

We Can Help Children Grieve: A Child-Oriented Model for Memorializing

Linda Ellen Goldman

On a family vacation Andrew died suddenly of a rare virus. Family and friends were shocked by this unexpected death. Andrew was six years old and had just completed kindergarten. The shock of his death needed to be recognized and processed before the overwhelming feeling of loss for Andrew could be honored. A special child-oriented memorial service was a vehicle for expression of this complicated grief.

Preparing the community and school

Andrew's parents wrote a letter explaining the facts of Andrew's death and the events surrounding his illness. It was mailed to every parent of a child at Andrew's school before Andrew's parents returned home from the vacation. The head of Andrew's school included with this letter an addi-

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Parents and children need to know the facts about a loss. This information lessens fear and creates a foundation from which to grieve.

tional letter with information and resources on children and grief. Prior to the opening of school, the faculty met and discussed appropriate ways to work with children and their grief. Counseling was available to children at school.

Preparing concerned parents

A meeting was held at Andrew's school for all concerned parents and faculty. Information and appropriate resources were presented on how young children grieve. Adults expressed their own feelings, fears, and vulnerabilities, and they shared information about how Andrew's death was affecting the children. Parents were given suggestions about how to help the children grieve and prepare them for the memorial service planned for Andrew. The ideas included the following:

1. Give the facts of Andrew's death.
2. Share your feelings of grief.
3. Allow your children to express their feelings and to commemorate Andrew through drawings and stories.

4. Describe what will happen at the memorial service.

5. Invite your child to join you in coming to the service, but don't insist that she come.

6. Explain that children can participate if they feel like it by telling a story about Andrew or something special they remember. They can share artwork or poetry or join in singing. They do not have to participate if they don't feel like it.

7. Tell your child that there will be people there he knows.

8. Be prepared to leave with your child if she feels uncomfortable.

9. Let your children know that people may be sad and cry and *they* themselves may be sad and cry. That's OK. They may not feel sad and may not cry. That's OK, too.

10. Read resources written for parents, such as those mentioned at the end of this article.

11. Read to children to help prepare them and to answer questions—see the suggested books on page 72.

12. Encourage your children to ask questions.

We can define death to the young child in the following way: "When someone dies his or her body stops working. No matter how hard the doctors and nurses try, they can't make the body work again. Usually people die when they are very, very, very old or very, very, very sick, or when something so bad has happened to someone that the doctors and nurses can't make the body work anymore."

The child's view of death

1. Young children ages three through six often think that **death is reversible**, and they imagine that their loved one will return after death.

Joey, age four, asked his mom, "Why can't God bring our baby back from heaven, give him back to the doctors, and then the doctors can fix him and send him home?"

2. Alice, age three, sat at her mother's funeral and whispered to her dad, "I bet Mom is sleeping in God's bed right now." Children believe that **death is sleep**.

3. Five-year-olds **may ask for facts and details of the death**. "How did Megan die? Who was with her? Where did she go?"

4. They may also **ask about the nature of death and what happens after someone dies**. "Can Megan see me?" "What does she have for dinner?" and "Can she watch TV in heaven?"

5. Three- to five-year-olds often **take language literally** and many common clichés confuse young children, inhibiting their ability to grieve. The following are a few inappropriate clichés:

"God loved Grandpa so much that he took him with him to heaven." (Three-year-old Tom thinks, "Why doesn't God love me?")

"Mom's watching over me." (Five-year-old Alice thinks, "I can't do anything without Mom seeing me.")

"Dad went on a long trip." (Four-year-old Susan questions, "Why didn't he take me?")

"Grandma went to sleep." (Three-year-old Sam wonders, "Will I die when I go to sleep, too?")

Alex, age four, began to have terrifying nightmares after the death of his alcoholic dad. His grandmother was telling him that "Dad is watching over you in heaven," and Alex was very frightened. His dad had been punitive and physically abusive. Alex visualized him being able to see and hear everything because he had taken his grandmother's words literally.

6. **Magical thinking and egocentricity** is another component of the young child's view of death. Five-year-old Joshua began bed-wetting after his older sister Karen was killed by a drunk driver. He had become clingy and fearful and had refused to play with other children. One night before bed he confided to his mom,

"I know it's my fault that Karen died. We had a fight that day, and I told her I hated her; she was a bad sister, and I wished she was dead. I know my words made her die!"

Children often feel that their thoughts and words can magically cause things to happen. This was a perfect opportunity for Mom to explain the facts to Josh about how his sister died.

"Your sister was killed by a drunk man in a car accident. Your words did not cause her death. Karen knows you love her, and I know we will miss her very much."

