The meaning of death for children and adolescents

Maare Tamm

Maare Tamm, *PhD*

Lecturer in Psychology and Health, Boden University College of Health Sciences, Boden, Sweden

The results of our project indicate that children and adolescents have many, multi-faceted concepts of death, and that the ideas which go to make up these concepts come from many different sources. Further, we have shown that an understanding of death is related to both age and gender. Compared with teenagers, young children think about death in a different and more concrete way; and girls' ideas about death differ markedly from those of boys.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

Six to nine years old

In the case of the younger children in our studies, we found that the six- and nine-year olds' understanding of death mainly had to do with biological death. Children viewed death as an external force affecting us, often violently, through murder, war or accident. Boys, in particular, drew violent death scenes and described how one could be killed in war or murdered. This trend was strongest among nine-year-old boys.

Parallel to the tendency to associate death with violence, children in this age group tend to associate death with funeral rites of various kinds. For them, thoughts revolved around the sorrow and longing we feel when a close relative or beloved pet dies and is buried. Girls were more apt to emphasise their emotions than boys. They could describe sorrow and longing in the event of a death and fear and panic in connection with thoughts of death, while boys were more given to describing what actually happened, how funeral rites were observed, how cremation took place and what became of the body in the grave.

Many of the nine-year-olds who had suffered the loss of a pet dwelt much on the sorrow they had felt and on the burial rites they had performed on these occasions. The observance of these rites seemed important for the children. Only then, the children felt, had one behaved in an ethically correct manner towards one's beloved pet.

When questioned as to what causes death, most children in this age group associate death with old age and illness. Surprisingly often, however, violence is cited as a cause of death. Here we see, from an adult point of view, some extraordinary combinations: 'You can die if you're old or get hit by a car.' These associations between illness and old age on the one hand, and violence and accident on the other hand, are reflected in common notions of death in our society. The mass media image of death is often of a violent character.

As to what happens after death, more boys than girls in this age group were satisfied with a biological explanation. Life ends at the grave. The body is buried and decomposes. However, more girls than boys prefer the explanation of an afterlife in Heaven. This is explained by a nine-year-old girl in the following manner:

'The soul, which is in the body, goes up to heaven. There, it finds a magical landscape where water and fruit and things like that can be formed.'

A religious Heaven inhabited by God and angels is conspicuously absent in these explanations, even if most younger children express a belief that people become angels when their earthly life ends.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Tamm has here summarised for English-speaking readers a study, published mainly in Swedish, of children's ideas about death based on a survey of about 500 children in day-care and school in Boden, a small town in Northern Sweden. As others have found (eg Anthony[1]) in studies done decades ago, there are age and gender differences in children's understanding of death but, it seems, few secular differences: explanations of a religious nature, (heaven, hell, angels) appear in the later studies as in the earlier. Anthony's original study was done in 1945 just after World War II, so violent imagery could be forgiven. Tamm's study was done 50 years later, in a country which had not had a war for centuries, yet the young boys' imagery continued to be more violent than the girls'. The new genetic studies on structural differences between the X and Y chromosomes[2] may help us to understand the origins of the fundamental differences between the sexes in terms of both the way in which we perceive the world around us and the way in which we interact with it socially. Such belligerence clearly once had survival value but an important task for parents and educators for the future is to find a way of helping boys to modify their instinctive aggression to meet the needs of a different social world.

1. Anthony S. The Discovery of Death in Childhood and After. Harmondsworth, Middx, UK: Penguin, 1971.
2. Skuse D. Sex differences in cognition and behaviour - the role of the X chromosome. Paper given at the Third European Conference of the Association for Child Psychology and Psychiatry, Glasgow, August 1996.

ADOLESCENTS

Young people aged 12, 15 and 18

We observed a greater tendency towards more abstract thought and symbolism in the upper age groups (12, 15 and 18 years). When asked what they think of when they hear the word 'death' younger adolescents sometimes give answers which are of a very poetic and metaphysical nature. One 12-year-old girl expressed her thoughts on death in the following way:

'What happens when you die, are gone and buried? Will millions of years sail past without me or will I become another person and still think that I am me? Or will I never know that I once existed? Or will I go to Heaven, where my dog and grandfather are? Do all the

birds who have been killed by cats fly up there, invisible to us down below?

Even among the older children, more boys than girls regard death, from a biological point of view, as the cessation of bodily life. This trend is most prominent in the oldest group: half of the 18-year-old boys, but only 13% of the girls of the same age, prefer this type of explanation. After death there is absolutely nothing, they say. The body returns to the ground.

