

Grief Education for Preteens

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INTRODUCTION

Death is a difficult topic to discuss for most everyone regardless of age. It is especially difficult to discuss with young children or adolescents. Most of us have a difficult time dealing with the death of someone very close to us. Children may have an especially hard time dealing with the loss of a parent, sibling, or grandparent. In these perilous times in which we live, a child may even have to deal with the sudden and sometimes tragic death of a playmate or classmate. When children or adolescents lose someone who has been a part of their lives and activities, the normal and predictable response to loss is grief. The concern is not whether the youth will grieve, but whether his or her grief will be healthy and functional or pathological and dysfunctional (Parkes, 1990). This curriculum unit was written to help children ages 9 to 12 understand and cope with the loss of a loved one.

I am a teacher of children with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and various other health impairments. The students who attend the inner-city school where I teach are considered at-risk. The ages of my students range from 9 to 13 years. I teach grades first through fifth with the majority of my students falling in grades four and five. Their reading and writing skills are at least 2 or more years below grade level. It will be beneficial for my students to learn about this topic because they come face to face with issues of health, illness, and death in their everyday lives. From dealing with terminally ill parents, to ailing grandparents who are their primary caretakers, to their own health issues – the children of Houston’s inner-city community are forced to deal with issues of health, illness, medicine, and death on an ongoing basis.

This unit is being developed with the hope that they can be taught to increase their knowledge thru life lessons that will help improve their quality of life. I want to empower my students to take charge of their own health at an early age and to be aware that the choices they make now will have an impact on their health, life span, and well being as adults.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Grief is a healthy, human response to the death of a loved one; loss of a pet, property, or job; significant change in health and wellness due to injury or illness; change in family unit due to divorce or separation. These may seem like adult problems but each and every one of these situations can have a tremendous impact on the life and learning of a child or teenager. Everyday there is a new story being reported as children fall victim to crime, accidents, and disasters. You cannot turn on the radio or television without hearing about a child related incident. Because of the very violent society that we live in today, our children are having to face the reality of death at very young ages.

The nature of death in the lives of children and adolescents has become more violent in recent years and is more likely to involve peers (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 1996).

One out of every 20 children will face the death of a parent during their childhood, and one of every 5 children will experience the death of a parent by age 16 (Los Angeles Unified School

District, 1994). Overall, the prevalence of death in the lives of children and adolescents is increasing (Deaton & Berkman, 1995).

Writing about this topic has personally helped me to grieve the loss of my favorite cousin to cancer. Writing this curriculum unit is and has been therapeutic for me. It is my intention that this unit will be useful to all educators and therapeutic in helping grieving students get through a difficult time in their life.

This unit will focus on aspects of grieving in children and youth related to the death of significant others, specifically parents, siblings, and friends. Students need to know and understand death. Adolescents can be taught ways to cope with the loss of someone close to them whom they loved. The first four chapters of the book entitled *Death* by Barbara Sprung each deals with a different kind of death. The fifth chapter deals with the feelings and emotions that you may experience when someone dies—grief, sadness, anger, confusion, disbelief, and fear. The final chapter is about different ways in which people grieve and learn to cope with the death of someone they love. Each chapter begins with a story about a preteen who has experienced the death of someone close. This book is very informative and useful providing a list of resources for further reading and a list of places to call for additional help. At the end of this unit, students should be well equipped to cope and help others in their family during a time of loss.

ENHANCING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE

Understanding grief can help adults and children alike to face the reality of death and deal with the feelings of fear, loneliness, despair, and helplessness. Sprung (1998) explains, “We learn at an early age that people and all other living things die, and that death is the natural end to life.” A unit on learning how to grieve will help students who experience loss to deal with their feelings of anger, fear, or depression. They will be taught to recognize the stages of grief and mourning. Students will learn to recover and grow to be a stronger person. They will learn that by accepting their loss that they can live a happy, full life. They will also learn ways to honor or remember someone who has died.

If you accept that many children and adolescents experience loss through death, and that grief is a natural and normal reaction to such a loss, then grief-management techniques and tools should be an integral part of school support services (Deaton & Berkan, 1995).

Schools should be *proactive* in their endeavors to assist students who are grieving a death (Brock et al., 1996). Schools should have a plan in place for such unforeseen and unexpected student or faculty deaths. Oates (1993) asserted that when death affects a school community, there can be resultant chaos or an orderly resolution of the crisis and trauma: “The outcome largely depends on how effectively school staff responds, and effective responses require planning.”

