

Role of Primary School Professionals in Helping Primary School Children Cope with the Death of a Loved One

Marija Šlutej

International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia
marija.slutej@gmail.com

Abstract

Most of us experience the death of a loved one at some point in our lives and it can leave a significant impact on one's life. Professionals at primary schools play an important role in children's grieving after a loved one's death as children spend a lot of their time at school. This article is mainly focused on the research of specific needs of children and adolescents, who are facing the death of a loved one, and how exactly professionals at primary schools can help them cope with their loss. The main focus of the theoretical introduction is the role of professionals at primary schools and the activities they can have with students about death. As part of the research, I have conducted interviews with ten interviewees.

Keywords: grieving, death, children, adolescents, elementary school, professionals

DEATH AND GRIEF IN A SOCIETY

Acceptance of death is socially conditioned, and for Western society, we can say that its attitude towards death is full of fear and prejudice. Western society taboos bring many negative consequences. On the other hand, countries with Eastern cultures are considered to have a lower fear of death (Gire, 2014). Death, dying and mourning are not talked about. The result of avoiding the topic is an unwillingness to die, even though we all know that we will die one day (Murphy, 1997).

In life, we encounter various losses, which can be sudden or predictable, whether we are aware of them or not, and they affect us more or less. Among the losses we grieve are for example the death of a pet, the loss of a body part, divorce, moving, illness, loss of job, aging, loss of an object, trust, an unattained goal in life, and the death of a loved one (Korošec, 2007).

Mourning is a healing process that maintains the memory of the deceased and the connection with them. It helps adjust to a new life without the person who has died (Mikuš Kos and Slodnjak, 2000). Many people find themselves in distress when faced with loss because they do not know much about mourning. As a result, they may feel that they don't know how to help the grieving person properly, and they will likely grieve unprepared themselves (Korošec, 2007).

When someone dies, different reactions occur. Those reactions are individualized, meaning that they depend on the characteristics and circumstances of the person. After a loss follows grieving, which is healthy, natural, and very important. Just like for adults, grieving is unique for children. No one can predict how a person will grieve. Those who provide support to the person must be empathetic listeners, but also learners. They must allow unique ways of expressing grief without judgment, guidance, ignoring, or denial. When a loved one dies, those grieving often receive advice on what to feel, how to behave, and what to believe, but impartial listening is much more helpful. There are no right or wrong ways to grieve, but there are different forms of behavior that occur as part of grieving (Babič, 2013).

Tekavčič-Grad (1994) talks about four stages of mourning. The first stage is shock. It is characterized by emotional numbness, which can last from a few hours to a week. The mourner feels helpless, lost, and confused. Physical signs may also appear, such as difficulty breathing, a lump in the throat, a feeling of emptiness in the stomach. During this period, the mourner denies the reality of the event, as he wants to protect himself. During this time, he takes care of the formalities and the funeral. The second stage is protest and longing. This stage lasts from two weeks to three months. During this time, the mourner searches for the deceased, longs for him, and deals with the deceased's property. All this is accompanied by turbulent emotions, crying, sobbing, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, panic, and physical problems may occur. The third stage is hopelessness and disorganization, which can last from a few months to a year. The grieving person begins to realize the final loss, feelings of hopelessness appear, and physical problems often develop, which often intensify. The grieving person is burdened by the deceased, socially withdrawn, and overcome by despair, anxiety, anger, and guilt. The fourth stage of grieving is improvement, when the grieving person accepts the fact that the deceased is no more coming back. They become more independent, try to return to the social environment, make new acquaintances, and assume new roles. However, grieving is not over after this stage, as grieving people often describe worsening symptoms, especially during anniversaries and family holidays.

GRIEF AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENT

Nowadays, children rarely encounter death. Parents are not aware enough that children often deal with this concept from an early age and build ideas about it. The idea of death in children differs from the idea in adults (Hofer, 2004). Mikuš Kos and Slodnjak (2000) cite a study from England and Wales, where they found that 3.3% of children and adolescents under the age of 16 have already experienced the death of a loved one.

