
Helping Children Cope With Death and Tragedy

By Clarence Dunbebin

Grisly television reports about the murder of a five-year-old kindergarten student left Sligo Adventist School teachers wondering. The details seemed only too familiar, but we could not bring ourselves to admit that we knew the victim. When television news reports named the dead child, our worst fears were realized.

Billy possessed all the charm anyone could want in a child. At five, he had more friends than most children have in a lifetime of school experiences. But now he was only a memory. His life ended brutally, leaving students and teachers to assign meaning to his death.

Two weeks later Sligo students again faced the reality of death. This time they shared the horror with the world. They, like tens of thousands of other elementary school students, saw six astronauts and a teacher die in the spectacular explosion of the space shuttle Challenger.

"When it comes to death, children are the forgotten people. When it comes to death, we are all children," said Ralph Waldo Emerson. A fifth grader at the Hebrew Academy in

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Silver Spring, Maryland, put it differently. He asked, "If this can happen to people with so many safety checks, then what can happen to one little kid? I saw a picture of the teacher eating breakfast and the next minute she was dead."¹

Educators across the nation faced a grim task when their students saw death explode before their eyes. The Sligo School facility faced the same task when their students came face to face with Billy's death. But they were not alone in their task. *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen wrote, "Almost immediately after the space shuttle Challenger blew up, national concern focused on children. What to do? They had seen it all. And if they had not seen it live, they had seen it on one of the incessant tape repeats of the explosion: it was funeral music for the eyes."

Cohen told how the experts were paraded on television and offered their advice to school and parents about helping their children cope with the trauma of death. "A visitor from an earlier generation would wonder why all the anxiety," he said.

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"Death was once commonplace, and the kids who survived, survived. . . . Death was then very much a part of life."²

Why should we be anxious now? To be parents and teachers is to know more than just anxiety. Adults

who deal with children experience guilt because they are never sure if they have done their best in educating those who depend on them. In earlier times, tragedies such as death were blamed upon God. If that seemed inappropriate, the tragedy was labeled "unavoidable" and that seemed to take care of things. Now adults feel constrained to deal with death differently. Today children have to be protected lest they become permanently traumatized.

The public documentation of the Challenger explosion and Billy's murder focus "attention on what is more often hidden, denied or couched in euphemisms for children," says Marta Vogel.³ The public drama of these events is unlike the everyday traumas children face such as divorce and separation or the death of a parent or other relative. These common crises are often ignored or handled in an inadequate manner, she says. Instead of avoiding the issues, everyday events of this nature should be used to strengthen the ability of children to meet the realities of life.

"Most adults—parents included—are reluctant to talk with young children about such an emotional event as death for they fear they will say 'the wrong thing' and create unnecessary anguish for the children," says Sandra Fox who directs the Boston-based "Good Grief" program that helps schools and other community groups become a base of support for children when a friend dies.

Adults have other problems in helping children handle crisis, especially death. Judy Frank, who runs a "Living Through Loss" program in Maryland, says adults seem to have a need to see kids happy and often attempt to overcompensate for sorrow or crisis. This overcompensation, she says, conveys the message, "Let's not have them deal with it [death or crisis] because I can't deal with it."⁴

If we acknowledge that at least some of the anxiety schools have about crises arises out of adult fear of failure, what can be done to help children learn how to handle death, pain, fear, failure? Robert Lazun,

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codirector of the "Living Through Loss" program, says helping children learn to deal effectively with even the smallest tragedy at an early age can be a fundamental contribution to strengthening them to meet the inevitable future tragedies of life. "Being able to cope with something negative and come out whole makes a person stronger," he says. "If it happens again, the student says, 'I'll be able to cope.'"⁵

Crisis intervention programs generally have four objectives. Each objective has been developed to help children learn a skill for handling the frustrations and pain they must experience as they grow into adulthood.

1. Create an Understanding of What Happened or Will Happen.

Children tend to fill in missing information when gaps are present. Therefore, adults must give them enough information so the gaps are not filled by childish imaginations. "We didn't sugarcoat anything," says social worker Judy Frank about the death of the astronauts. "We told them exactly what we knew and we used the words 'dead' and 'killed.' No euphemisms."⁶

2. Give Permission for Children to Grieve.

Adults must listen to children if they are to know the level of their understanding. This means listening to their words, their feelings, and their body language. For a child, the most distressing aspect of a crisis, especially one involving death, is not knowing what to do or what is expected of him.