This unit will serve as a guide for teachers and other school staff who can provide timely assistance to grieving students. In studying this unit the student will learn to recognize the causes of grief; identify the stages of grief; and use available resources to help them cope with their own feelings of grief. Students will also develop reading and writing skills by demonstrating a basic understanding of culturally diverse written texts and applying knowledge of literary elements to understand culturally diverse written texts.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

The student will be introduced to the topic through the use of literature, current events that relate to the topic and children’s movies that are relevant to the topic of children dealing with the issue of death. A good literature book to use for an introductory lesson for younger students is *Everett Anderson’s Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton, which is the story of a young boy who is having

a difficult time coming to terms with his grief after his father dies. The text is very simple, and the compelling black and white pencil sketches of Ann Grifalconi help convey the somber mood of the story. After reading the story, we will discuss and explore the feelings the boy experienced. Students will also get in touch with their feelings through the use of journal writing.

Teacher will create a special reading center of books cited in the bibliography and other books that deal with the topic of death of a friend (parent or sibling). Lessons and activities are designed for students in third to sixth grade. However most can be modified to facilitate use with younger and older students. I have tried to include a range of books for reading levels one through three as my special needs students include reading levels kindergarten to third grade.

A great chapter book to read with the preteen age group is *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. This Newbery Medal book about ten-year-old Jess and Leslie who form a friendship that is shattered by her untimely death will not burden down the struggling reader with its short chapters. Chapters may be read aloud by teacher or students that are strong readers as the students read from their own copy. The teacher can lead the class in a discussion of important events in each chapter. A word wall can also be started for new and or unfamiliar vocabulary. Students are free to read on their own and to read ahead.

Recent current events either nationally or locally can also be used as a focal point for teaching this unit. Accidental and tragic incidents involving school age children fill every form of media. Suicide among our teenage population is also a national concern. The topic of suicide is more suitable for the middle school and high school grades. I have included references to the topic of suicide in the bibliography.

TYPES OF STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

Keep a Personal Journal

Objective: The student will within a given context, produce an effective composition for a specific purpose.

Writing about your feelings of loss by keeping a daily journal is a good way to start the healing process. Writing will help you sort out feelings of hurt, anger, confusion, or pain). For your writing to be effective, you should commit to writing down your feelings for 15 to 20 minutes. Write down whatever thoughts pop into your mind. Putting your thoughts and feelings down on paper will help them to lose their intensity or power to stay in your mind.

Personal Loss History

Objective: The student will recognize appropriate organization of ideas in written text.

Completing a personal loss history can help you examine and understand each of your personal losses. Divide a sheet of paper into three parts. Label one column Major or Minor Loss, the middle column Loss Event, and the last column Change after Loss. Start by writing down the losses you have experienced in the middle column. Then decide whether it was a major or a minor loss in the first column. In the right column write down any and all changes that occurred because of the loss. The change may have been positive or negative. Your Personal Loss History will help you see how your life has changed as a result of each event.

Compile an Assemblage/Memory Box

Objective: The student will use a variety of materials (e.g., paper, found objects, cardboard, string, plastic, fiber) to create a COLLAGE.

Have the student collect small objects that hold special meaning for/of the person being remembered. You may have small personal items that belonged to the deceased. Jewelry, combs, hairpins, coins, hobby related items, and small photos are types of items to collect for

your memory box. Select a box suitable for holding the objects you have selected. Cigar boxes, small hatboxes, shoeboxes, gift boxes, and cardboard boxes used for packing are all suitable. Demonstrate several ways to arrange a collection of selected items in a box. Glue the objects in an arrangement that is pleasing. After letting the assemblage dry, paint one color using a mixture of white glue and one color of tempera paint. If a photo has been included remember not to paint over the photo. Allow your box to dry completely before handling.

Design a Sympathy Card

Objective: The student will create an artistic cover using various mediums to generate a front cover for a sympathy card. The student will write an original poem that expresses their feelings for a message of sympathy.

Materials: chart paper, colored paper, crayons, markers, watercolor, scissors, sympathy cards to display and use as models

Discuss ways to help a grieving friend feel better, including sending them a sympathy card. Model for students how to write a message for a sympathy card. Show examples of actual sympathy cards. Brainstorm with students and write several different ideas on the board. Include messages written specifically for a friend, relative, parent of a friend, or family of a teacher. Share poems that may be appropriate. Encourage children to write their own original poems. Introduce various card formats. Provide children with printed directions of how to make cards with pop-ups, flaps, and cut out windows. Demonstrate one or more of the different styles.