Grieving in childhood can have a significant impact on a child's development and is a risk factor for their mental health. Despite the large amount of research about grief, there is a lack of research about grief connected to children and adolescents (Raphael and Dobson, 2000). McCarthy and Jessop (2005, in Holland, 2008) estimated that between 4 and 7% of children and adolescents from socially disadvantaged or vulnerable families will experience the death of a parent before the age of 16 and thus face the negative consequences of the death.

The grieving process is influenced by many factors. A child's reactions to the loss of a loved one are influenced by the social support system, for example, family, school, neighborhood, friends. A child's reaction to loss also depends on the nature of the death. The characteristics of the relationship between the deceased and the child, the child's age and related developmental characteristics, and cultural views on death are important. Grieving is a long-term process that should not be postponed (Babič, 2013).

Responses to death vary greatly from person to person. Children may worry about being left alone and who will care for them. Separation anxiety may increase. The child may express feelings of responsibility for the person's death, even if the person was ill for a long time. Magical thinking may also occur, in which children believe that wishes or bad thoughts will come true if they believe in them enough (Miller, 2000). Children's responses to the death of a loved one vary. Regardless of the child's age, most do not initially show emotional distress and sometimes do not even believe that the person has died. Some immediately show agitation, scream and express their pain. The child may also become numb, appear emotionally empty, apathetic. This is how they protect themselves (Mikuš Kos and Slodnjak, 2000).

Common reactions of grieving children and adolescents can be behavioral (aggressive behavior, arguments, isolation, need for attention), emotional (insecurity, anger, rage, apathy), social (withdrawal, substance abuse, change in family roles), physical (pain, injuries, nightmares, lack of energy), spiritual (anger at God, questions about the meaning of life). Problems at school can also occur, such as inability to concentrate, poor academic performance, absence from class, forgetfulness, striving for perfection. Peers often find it difficult to empathize with the feelings of the grieving person, which can make the grieving person feel lonely or become a target of mockery, which can further reinforce the previously listed reactions of the grieving person. It is impossible to predict which forms of behavior will appear. It is possible that external signs of grief will not appear at all. Individual differences can be large (Babič, 2013). Most grieving children will recover with appropriate support (Dyregrov et al., 2020).

ROLE OF SCHOOL AS A SYSTEM IN THE PROCESS OF GRIEVING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Besides the family, school is the most important factor influencing a child's experience of life and development. Children spend more time at school than at home, which means they have less time for outdoor and family activities (Marjanovič Umek and Zupančič, 2004). At the beginning of the mourning after the death of a loved one, parents are often overwhelmed by their own pain and obligations. At that time other people (relatives, teachers, etc.) can be a great help in temporarily taking over the tasks of communicating with the child, especially when the child does not want to talk to the parent about his or her feelings. The reason is often that the child does not want to burden the parents and wants to protect them (Babič, 2013).

Rodriguez Herrero and Serrano Manzano (2020) consider death as an important topic for education. In their opinion, the social resistance to death is also reflected in the school environment, as it is not included in the teaching content and professionals do not include the topic of death in lessons, despite the fact that it is an important part of each of our lives. It is much easier for grieving children and professionals in school if they have already talked about death before encountering it, as they have already acquired basic concepts and verbal expressions about death, which makes it much easier for them to process events (Mikuš Kos and Slodnjak, 2000).

King-McKenzie (2011) adds that if we want to include death and dying in the school curriculum, education about death should be part of the education of every teacher, as they play an important role in providing support when children and adolescents are dealing with the death of pets and loved ones. Holland (2008) also writes about the unique position of possible help from the school to the grieving child. Professionals in the school should not only offer help when the child is already facing death, but also in advance through preventive activities. It is important to familiarize children with the concept of death, mourning, loss and include this as educational content.