A Sligo parent became alarmed when his six-year-old daughter seemed to be laughing about Billy's death. Fortunately, he listened and didn't scold her for laughing. Sensing his daughter was nervous, he asked, "Is it that you don't know what to do about Billy's death and so you are laughing?" The six-year-old acknowledged the accuracy of her father's observation, and he was then able to help her find a more appropriate way to handle her uncertainty.

Grief counselors suggest that teachers and parents encourage children to share their thoughts about what they would like to do. These could include merely riding past the funeral home or going inside to view the body and attending the funeral. At least 50 Sligo students and parents, along with teachers, felt that they must attend Billy's funeral and share in the tragedy that way. "It's important," principal Robert Lazun says, "for adults to identify their feelings—I really miss that guy." Then the child says, "I guess it's safe to be vulnerable. If he thinks that way and he's an adult, then it's okay."

3. Find an Effective Way to Commemorate the Memory of the Person or Event.

When the reality of Billy's death registered with Sligo's seventh and eighth graders, they wanted to do something. Some requested permission to spend a few minutes meditat-

ing about Billy and the other "little kids" they had taken for granted. Others wanted to dedicate the school yearbook to Billy's memory. This spontaneous urge to do something seems to be an inborn instinct and should be encouraged.

Dr. Gilbert W. Kliman, co-author of *Children and the Death of a President*, a book about the effect on children of John F. Kennedy's assassination, says teachers must be willing to "take leadership" immediately in organizing classroom discussions and activities to help children find meaning in the crisis.⁷

Adults should carefully avoid the temptation to plan all the activities without having children actively par-

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ticipate in the planning. "Commemorating the death of someone who is important to a child provides an opportunity for affirming the value of the life of that person," says Sandra Fox, director of "Good Grief."

Immediate, concrete action such as writing letters of condolence, holding a memorial service, or establishing a scholarship fund should be encouraged to help students put the crisis into perspective and give a sense of doing something worthwhile to memorialize the moment.

4. Get Children Unstuck.

The ultimate goal, says Fox, is to get children "unstuck—to help them get through, over, under or around a temporary barrier to their normal

and healthy forward movement."

The Children Who Are Most Vulnerable

Some children are more vulnerable to crises than others. For example, when Billy was killed, one of his closest friends spent the next day writing notes to his mother. His notes told her he loved her and he hoped she wouldn't do anything to him.* He was vulnerable on two accounts. First, he knew Billy as a close friend. Second, he is a member of a single-parent family and had known the trauma of separation before.

Other children who are at high risk include the following:

1. Those who have had a recent death in the family.
2. Those who are most nearly like the one who has died with respect to age, sex, friendship, relationship, etc.
3. Those who feel they are inadequately cared for by adults and fear they may be abandoned.
4. Those who are angry with their parents and teachers and feel guilty about that anger.

Coping Skills Can Be Taught

Nearly all the experts who deal with childhood traumas agree that certain skills can be taught to help children deal with crises of all kinds. Generally, teaching these skills will not impinge upon the time normally needed for the regular curriculum; and, in the long run, teaching these coping skills may be one of the most important tasks performed by schools.

1. Talk About the Event.

Experts are unanimous about the need to teach this skill. When the students learned of Billy's death, they wanted to talk with sympathetic adults. Since they received the

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*Billy's mother has been accused of the murder.

should ask the substitute teacher how the day has gone.¹¹ This contact helps the principal evaluate the substitute teacher personally and offers insights into the effectiveness of the entire substitute teaching program.

Often even minimal feedback has a profound impact on substitute teaching performance. A note from the regular teacher commending the substitute on student satisfaction, on having papers marked and recorded, and on students' grasp of the material presented, can raise the morale of the substitute teacher and encourage even greater professionalism in the future. The teacher could also send a copy of such a note to the principal. Having the principal know of his or her good performance provides an added incentive for the surrogate teacher to do even better next time.

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Hoover suggests that negative feedback should be given to the principal and should be specific.¹² If the substitute teacher merely babysat the students, the principal ought to know. This will help the principal select future substitutes and plan in-service for those who need it. Substitutes who receive consistently poor evaluations from both the principal and the regular teacher should be removed from the roster of surrogate teachers.

A Final Word

The Seventh-day Adventist school is uniquely qualified to develop and maintain a strong substitute teaching program. The degree of uniformity afforded by our system of

education helps guarantee that most teachers are already familiar with the textbooks, cultural atmosphere, and philosophy of our schools.