Offer opportunities for students to create cards for other occasions like birthdays or when someone they know is in the hospital. Place materials for creating original get well and birthday cards in the writing center for future use.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One

Keeping a Personal Diary or Daily Journal

Using a small spiral notebook or a bound writing book let students choose one of the sentence starters below to begin their journal entry for the day. You may choose to select a topic and write it on the board. Allow students 15 to 20 minutes to respond to the writing prompt. Encourage students to write in complete sentences. Spelling and grammar is not emphasized at this point. The main focus should be on the students getting their feelings written down on paper. They may even include drawings. Student responses should only be shared with the class if the student is comfortable with and willing to share his or her personal thoughts with others.

1. One of my sweetest memories is of ...
2. One funny memory of you
3. I think of you whenever I hear
4. I am reminded of you when I smell
5. I feel sad when
6. My happiest day was when
7. A funny story you told me
8. I always laugh when
9. I will never forget
10. The worst day of my life was
11. I am afraid that
12. I feel angry because
13. My wish for tomorrow
14. If I could talk to you one more time
15. Last night I dreamed
16. Grandmother would always say
17. Granddaddy would always
18. I loved my mom so much because
19. I miss my father because
20. (Name) was my best friend because
21. Today I feel
22. The last time I saw
23. If I could change
24. When I close my eyes
25. I am sorry that

Lesson Two

Family Tree and Timeline

In this activity students will gather information about family members to complete their family tree and study changes over short and long periods.

Objective: Students will (1) identify changes in their family over a hundred year time period, and (2) create a timeline to illustrate patterns of change over time.

Materials: roll of butcher paper or newsprint for timeline, colored markers, poster boards

Activities

Making a Timeline / Making a Family Tree

1. Ask students to gather information about the history of their family. Tell them to start with their parents by collecting names, dates of birth, and dates of death. They will also need this information for all children born to this union, both parents of their mother, and both parents of their father. Certificates of birth, family bibles, and death certificates can also provide useful sources for locating this information.
2. Tell students that they are going to create a timeline of the history of their family. Students should compile information including any special dates like weddings and graduations from school or college.
3. Show the students how to show decades, periods of ten years on their sheet of butcher paper. They should draw or write important family events on the time at the appropriate year. Old photographs can be used in place of drawings.
4. Have students create a “My Family Tree” poster. Information would include mother’s and father’s names, dates of birth, places of birth, parent’s siblings, and a photo of the parents.

Assessment

Ask students to display their timelines and discuss any trends they notice in marriages, births, and/or deaths.

Lesson Three

Tree Lifecycle

In this activity students will discover that trees have a lifecycle that is similar to that of other living things. They will investigate a tree’s role in the ecosystem at each stage of its life. Select several books on trees from the school library including field guides and stories. Start a “Tree Source” center, so the students have easy access to materials for researching trees.

Teacher will read aloud *The Grandad Tree* written by Trish Cooke.

It is the story of the changing nature of a family’s apple tree, as it grows and goes through the seasons reminding two children of their grandfather, who is gone but lives on in their memories. Children will be fascinated and drawn into the story by the beautiful pastel illustrations of Sharon Wilson. Other titles that may be used are *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, *The Grandpa Tree* by Mike Donahue, *Apple Tree* by Peter Parnell, *Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest* by Lynne Cherry, *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia.

Science Concept

While every organism goes through a lifecycle of growth, maturity, decline, and death its role in the ecosystem also changes.

Objective

Students will (1) diagram the lifecycle of a tree, (2) compare a tree lifecycle to a human lifecycle, and (3) explain the role that each stage of a tree's life plays in the forest or other ecosystem.

Materials

Art materials, poster boards, Tree Lifecycle Worksheet

Activity

1. Discuss the idea of lifecycles by asking students to describe the lifecycle, or history of a person. Make sure students include childhood, teenage years, young adulthood, and so forth in the discussion. Write these stages on the board. Ask students to identify the different jobs, roles, or things that a person might do in each stage of the lifecycle. Next, ask them to describe the lifecycle of a tree in similar terms. [Note: A tree's lifecycle will include seed, sprout, sapling, maturity, death, and decomposition.]
2. Distribute art materials and ask students to create the lifecycle of a tree, from birth through death and decomposition. Students should include at least three stages or events in their lifecycle (e.g., a forest fire or insect invasion). Encourage them to research a particular species of tree for accuracy in life characteristics, climate, and environment. Remind students that one event that affects the tree (e.g., insect damage) is likely to clear the way for another event (e.g., a hole for nesting birds).