Preparing the memorial service

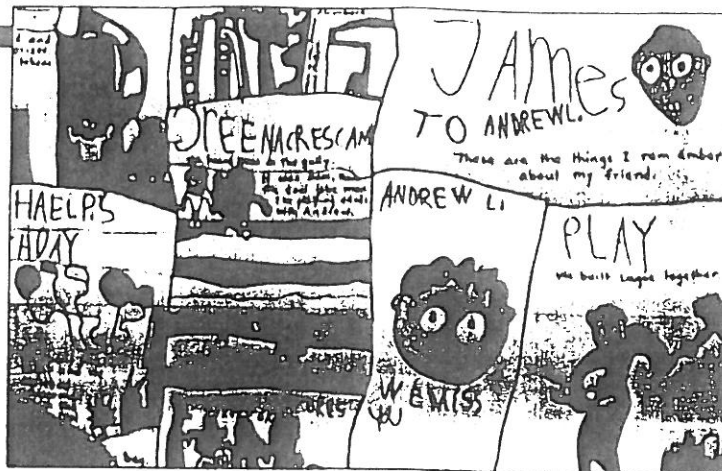
While Andrew's parents went through all the pain, anguish, and stages of deep personal grief to be expected under such tragic circumstances, they summoned their love for their son Andrew to help them create a loving tribute to his life. In so doing, their own grief process was enriched as was the grief process of all others who were involved with the memorial service.

Andrew's parents prepared a very child-oriented memorial service to celebrate Andrew's life as well as to commemorate his death. They told other parents what the ceremony would be like, so that these parents, in turn, could tell their children what to expect. A notice also was put in the school newspaper.

So many times at the Center for Loss and Grief Therapy, I have received calls from parents asking if children should come to a funeral or memorial service. Breaking this silence on children and funerals and memorial services by *including children* is an idea whose time has come. The memorial service and funeral can become a shared family experience. To include young children in these experiences we need to understand the young child's vision of death (see box at left).

Ways children can commemorate:

- Plant a flower or tree.
- Send a balloon.
- Blow bubbles.
- Light a candle.
- Say a prayer.
- Create a mural or collage about the life of the person who died.
- Make cookies or cake.
- Make a memory gift for the child's family.
- Write a poem, story, or song about the loved one who died.
- Talk into a tape recorder or make a video of memories.



The memorial service

Andrew's memorial service served as a model for me of what is possible when parents choose to commemorate and honor the dignity of their child's life, with a true respect for all children.

While there certainly was sadness, the service held a warmth and invited an openness that allowed children of all ages, adult friends, family members, coworkers of Andrew's parents, school representatives, and Andrew's parents themselves to freely and spontaneously participate. People of all ages told stories, sang songs, and read poetry acknowledging Andrew's wonderful life.

Children and adults sat on the floor. Chairs were set up in the back of the room for those who preferred them. Families were together. Children could lie down, stand up, or

leave. They did not have to participate—they could if they wanted to. They could go outside or blow bubbles or play. Children made their own choices as long as the service was respected. A parent or caring adult was prepared to leave with any child who wanted to.

Children shared their thoughts, feelings, pictures, poetry, and stories. Artwork and stories were displayed on tables and walls. They told of memories and love and sorrow for their friend Andrew. Some children shared their photo collections about special times with Andrew. Andrew's dad read memories of Andrew for a child who was hesitant to speak. Andrew's adult friends and relatives also shared memories. Andrew's class offered gifts for his parents—a quilt with each child's handprints on it and a photo album of the kindergarten year.

Community support was very meaningful. Andrew's principal spoke of his memories of Andrew. Andrew's parents shared their love for their son and experiences with him. They told funny stories about Andrew and had made a booklet of favorite poems and prayers for each family to take home. Some children's words were included. Andrew's good friend Chris, age seven, wrote, "Andrew is in my heart." His mom had been crying and Chris wanted to know why. She explained she was sad because she would never be able to see Andrew again. "Don't worry," Chris replied. "I can see Andrew whenever I want, because he is always in my heart."

His teachers and friends sang many of Andrew's favorite songs. They invited the children and their families to join in if they

Four-year-old Mary was sad at school one day and explained to her teacher that she missed her dog Lucky who was recently killed by a car. Her teacher handed her a toy telephone and suggested she call him and tell him how she feels. Mary sat down, dialed a number, and began speaking. "I love you, Lucky. I miss you so much. I hope you are OK and having fun and that God plays ball with you every day."

felt comfortable. Songs included "The Earth Is Mine," "When the Rain Comes Down," "I'm Being Eaten by a Boa Constrictor," and "The Garden Song." At the very end of the service people held hands and sang "Friends, Friends."

After the service

After the service the children were invited to make commemorations of Andrew if they wanted. There was a crafts table where children could draw pictures, write let-

ters, or share stories about Andrew. Bubbles were provided. Children could take them outside to blow in remembrance of Andrew.

"Memory bags" were given to each child who attended—bags filled with treats (like stickers and

Books to Read

For teachers and parents

Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children with Complicated Grief by Linda Goldman. 1996. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis. For adults to help children with complicated grief issues of suicide, homicide, AIDS, violence, and abuse. It includes guidelines for educators, national resources, an annotated bibliography, and a chapter on a child-oriented memorial service.

Good Grief: Helping Groups of Children When a Friend Dies by Sandra Fox. 1988. Boston: New England Association for the Education of Young Children. A pioneering book that is an excellent source of information for adults working with children whose friends have died. Defines death for young children with clarity and simplicity.

The Grieving Child by Helen Fitzgerald. 1992. New York: Simon & Schuster. A comprehensive guide for parents to use in helping children with their grief. It is written clearly, in a very practical style, and with many useful suggestions.

Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children by Linda Goldman. 1994. Washington, DC: Taylor

& Francis. A resource for working with children and normal grief. It provides practical information, resources, hands-on activities, and an annotated bibliography.

Thank You for Coming to Say Good-Bye by Janice Roberts and Joy Johnson. 1994. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. An excellent source of information to help caring adults involve children in funeral services.

For children

Aardy Aardvark Finds Hope by Donna O'Toole. 1988. Burnesville, NC: Mt. Rainbow Publications. (ages 5-8) In this story of grief for young children, animals are used to show the pain, sadness, and hope that is felt after the death of a loved one.

About Dying by Sarah Stein. 1974. New York: Walker & Co. (ages 3-6). Contains a simple text and photographs to help young children understand death and memorializing.

The Frog Family's Baby Dies by Jerri Oehler. 1978. Durham, NC: Duke University Medical Center. (ages 3-6). A coloring book for very young children discussing feelings after a death in the family.

So Much to Think About by Fred Rogers. 1991. Pittsburgh, PA: Family Communications, Inc. (ages 3-6). An excellent activity book for young children that allows them hands-on



Andrew

ways to commemorate the death of someone they have loved.

Tell Me Papa by Joy and Marv Johnson. 1990. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. (ages 5-8). A book that talks in very simple and clear language about death, funerals, and how children feel about both.

You Hold Me and I'll Hold You by Jo Carson. 1992. New York: Orchard. (ages 5-8). A simple story for young children about a young girl's feelings of wanting to hold and be held at a memorial service.

Young children learn through play and grieve through play. Role-playing, puppets, artwork, clay, and sand-table work are a few of the many ways they can imagine, pretend, and engage in meaningful activities that allow them to act out or project their grief feelings without having to directly verbalize them.

Young children need to know the facts of death in an age-appropriate way. They usually imagine far worse and have a sense that they are being lied to when they are not told the truth.

a piece of candy) that Andrew's parents felt he would have liked to give to his friends. The room was filled with photos of Andrew and his family and friends, Andrew's artwork, and the artwork of Andrew's friends. The children could walk through the room freely and experience Andrew's life visually. Andrew's favorite toys and books were on display.

The children who attended Andrew's memorial service appeared to gain a great gift, the gift of inner strength. Participating with adults in a community remembrance of their friend gave them a way to honor Andrew's life. Knowing how to honor Andrew's life gives these children a way to value and respect their own lives. We hope this will help them be a little better prepared for other life and death experiences they will face. For sadly, sooner or later, we all must face the ending of a life.

For further reading

- ssa, E.L., & C.I. Murray. 1994. Research in review. Young children's understanding and experience with death. *Young Children* 49 (4): 74-81.
- urnan, E. 1990. Plant a potato—learn about life (and death). *Young Children* 46 (1): 15-20.
- olschield, K. 1991. The gift of a butterfly. *Young Children* 46 (3): 3-6.
- laclsaac, P., & S. King. 1989. What did you do with Sophie, teacher? *Young Children* 44 (2): 37-38.
- ley, S.S. 1989. Pilgrimage to Elmwood cemetery. *Young Children* 44 (2): 33-36.

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Children's Voices

The following excerpts reflect the thoughts, feelings, and memories of children who knew and loved Andrew. They appeared in a booklet made for Andrew's first anniversary memorial, entitled "We Remember Andrew."



This is a drawing that Andrew made at age four-and-a-half on one of his favorite themes: a knight with a sword.

Elyssa

"Andrew, you were a good friend. When we played the chace [chase] game it was really fun. One day Paige came over and she said that you dide [died]. I did not want to bleav [believe] her but my Mom came into my room She got a letter and said that is was tror [true]. You were such a good friend. I wish you were here your teacher wood [would] be Sharan. You wood [would] be with me Elyssa we did so much things together. I am the one uuw [you] made up huugy [huggy] but I want to end it But nothing is the same with out you

This Pache [page] is dedicadid [dedicated] to one of my Best Friends Andrew Love Elyssa."

Christina

"One day Christina, Andrew's five-year-old cousin, and I (Andrew's mom) were driving in the car. She looked at me and sighed, 'If I only had one wish, do you know what it would be? I would wish for a machine with a button on it. When I pressed the button, it would bring kids back from being dead. Then cousin Andrew would be alive. Don't you think that's a good wish?'"

Adam

"Seven-year-olds ask difficult questions. Recently, Adam asked his mother Joanne who her best friend was. She replied that she didn't have one best friend, rather she liked this person for this reason, and that person for that reason. Then she asked Adam who his best friend was. He named a friend from the neighborhood and one from his class. Then he paused, 'And Andrew . . . I didn't mind when he called me names. In fact, I kind of liked it.' Joanne says that Adam sometimes asks if the doctors will ever find out why his friend got sick and died."

Christy

"Before the Memorial Service, Christy and his mother were talking about Andrew. He had a theory about what happened to his friend: 'When you die, your body goes to the ground and makes trees. And your dreams go to heaven and they come back and get born again in other people.'"