A further advantage enjoyed by Adventist schools is the relative ease with which the regular teacher and the substitute, both enjoying the commonalities of the Adventist subculture, can develop the positive relationship so essential to a successful substitute teaching program.

Finally, the potentially disruptive effects of a teacher's absence are compensated for by the presence of the Holy Spirit as a member of the instructional team. His presence assures continuity in the training of the whole person—head, hand, and heart. □

In a future issue, tips for "subs," including guidelines the principal can share with substitute teachers.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *Education Week*, IV:28 (April 3, 1985).
- ² Patricia Lucas George, "How to Improve Your Substitute Teaching Program," *NASSP Tips for Principals* (Reston, Va.: September, 1984).
- ³ *Education Week*.
- ⁴ George, p. 2.
- ⁵ C. M. Charles, *Elementary Classroom Management* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 218.
- ⁶ Raymond J. Palvoni, *A Handbook for Substitute Teachers*. Unpublished thesis, Arizona State University, 1977, p. 25.
- ⁷ David J. Reynolds and Learita Garfield, "Retraining Substitute Teachers for the Urban High Schools," *NASSP Bulletin*, 55 (April, 1971), pp. 80-88.
- ⁸ George, p. 2.
- ⁹ Kenneth H. Hoover, *The Professional Teacher's Handbook* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976), p. 602.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ George, p. 2.
- ¹² Hoover.

Coping With Death

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news by television, their parents were the first adults with whom they talked. The next day they talked with one another and their teachers.

Many asked to talk with me, and they also wanted the comfort of talking with one of our youth pastors. The same was true of people across the country when the shuttle exploded. Children and adults alike wanted to talk about it.

The catharsis needed in the situation described by Dr. Kent Ravenscroft, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical School, is almost beyond understanding:

"I had one boy who said he was riding right up in the rocket with her [Christa McAuliffe] and then he felt himself explode. . . . It was so intolerable that he finally denied it."⁸

In allowing time for students to talk, adults learn what they are thinking and are better able to correct their misunderstandings. Children

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should be encouraged to share their feelings about the person or the event and to formulate their memories. By doing this, they learn to place value upon what has happened.

Teachers need to do more than just allow their students to talk about the event, as important as that is. They must also teach them *how* to talk about what has happened. It is especially important for children to learn ways to frame feeling statements and to feel free to express them. Bottled-up feelings of fear or rage can prove devastating later on. The grieving process must include opportunities to bring emotions to the surface both in words and in tears.

2. *Help Them Respond Purposefully to the Urge to Do Something.*

Human beings seem to have the inner urge to be helpful in a time of crisis. When President Kennedy was assassinated, our nine-year-old son wrote to Mrs. Kennedy expressing his sorrow over her husband's death. For some reason, he didn't mail the letter, and we found it four months later when we were putting away his belongings following his sudden, accidental death. His warm, sensitive condolence to Mrs. Kennedy needed to be written, even though he chose not to mail his letter.

In addition to writing letters, children may want to hold a memorial service or contribute to a scholarship fund. They may have a strong urge to make a pilgrimage to the place of the accident or burial. In the years since President Kennedy's death, thousands of Americans have made pilgrimages to his grave. When it is practical, adults should help children fulfill their need to pay respect to someone they loved or respected.

3. *Provide Ongoing Lessons on Dealing With Life.*

Unfortunately, coping skills are frequently left untaught except as a

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crisis forces us to address them. However, children need to learn these skills step by step. Learning to handle small crises gives them confidence when major crises confront

them. This might be termed a "preventive" or informal approach to teaching about loss.

Judy Frank and Robert Lazun say coping skills should not only be taught during "Death Education Week" in March. Instead, educators and parents should seize everyday opportunities for helping children learn how to deal with death or other tragedies. When Pumpernickel, the second graders' pet gerbil, died at the Hebrew Academy last year, the teacher wanted to quietly remove his body and go on with the regular routine of school. Frank saw this as an opportunity to talk about death and insisted on giving Pumpernickel a funeral. She encouraged the second graders to remember good

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things about their pet, who was buried in the schoolyard with Fritos thrown on his grave.

"We have institutionalized death," says Frank. "It's pushed away. We need to make children aware that all around is death. As we make it a natural part, then the mystique is not so awful."