As for considerations of the afterlife, Heaven is no longer offered as the exclusive explanation of an existence after death, as it was among children in the lower age group. What we now see are reflections about the process of dying, rebirth and of an afterlife in which one is reunited with dead friends and relatives. Sometimes what is expressed is only a hope that there may be some sort of afterlife.

Thoughts about reincarnation and death in the form of 'near-death experiences' are common among girls aged 12 and older. A third of the girls in these age groups express thoughts of this nature and draw pictures depicting death as a journey through a dark tunnel toward a golden light in the distance. It is here that cultural influences are most evident. It is just this sort of idea of death that has been portrayed in our society in recent times.

Such speculations are practically non-existent among boys. To the extent that they reflect at all on a continued existence, they are more interested in Hell than Heaven. They consider the possibility of two alternatives at the final judgement after death – one directing the individual to Heaven, the other, to Hell. Their drawings of Hell scenes, which are very illustrative and detailed, describe graphically the horrors awaiting those fated to an afterlife in Hell. These representations are inspired by the cover art of video films and CDs and also, probably, by horror films and films of violence.

Personifications of death, ie representations of death in human form, appear to a certain extent among all age groups, with a predominance among the boys, though only when concepts of death are expressed pictorially. Verbally, only a few subjects described death in human terms. The form taken by drawn personifications of death is inspired by cultural archetypes, with death appearing as the grim Reaper, as a skeleton or a devil-like figure. Only a few younger boys drew death in a personal manner, as a snowman wearing a hat and bearing a large knife or some other weapon.

AN EXCITING ENTERPRISE

Questions about life and death are always present in human consciousness, from the young child's initial curiosity over why flowers wilt and die, to thoughts in old age about the transitory nature of life. Research within this sphere of enquiry is an exciting enterprise which will develop and branch off in many directions.

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Winston's Wish (Gloucestershire, UK)

In 1992 Julie Stokes, a consultant clinical psychologist working with a hospital palliative care team, used a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship to visit bereavement centres in the USA and Canada. Inspired by what she saw there, she returned to found a grief support programme for 'every child in Gloucestershire who had experienced the death of a mum, dad, brother or sister'. A bear, named Winston in appreciation of the fellowship, symbolised the child-led approach, instrumental in the success of the programme.

The aims of the programme are:

- to organise a service which can offer an intervention to all children bereaved of an immediate family member, with the intention of reducing the risk of psychological and somatic problems in later life;
- to provide a supportive and educational environment where grieving children can share their experiences, and increase their knowledge and understanding of death, as they move through their own healing process;
- to respond to the individual needs of each child and its family, promoting open communication between them and enabling them to continue their lives in a meaningful way;
- to support care givers, schools and the wider community in responding to the needs of bereaved children;
- to increase awareness and understanding of the grieving process;
- to provide relevant support to other groups endeavouring to establish, or already providing, child bereavement services;
- to work towards the development of a national network for child bereavement services.

Winston's Wish is based at the Gloucester Royal Hospital and jointly funded from statutory and voluntary sources. Julie leads a small, multi-disciplinary professional team, supported by a larger team of trained volunteers. Together they provide a range of services including individual work, group work and residential weekends. A variety of social/therapeutic activities are also offered, designed to enable children and their parents to maintain friendships developed through the clinical programme, and to acknowledge difficult times during the year, like Christmas. To date 200 children have been referred each year, 75% of all bereaved children in Gloucestershire.

At the centre of the programme are the children's residential weekends[1], held five times a year in the Forest of Dean. Here children are helped to acknowledge and express their feelings, to understand more about illness and the causes of death, to learn that it is still OK to have fun and, most importantly, to meet other children who have had a similar experience.

Diana Crossley, Macmillan child psychologist on the team, explains, 'We have worked hard to offer a range of child-focused activities. These are all theoretically based and build on each other to create an effective therapeutic process'. An important focus of the weekend is a candlelight ceremony when even children who have not expressed grief since a death can usually connect with their sadness. The children are then encouraged to remember the dead person with their families by lighting candles at home on special occasions. Every child leaves the camp with their own Winston teddy bear and a memory book to help them to remember that they are not alone.

During camp, a non-residential support group for the parents gives information about what the children are experiencing and provides a safe and supportive environment in which they too are helped to cope with their own grief. 'After School' groups are organised for children who have experienced a difficult bereavements, eg suicide or violent death (again a group for their parents is held at the same time). Individual therapy is offered to young people who are experiencing more complicated bereavements; this is about 10% of all children referred.

Tim Gisborne, a teacher employed by Winston's Wish, has invited all