

23. Coping with Bereavement

Part 2: The Journey of Life and Death

INTRODUCTION

Begin this session with the same invitation for children to sit this one out, or to see you later if they want to talk.

Remind the children of the topic and that when someone dies people feel loss; they grieve. This is called 'bereavement'. People who are bereaved can go through all sorts of emotions including anger and guilt, or even a kind of numbness where they find it hard to feel anything at all. They may find it hard to accept that they will never see that person again.

ACTIVITY

Ask the children whether they think it might be helpful to recall special memories of the person that has died and to tell stories about them.

Get some feedback from the children and then read this extract from 'Badger's Parting Gifts', where the author, Susan Varley, uses animal characters to deal with the subject of death. The main character, Badger, gives all his friends a 'gift' before he dies.

"Although Badger was no longer with his friends, he had given each of them a special memory of him."

"He wanted them to help each other using these gifts."

"Even though Mole and his friends felt lost, alone and unhappy, in time their sadness melted like the winter snow."

"They remembered the joyful moments they had shared with Badger and all that he had taught them and they felt thankful that they had known him. As he had left them he had felt free and happy, not afraid."

Ask the children:

- Why do you think the author uses animal characters instead of human beings to tell this story? Would it work just as well if it featured people instead of animals?
- How might people feel when someone dies?
- Badger gave his friends special memories or 'gifts'. What 'gifts' have people given to you?

ACTIVITY

Remind the children about the previous session on funerals and animal coffins and explain that people have devised different ways to commemorate or remember someone who has died.

Ask them to talk to a partner on the following questions and tasks:

- How would you like your life to be remembered or celebrated?
- Write a shopping list of things you would like as a celebration of your own life. [For example, someone might like a party where all their favourite music was played really loudly and everyone had pizza! Another person might like their family to sit and watch a favourite film while eating popcorn.]

Help children to understand that it is important to remember someone they have lost (this might help them in the future). It is important to look back on someone's life and remember the things that made that person special – the things you will never forget. It's also important to remember the little things – a shared joke; a nice walk; an outing or a quiet time at home. Children need to know that these things can be difficult at first – for example the first time you return to a favourite place without a loved one – but in the end they can help because they help us to remain close to someone who has gone.

Additional resource: <http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/> - charity for bereaved children.

CONCLUSION

As an extension exercise, explain that people hold different beliefs about what happens when we die. Provide them with four contrasting views about the question of life after death:

RESURRECTION: Christians generally believe that living a Christian life ensures that when they die they will continue the next stage of their journey, sharing the promise of an eternal life with God in Heaven and with those Christians who have passed on before.

REINCARNATION: Hindus generally believe that when people die a soul reincarnates again and again on earth until it becomes perfect and reunites with its source. During this process the soul enters into many bodies, assumes many forms and passes through many births and deaths.

REBIRTH: Buddhists generally believe that when people die the *energy* that is in their life is reborn as another being - and not always as a human being. Only when a person becomes 'enlightened' about the way things really are, and gets rid of their greed, hatred and ignorance, will that energy pass into 'Nirvana', a state of perfect peace.

FINITUDE: Humanists generally believe that when a person dies, that is that! We are 'finite' beings, that is, like other things in nature, we have a limit to our life. The human body is a wonderful organism, but when it ceases to function, the person is dead. All of them that carries on is in the *influence* they had on the world, or in the lives of their children if they had any.

Ask the children to reflect on these ideas, research them further, consider other possibilities, talk to family and friends, and work out their own ideas about what might happen when a person dies.