It is very important for professionals working in primary schools to recognize that a child is grieving and to be aware of the importance of grieving. They should monitor the child, listen to him, and help him (Curren, 2001). Many teachers have reported that a child's academic performance can decline after the loss of a family member. This idea was supported by a large Danish study that found that children who lose a parent in childhood are up to 26% less likely to obtain a university degree (Dyregrov et al., 2020).

A teacher is an important person in a child's life, as he or she guides the child, provides appropriate conditions for development, and helps the child to discover their own abilities. The teacher's self-image also has a great influence on this, influencing the way of teaching, creating a classroom climate, and choosing teaching methods. Children who are taught by teachers with a positive self-image will also perceive themselves as more successful and positive in various areas (Jurišević, 1999). Good communication between an adult and a grieving child or adolescent is a prerequisite for sufficient support, as the grieving person can express their emotions and needs, and the environment can understand them more easily and offer them appropriate help. Help can only be help when it is in line with the wishes and needs of the grieving person (Dyregrov and Dyregrov, 2008).

Miller (2000) writes about what a counselor can do in an elementary school when a student loses a loved one. The counselor must also pay attention to the class of the grieving student. Before the student who has experienced a loss returns to school, it is a good idea to talk to classmates and answer their questions. It is a good idea to talk to them about death, dying, and grieving. Teachers should also be informed about grieving and the expected responses of the child, such as poor concentration, abdominal pain, and fatigue. It is important to note that these signs may come with a delay, and the death of a loved one can also cause behavioral problems and absenteeism (Mikuš Kos and Slodnjak, 2000).

WAYS OF HELPING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WHO ARE GRIEVING

We can help those who are grieving in various ways. It is important to show them a friendly, supportive attitude, actively listen to them, take time, help them accept the loss, allow them to express their pain and sadness, use various opportunities to talk about the deceased person, raise awareness among the grieving person and the wider environment about the grieving process, talk about the future, provide practical guidance on moving on with life, and be patient (Mikuš Kos and Slodnjak, 2000).

It is important to resume daily activities and routines as soon as possible and to change them as little as possible. It is good to include children in planning the day and thus help them maintain a sense of control and predictability that they may have lost when facing death. When talking about death and mourning, we need to communicate with children and adolescents in an age-appropriate manner. We make sure that they have objects that comfort them. We often tell them that they are safe and loved, that they can turn to us whenever they need a conversation or comfort. It is important that they know that they can ask anything and that they can talk about and remember the deceased person. We also describe our own emotions and encourage children to express theirs through conversation, drawing, story, song (www.hospic.si).

RESEARCH

The goal was to research the role of professional workers at primary schools in helping primary school children and adolescents cope with the death of a loved one. I researched what teachers and counselors

need to be able to provide support to grieving children and adolescents, how children and adolescents grieve, and what do they need.

I used a causal non-experimental method, as I was explaining the existing situation that I was researching. I conducted a qualitative study in which I used the interview method. The sample is purposive. I interviewed ten people. I conducted interviews with two children and an adolescent who are coping with the death of a loved one, and according to their age they fall into middle childhood, late childhood, and adolescence. Four professional workers also participated in the research: a psychologist at the primary school, a classroom teacher, a social pedagogue and a professional from the Hospice Association. I also spoke to parents or guardians of children and adolescents who had lost loved ones – two mothers and a guardian. At least one year and a maximum of five years had to have passed since the death of a loved one, as I did not want the loss to be too recent and at the same time not too distant, so that the interviewees could describe their emotions and the grieving process. For professional workers, the condition for participation was that they were employed in a primary school and that they had experienced the death of a loved one in their work.

FINDINGS

In my research, I was interested in the ways in which children and adolescents in primary school grieve after the death of a loved one. Their responses to the death of a loved one vary depending on the developmental stage they are in. Adult interviewees said that children in middle childhood do not understand death well, talk about death more easily than older children, and mostly react to the news of death with crying, sadness, a need for closeness and conversation, sometimes with aggressive behavior, but then behave as if nothing had happened. For children in late childhood, they said that they understand death and want to talk about it, while adolescents understand it, but mostly do not want to talk about death.