The lifecycle could be represented by a circle on the page, with illustrations and a label for each stage or event, or could be shown in a line on a long, narrow piece of paper taped together at the ends.

3. Using the teacher-created "Tree Life Cycle" student page, have students fill in the details for at least three stages or events. Some items may stay the same throughout the tree's life. Information on this sheet would include the following:
 - Common name of the tree
 - Scientific name of the tree
 - Characteristics of the tree
 - Lifecycle stage 1, including the age of the tree, role in the ecosystem, and a list of things that the tree depends on to survive
 - Lifecycle stage 2, including the age of the tree, role in the ecosystem, and a list of things that the tree depends on to survive
 - Lifecycle stage 3, including the age of the tree, role in the ecosystem, and a list of things that the tree depends on to survive
4. Give students the opportunity to share their lifecycles with the entire group. Create an exhibit by mounting all the lifecycles around the classroom. Invite other classes in to view your students' "History of the Forest" exhibit.

Assessment

Have students write an imaginative story about the lifecycle of the particular tree they created. The story can be written as a fable in which the trees, plants, and animals can talk.

In the story, students should include at least three stages or events of the tree's life, such as sprouting from a seed, or dying and decomposing into the soil. Ideally the life events should show a cause-effect connection. There are several workbooks called *Project Learning Tree* that contain activities that can be used with this lesson.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited:

Books

Bratman, Fred. (1998). *Everything You Need to Know When A Parent Dies*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc.

A guide to coping with the stresses and emotions arising after the death of a parent

Clifton, Lucille. (1983). *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., LLC

Cooke, Trish. (2000). *The Grandad Tree*. Mass: Candlewick Press.

Kuehn, Eileen. (2001). *Death: Coping With the Pain*. Minnesota: Capstone Press.

Defines death and how it may effect teens. Describes death as part of life and ways in which people react to death. Provides ideas for dealing with death, as well as how to move beyond it and return to a normal life. Also gives tips on helping a friend experiencing some ones' death.

Kuehn, Eileen. (2001). *Loss: Understanding the Emptiness*. Minnesota: Capstone Press.

Defines loss and many ways in which it affects teens. Provides ideas to deal with loss in a helpful way, as well as tips to move beyond it and get on with life. Gives ways to help a friend deal with loss.

Paterson, Katherine. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers

Sprung, Barbara. (1998). *Death*. New Jersey: Steck-Vaughn Company.

Discusses what it feels like to experience the death of a loved one, outlines the stages of grief and mourning, and describes ways to honor or remember someone who has died.

Wallace-Brodeur, R. (1995). *Goodbye, Mitch*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company.

Articles

Mauk, G.W., and Sharpnack, J.D. Utah State U. "Grief" National Association of School Psychologists, 1999.

Interviews

Mitchell, Roseleta. April 6, 2001. Personal Interview: Houston, Texas.

Ex-member of local chapter of The Compassionate Friends at death of 9-year-old son

Internet Sites

Counseling for Loss and Life Changes. www.counselingforloss.com

Links to other grief-related Internet sites

Death and Dying. www.death-dying.com/teen.html

Articles and a special chat room for teens

Hospice Net. www.hospicenet.org

Helping teens cope with grief due to life-threatening illnesses

SA\VE Suicide Awareness Voices of Education. www.Save.org

Online grief and outreach support group for survivors of suicide and others

Hot Lines

National AIDS Hot Line. 1-800-342-AIDS (1-800-342-2437)

Youth Crisis Hot Line. 1-800-HIT-HOME (1-800-448-4663)

Useful Addresses

Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC)

638 Prospect Avenue

Hartford, CT 06105-4298

www.adec.org

Promotes information on death education and makes referrals.

The Compassionate Friends

P. O. Box 3696

Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696

www.compassionatefriends.org

International self-help group with many publications on bereavement

National Directory of Children's Grief Support Systems

P. O. Box 86852
Portland, OR 97286
(503) 775-5683

National Funeral Directors Association

Washington DC Office
400 C Street Northeast
Washington, DC 20002
www.nfda.org

Provides information on all forms of bereavement, funerals, and various ways to handle bodies, such as burial or cremation.

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

1700 Diagonal Road, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314
www.nho.org

Provides names of hospices and related service organizations in different areas

Teen Age Grief (TAG)

P. O. Box 220034
Newhall, CA 91322-0034
www.smartlink.net/~tag/info.html

Articles about grieving and teenagers; provides links to other sites