of expressing sorrow, for most of them related to thoughts about that child and his or her relationship with Jill. Before sending the cards, the children read and shared them with the class.

Since school is a place where learning takes place, I tried to maintain an atmosphere in which it was safe to ask, know and gather facts even on a topic such as death. I incorporated the different aspects of this tragedy into many different curriculum areas.

Jill's death was discussed during our daily current events session. The children brought in the reports of Jill's death that appeared in the local newspaper, as well as her obituary. They discussed these articles with one another including their reactions on how it felt to read about the death of their classmate and friend.

In addition to writing cards, the children read the cards other classes sent to us. Vocabulary words such as obituary, coffin, autopsy, funeral, cremation, wake and in memorium were taught.

One of the most valuable experiences in the mourning process was utilizing the class newspaper. The children dedicated the next issue in Jill's memory. They wrote both factual articles and their own personal memories. All the children had the option to include at least one thought about their classmate. The newspaper served an additional purpose. It was published on what would have been Jill's ninth birthday and gave us another opportunity to share our feelings. These fourth graders eagerly shared their copy of the newspaper with schoolmates, friends and family.

The school nurse explained the importance of the heart and how it works. These lessons in science and health also emphasized that it is the norm for almost all children to reach adulthood, thus reassuring these students that their lives were not in danger. It was necessary to frequently remind them that they were healthy children who most likely would grow up to lead normal, active lives and that sudden death of children rarely happens.

This also lead to a discussion on the average life span in the U.S., thus involving math. Some students chose to research what the average life span is while others reported their findings with graphs and charts.

Our science unit on "Living Things" enabled us to discuss the life cycle of a leaf and that of a human being. The children made charts illustrating different stages of human and plant growth. They also observed and logged the stages of development of plans that were in the classroom. This was valuable to the children for M. Rudolph, in Should The Children Know?, emphasizes that children who have experiences with the living things, including dying plants, will become familiar with the life cycle and will gradually understand human health.

Many children express the desire to attend either the wake or the funeral. First, we discussed some of the funeral rituals of different religious groups, such as a wake, the sitting of "shiva", and open and closed coffins.

When children know what to expect at a wake or funeral, they are better able to handle a difficult emotional experience. Attending the wake or funeral would help to confirm that which was hard for the children to believe - that Jill was dead. Also, G. Kliman notes that children between the ages of three and ten tend to invent elaborate resurrection fantasies.

Therefore, it is less frightening for children to participate in such procedures as a funeral and "see" for themselves rather than deal with their fantasies and perceptions of what is happening.

It is the policy of the school board that parental permission is required for children to leave the school building during the school day. I contacted all the parents and encouraged them to allow their children to attend the funeral. We, as educators, have a responsibility to help parents understand that we neither protect nor help children by not allowing them to participate in rituals such as funerals. Since not all parents agreed to let their children attend the funeral, I, and those classmates accompanied by a parent, represented these children.

After returning from the funeral, the children shared what had happened as well as their feelings. The children were open and interested in knowing specific details and many of their questions, such as what did the coffin look like, were her eyes open, did she look the same as when she was alive, were answered. This was appropriate behavior, for A. Gordon observes, in They Need To Know, that children from ages seven to eleven are at a developmental stage where they may be more fascinated with the physical aspects of disposal than with the emotional aspects of the funeral.

Furthermore, the children's interest in knowing the truth was not morbid, but rather realistic, healthy and left less to their imagination. What is not known is usually more frightening than that which is known. By talking about that which is scary, we can help children deal with it.

Following Jill's death, I scratched our normal schedule and allowed time to discuss this tragic event whenever the need arose. But, I was also careful not to dwell on this topic for too long.

For the first week following the announcement of Jill's death, there were many requests to see the school nurse. A. Kliman alerts us that children who are friends and classmates of the deceased child are "indirect victims" and are subject to "the guilt of the survivor", which manifests itself in new physical and psychosomatic illnesses and in accidents, both at home and at school. This was evident in my classroom. The children had complains of hearts that hurt (the cause of Jill's death) as well as stomachaches, headaches and frequent minor accidents resulting in limping legs and sprained fingers. The school nurse, after examining the children and being aware of their vulnerabilities as "indirect victims", was supportive and reassured the children that they were not seriously ill and helped them "talk out" the reasons for their illnesses.

Jackson explains that the feelings of grief for children are more likely to be worked out through their behavior. He states that this can include angry, boisterous and noisy behavior. During this period, I observed that the children's feelings and emotions spilled into their behavior both inside and outside the classroom. Bickering, unwarranted outbursts and needless arguments took place in the cafeteria and on the playground. Their disruptive behavior gradually subsided as their angry feelings were "talked out", and channeled into more positive behavior. At this time, some children found it difficult to concentrate and were inattentive, others were "Models" of good behavior.

Fourth graders are chronologically completing the stage of magical thinking when they believe what they think, wish or say can make something happen. Under stress it is easy for all of us, especially children, to regress to this stage. G. Kliman states that, "children feel the emotion of guilt even more intensely if they happen to be young enough to imagine they are magically responsible for the person's death."

Before Jill's death, one child wished that I would move Jill's seat; she did not want to sit next to her. Another student was worried, he had pushed Jill in the lunch line. These are just two instances where it was necessary to remind them that their thoughts or actions did not cause Jill's death, thus helping to relieve them of guilty feelings.

At the children's request, Jill's desk remained in the room for the next few weeks, making the loss of their classmate very real and concrete. The desk became a link which enabled the classmates to reflect on her absence, their sadness and loneliness and provided the healing time to help them accept and recover from their loss.

It is important for teachers was well as parents to realize that, when an important person dies, it is not helpful to immediately discard all evidence of that person's life. To do so gives a message to others, including children, that the deceased person was not important, and/or we didn't care about that person. It leaves children confused for they are then unable to express their grief, which involves talking, sharing and remembering with the family and friends, thereby making mourning that much harder. Grollman emphasizes this point by urging us not to attempt to eradicate the memory of the loved one. Children want some tangible reminders of the deceased and pictures are helpful for remembering, as are other mementos.

Her work, especially her autobiography and self-portrait, done at the beginning of the school year remained on display. The children would frequently read and look at these and then discuss with me or a few of their classmates her wishes, hopes and facts of her life gleaned from the autobiography. These fourth graders were truly mourning in an age appropriate way.

The children will not forget Jill. At appropriate times, she will be remembered, such as when the class photos arrive, for the children are now able to share and express their feelings.

Mourning involved discussing a scary subject and realizing that our classmate was no longer with us, except in our memories. But it is more important that the children are now able to continue growing, strengthened and prepared both emotionally and academically to face life.

Summary

Educators have a responsibility to help children deal with crises, such as death, by doing the following:

1. Acknowledge the reality as soon as possible.
2. Provide an environment where children feel comfortable discussing their feelings.
3. Provide learning opportunities with curriculum so children may understand what has transpired.

It is my hope that the means I used to incorporate the subject of death into the curriculum can be adapted by other educators. Additional resource material can be found in They Need To Know and Discussing Death.

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Family Loss Center
Children's Hospital of Wisconsin
P. O. Box 1997/MS# 603
Milwaukee, WI 53201
(414) 266-3350