All participants in the research, especially adults, said that the family environment is very important in the mourning of children and adolescents. The interviewed children and adolescents preserve the memory of the deceased in various ways - organizing events, pictures, clothes, talking, visiting the grave, etc.

All interviewees noticed changes in children and adolescents who were grieving. Positive changes included improved academic performance and behavior, as well as emotional resilience. Negative changes included loss of eye contact, waking up at night, withdrawal, seeking attention, emotional outbursts, crying, appetite problems, emotional numbness, aggressive behavior, absent-mindedness, poor concentration, low self-esteem, and fatigue. Poorer academic performance or even school phobias may occur at school. All the grieving individuals became more protective of the living. They needed more hugs and closeness.

I was interested in what kind of help children and adolescents need when dealing with the death of a loved one. The mother of a child in middle childhood said that she sought help from a professional outside of school, while the other interviewees did not seek professional help in the grieving process.

There is very little research on death and grief. Death is considered a taboo topic in society, and grief is often ignored. This is also agreed by the interviewees, who said that they would like the topic of death to be better included in the teaching content. Professional workers at school can help grieving children and adolescents in various ways – drawing pictures, playing with dolls, relaxation exercises, board

games, play therapy, writing poems, making a memory box, drawing on stones, visiting a grave. In addition to individual work, it is also important to work with the class and cooperate with the parents of the grieving student.

I wondered how to talk to grieving children and adolescents. The participants in the study emphasized the importance of the relationship between the grieving child or adolescent and the person who wants to help them. The interviewees emphasized that it is necessary to take enough time for the grieving, not to impose emotions, thoughts and behavior on them. We must be aware that it is normal not to know the answers or not to know what to say.

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I was interested in what professional workers need to make it easier to work with grieving children and adolescents in primary schools. Self-care is very important for professional workers. The interviewees said that dealing with death can be very stressful and lead to burnout. It is important that professional workers have the opportunity for intervention or supervision, but at the same time it is also necessary to take care of their own mental and physical condition. The interviewed professional workers would like more training on the topic of death and mourning, through which they would receive specific advice from experts on how to act when a student's loved one dies, and how to talk to them. I was also interested in the role of professional workers in primary schools in dealing with the death of a loved one. The school and family environment have a great influence on mourning in children and adolescents who have lost a loved one. The school responded to the death of a loved one in various ways: they sent condolences, offered accommodations, attended the funeral, hung a black flag, organized a memorial hour, lit a candle, set up a memorial corner with a picture, and organized a mourning ceremony. Professionals employed at the school prepared classroom and teaching hours on the topic of death and mourning, thus preparing classmates to receive the mourner. After returning to school, the mourners needed some accommodations, such as withdrawal, help with learning and homework, and announced knowledge assessments.

I recognize the advantage of the research because the topic of death is insufficiently researched, so I believe that any additional research contributes greatly to appropriate ways of working with the mourners. I spoke with people who have concrete experience with the death of a loved one, so they were able to give me concrete information with which I could answer the research questions. Another advantage of the research is that I included children, adolescents, parents and professionals in the research, which gave me a broad perspective on the research topic.

In the future, it would be good to conduct research with a larger sample, which would give us even better insight into the grief of children and adolescents. We could also include the grief of preschool children.

I hope that the research will help primary school professionals in their work with students who have lost a loved one. I would like to emphasize the importance of the school environment in the grieving process of children and adolescents and encourage professionals to organize training on the topic of death and grief for school employees. With the help of knowledge of developmental periods, professionals would

better understand the perception of death in children and adolescents. It is important to share good practices of working with those who are grieving and to encourage the inclusion of the topic of death in teaching content. The results from the interviews show us what children and adolescents need when they are grieving and provide information on how we can help them.

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