

Bereavement Lesson Plans for Schools

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Lesson 1: The Language of Death and Grief

Key Stage 2, 3 and 4. Subjects covered: English Language, PSHE. Art and Design.

- Produced for a training workshop of CBC© Designed by Jill Adams

Lesson Aim: To get pupils used to discussing death in an open way and to explore why our society has difficulty using the “real” words such as death and dying.

Objectives: Pupils will...

1. Explore the word death and the many euphemisms used.
2. Think about what the word means to themselves and to others.
3. Consider why it is difficult to use the “real” words.
4. Consider the origins of these words and phrases.
5. Design and produce a condolence card (extension work)

Time: Approximately 40 minutes (not including design of condolences card).

Preparation: You will need a selection of condolence cards and/or death notices from a newspaper. A large sheet of paper for pupils to write down words and phrases. One for each pair. Felt tip pens.

The Language of Death

1. Introduce the session by explaining that pupils will be exploring the many words and phrases used rather than the actual words of dead, dying and deceased. Have on display the selection of condolence cards, and/or death notices.
2. Split into pairs and give each pair a large sheet of paper.
3. Pairs to write down all the different words and phrases they find in the cards and obituary notices plus any others of their own that come to mind.
4. Produce a master list that everyone can see.

For many, death is still a taboo subject – we use euphemisms when uncomfortable...

- **To protect children**
Discuss if children / young people might find some words confusing or condescending e.g. asleep / lost / gone away. **Seek views** on which words your pupils would prefer to be used.
- **For religious reasons.**
Pick out those which have a Christian basis e.g. in heaven. Any other religions represented?
- **To lessen the pain / make something good out of something very bad.**
e.g. at rest, at peace, reunited with. **Ask** which imply that life that carries on in some form? Do they lessen the pain or do they just confuse? Professionals, e.g. doctors and undertakers, use the substitutes as much as anyone. (Some would say more so!) Should they?

Close by reminding of the following: Using the word “death” can be just too painful for some people.

An often-heard comment by those seeking to help is “I did not know what to say”. Because we do not often speak about death in normal conversation, we rely on stock words and phrases. We often say nothing in our concern not to cause more hurt yet saying nothing is the most hurtful thing of all.

End of Session:

We often use humour when we feel uncomfortable. It is OK to laugh about death and some people have humorous comments on their headstones, e.g. Spike Milligan: “I told you I was ill”.

Extension work:

Pupils to design a condolence card and to write what they consider are appropriate words or a suitable poem to go into it. (This is a helpful activity to repeat if a death occurs within your school community.)

Debate why death is a taboo subject: society denies ageing; less respect for the elderly; grandparents often do not live close by; greater expectation that the medical profession can save lives; death is hidden as fewer people die at home; infant mortality rates low and child deaths are rare, unlike Third World countries; increasingly secular society funerals shorter; rituals in decline?

Reflective Exercises

Reflective Exercise 1:

- Adopted from: *Working with Bereaved Children and Young People*, Mallon, B. (2010)

Read:

The British actor Leslie Phillips spoke of the impact of bereavement on his life:

It was because of my father dying when I was ten that my life became different. We were just an easy-going Cockney family, but my dad was often ill. But none of us thought he would pop off, and I'll never forget crying all the way to school after he died. We were quickly in financial trouble, so we all found work. Because I did plays at school, my mother answered an advertisement for me to audition at the Italia Conti stage school. By the age of fourteen I was earning more than the lot of them. (Endnotes, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2009, page 8)

Questions:

- What was the initial impact of bereavement on Leslie Phillips?
- In what way was his mother's actions important to Leslie's future life?
- How does this article reflect his resilience?
- Can you think of any adverse events 'stumbling blocks' in your own life which you have turned into 'stepping stones'? Write a paragraph about what you gained, ultimately, from that adverse experience.
- Phillips' says no one expected his father to 'pop off'. What other euphemisms can you think of and what could be the impact of these on children?

Reflective Exercise 2:

- Adopted from: *Working with Bereaved Children and Young People*, Mallon, B. (2010)

Read:

British author Charlie Higson, now fifty years old, wrote of the long-term impact of his mother death when he was 18:

Losing my Mum early has instilled me with an overdeveloped sense of impermanence of things. I worry about mortality too much. It makes me a workaholic. I write something and I think, 'That might just disappear now, I'd better write something else.' (2008: 12)

Questions:

- Does writing indicate resilience in Higson's life following the death of his mother? If so, how? If not, can you explain your view?
- What benefit does Higson gain from his 'workaholic' behaviour?
- How do you think young people's view of mortality is changed by the death of a parent?
- Have you created anything that will still be in the world after you die

Reflective Exercise 3:

Words associated with death and dying

- Adopted from *Dying, Death and Grief Mallon, B (2008)*

Clear communication is essential when talking about death, particularly with children, vulnerable adults and others who may take the euphemism literally.

- Write down any words you associate with death and dying.
- How do these words reflect societal or cultural aspects of your world?
- How many are euphemisms that mask the finality of death?

(See teacher's notes – p.7)

Reflective Exercise 4:

Early experiences

- Adopted from *Dying, Death and Grief Mallon, B (2008)*

Complete the following statements. Not all the statements may be relevant for you, but complete any that are.

The first experience of death was when died.

I was years of age.

At that time, I felt.....

I was puzzled by.....

I was frightened by

When I think about that death now I remember

The funeral was

I was curious about the funeral because.....

The first significant death of someone my own age was

This person died years ago.

I felt

The most traumatic death I have experienced was.....

At I had an experience that brought me close to death. I felt
..... and I thought.....

These events have changed the way I live because now I

Teacher's Notes

Consider the following Euphemisms

- Adopted from a training workshop of CBC© designed by Jill Adams

Euphemisms	Comments
Lost...	young people are told to find things that they lose
Asleep...	death and sleep are different
Gone away...	to where? why? what is wrong with staying here?
In heaven...	safe, happy place, for good people only?
With the angels looked after...	must be a good person, angels do not exist
In a better place...	what is wrong with here?
Taken by whom...	alludes to no control over our death
At peace / At rest...	often used after a long and painful illness, comforting
Kicked the bucket...	people who were being hung were stood on a bucket and the bucket kicked away
Six-Foot Under...	under, where? Feet is not a modern measurement which are known to children now, they would tend to associate feet with a part of the body
Brown Bread	Cockney rhyming slang for dead