Call For Professional Help

While teaching children how to cope with sorrow and trauma is important, it is also important for school personnel to recognize that some trauma goes beyond the skill level of the faculty, and professional help must be found. An example of this was the wisdom the guidance department of Takoma Academy demonstrated in calling in a psychiatrist to assist them in helping Billy's

aunt, who had found his body when she went to his home to retrieve Christmas gifts.

Church school facilities may believe they cannot have access to pro-

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fessional help, but this is not true. Helping professionals are willing to assist where they are needed. Guidance people from the health department of the jurisdiction serving the school can be called for assistance or information. Public school guidance people are usually willing to assist as well.

The Advantages of a Christian School

The curriculum of Seventh-day Adventist schools should offer frequent opportunities for teaching children how to handle the traumas of life. Christian teachers who are committed to the mission of Seventh-day Adventist schools, will listen to their students with their hearts as well as with their ears. Worship periods and Bible classes provide many opportunities for children and teachers to discuss the pain that comes from death, injury, and frustrated plans.

Our concepts of life and death and of sin provide a sensible foundation upon which to help children acquire coping skills while also learning there is hope even in tragedy. The promises of God such as "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" will be more than mere memory verses. They will become

anchors to hold children steady when they feel adrift.

But even more important, the deep loyalty of a Christian teacher will make it easier for love to be displayed with all of its persuasive power at a time when children need it most. When Jesus taught on this earth, He modeled a crisis curriculum Christian teachers would do well to emulate.

"In every human being He discerned infinite possibilities. He saw [children] as they might be, transfig-

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ured by His grace,—in 'the beauty of the Lord our God.' [Psalm 90:17]. Looking upon them with hope, He inspired hope. Meeting them with confidence, He inspired trust. Revealing in Himself man's true ideal, He awakened, for its attainment, both desire and faith. . . . To Him nothing was without purpose. The sports of the child, the toils of the man, life's pleasures and cares and pains, all were means to the one end,—the revelation of God for the uplifting of humanity."⁹ □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Marta Vogel, "Growing Through Grief," *Washington Post* (February 3, 1986), p. B5.

² Richard Cohen, ". . . For Our Children An Exposure to Death," *Washington Post* (February 8, 1986), p. A21.

³ Vogel.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted by Lynn Olson, "Encourage Students to Express Their Feelings, Experts Suggest," *Education Week*, 5:21 (February 5, 1986), p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View,

California: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), pp. 80, 82.

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Organizations

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Living Through Loss, Park Centre Counseling Center, 12114 Greenleaf Ave., Potomac, MD 20854. Judith Frank and Robert Lazun (301) 762-0145.

Andrews Academy

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1. The struggling student

The unique environment of Andrews Academy generates many college-bound students, the report says. "Some are children of university students, a significant number of which represent overseas cultures. These students bring special learning problems which have been identified and are being addressed. Another class of struggling student is that of American students who have developed learning disabilities prior to admission. Not only is concern shown for these struggling students, positive programs of remediation and assistance are being provided."

2. Demands on faculty time

Committed to serve a widely spread student population in terms of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, the faculty are severely taxed by demands upon their time outside the regular schedule to meet the varying needs. Dedication to the

school's goals is seen in special tutoring sessions, supervision of and participation in extracurricular activities, student social events in faculty homes and the faculty's ready availability via telephone during non-teaching hours.

3. Financial assistance for students

"Although Andrews Academy has excellent facilities, a unique curriculum, and quality in-house and extended campus resources, vis à vis the university, the school is limited in serving its potential student population due to the high tuition costs in an area of economic recession. A number of innovative and creative ways are being explored by which greater financial assistance may be provided to students."

Andrews Academy has an unusually high percentage of students who go on to postsecondary education; in the past four years some 89 percent of academy graduates have pursued a college education. Fewer than one percent of the students dropped out of school, and on any given date 97.5 percent of the students are in attendance.

In October, 1985, the academy held a convocation to celebrate the school's award. Chace and Cook both attended. Chace commended the student body for their beautiful spirit of service and of family and added "but there can't be true Christian education without Christian teachers, administrators, and faculty, as well as student body." Cook stated that at the time of his visit he had been especially impressed with parents' involvement and with their knowledge of the goals and ideals the sponsoring church officers had delineated for Seventh-day Adventist education. "Catholic parents and church educators have traditionally followed the pray, pay, and obey cliché, a cliché that doesn't exist here," he said.

David W. Howell of the United