Discussing Death with Children

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Children's Conceptions of Death, Richard Lonetto, Vol. 3 in *The Springer Series on Death and Suicide.* Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1980. 219 pp. Price $23.75. ISBN 0-8261-2550-6 hardcover. ISBN 0-8261-2551-4 paper (not yet available in Canada.)

Children's Conceptions of Death concludes with a quotation by psychologist K.O. Budmen: "most of a child's education is for life which leaves him helpless in dealing with death. Such neglect is inexcusable and unnecessary." Prof. Lonetto says he was moved to write his book because this "neglect" disturbed him profoundly. By nature North Americans are a very death-defying society, he says. We shield ourselves and our children from first-hand experience or even talk of dying or death. We excuse ourselves by claiming that children under ten years of age would find the subject frightening, cannot understand it and do not think about such things in any case. This, says Prof. Lonetto, is "a self-protective delusion." As soon as a child has some inkling about cause and effect, he begins to know about death.

Why ought one to discuss such things with children? Because it is part of the concern of children, part of their maturing process and something they must learn to cope with, maintains the author. "Discussions about death . . . however . . . should recognize and respect the unique reactions and choices of children while helping them develop concepts of personal existence," he writes.

Prof. Lonetto's book seeks to illuminate these "unique reactions and choices" of children aged three to twelve years. The book explores the three-to-five-year-olds' magical-cyclical perspective of life and death as being interchangeable and the six-to-eight-year-olds' conceptions of death as an external agent, i.e., in the form of a monster, ghost or invisible demon, who carries off the ill and the aged. It is in this latter age group that children begin to associate "being old" with death.

Prof. Lonetto refers to a study undertaken by Jean Piaget that shows that "by the age of six years the child has added to his death concepts the components of causality, dysfunctionality, universality and irrevocability." Prof. Lonetto goes on to contend that "children from nine to twelve years old seem capable not only of perceiving death as biological, universal and inevitable, but of coming to an appreciation of the abstract nature of death and of describing the feelings generated by this quality."

In short, Prof. Lonetto's book shows that whether adults are willing to admit it or not, children's ideas about death are being formed as they develop in other ways. An examination of these concepts, therefore, goes hand in hand with an overall examination of what children are capable of at each stage of growing up.

Children's Conceptions of Death is given immediacy through a large number of accompanying drawings by children in the three age groups, a remarkable conversation with five-year-old Jennifer and a powerful and poignant story told by a fatally ill eight-year-old a week before she died. This latter account is contained in a section devoted to the special needs of the fatally ill child. It is followed by a section on childhood bereavement contributed by Steve Fleming. Both areas have also been neglected by researchers, the book reveals. "Research into the mental life of the terminally ill child is virtually non-existent," Prof. Lonetto declares. It has been found, however, that these children's conceptions of death keep pace with those of their healthy counterparts, but they experience, much more than chronically ill children for example, great anxiety.

So often parents, believing that open discussion with the child would shatter his already inadequate defenses, try to shield him from the truth about his illness. Prof. Lonetto believes that the child, then failing to find support and comfort, may resort to fantasies which may be more destructive and frightening than the reality of his condition.

Steve Fleming's section on childhood bereavement and, in particular, the examination of M. Chetnik's study (1970) of six-year-old Mark, whose mother was dying, and eventually did die, of cancer is also an important addition. Mark, because he denied and fantasized about his mother's dying, was seen as not able to assess the situation. In fact, as researchers discovered, he was reacting with anger and helplessness as he saw changes in the dying woman which made her seem less and less "his mother". Chetnik explains: "If she could be changed, lose her identity, could it also happen to him?"

Prof. Lonetto concludes: "Information [even about death] can be comforting when the realities it portrays are less fearful than fantasies. The goal of discussion with children becomes one of helping them, and ourselves, to live more freely." This book furnishes useful background information for those who work with children suffering bereavement and, in addition, it gives perspective to certain of our cultural patterns.

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