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EDITORIAL

Dora Black

In this issue we begin a series of practical papers describing techniques skilled practitioners have used successfully to help children to understand the basic concepts of death and to come to terms with the death of a parent or sibling. 'How-to-do-it' articles by experienced and skilled counsellors cannot substitute for comprehensive training and individual or small-group supervision, but they can augment them and give people ideas. I will always be grateful to Erna Furman, an American psychoanalyst, who many years ago wrote a paper on work she did with a boy whose father had committed suicide. How do you talk to a child about suicide? Furman explained that father had had a 'mind-sickness', and that had twisted his reasoning. The sickness made him think that he was of no value and that his family would be better off without him. The child understood how a body-sickness could twist the functioning of an arm or leg and lead to disability and was able to use this explanation to help make sense of the hitherto inexplicable behaviour of his father. I have used that method, adapted to my own style of working, innumerable times since, with apparent success. Another technique I use is adapted from the work of Don Jackson, one of the pioneers in family therapy in the USA. He would begin, in an engaging drawl, 'Well I guess what's happening here is ... ', followed by a pearl of wisdom and the afterthought, ' ... and I'm a purty good guesser', which made it clear to the family that they had better sit up and take note because he wasn't your ordinary everyday guesser but an expert in the art! We hope that you will be able to adapt some of Peta Hemmings' good ideas to your own work with children.

How do you talk to a child about suicide? Furman explained to the boy that his father had had a 'mind-sickness' and that had twisted his reasoning. The sickness had made him think that he was of no value and that his family would be better off without him.

All our interventions and counselling must be informed by the most up-to-date research and by the insights from those who bring academic rigour to the observation of behaviour. The paper by Stroebe and Schut we publish in this issue is one such work, and the book by Parkes and his colleagues reviewed by Ofra Ayalon, *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*, is another. Both works bring us closer to understanding how, although the experience of bereavement is universal, the expression of grief can be affected by our cultural and religious affinities – essential reading for all of us working in multicultural communities.