

Philosophical Conversation

In the early years

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When someone dies, where does he go?

During the children's snack-time, one girl asked me to listen to a particular song of a famous Greek singer who was dead. George mentioned that the singer was dead but he loved the song. John seemed to be puzzled and asked questions such as: "when someone dies where does he go?" and "if someone dies can he live again?" He kept asking questions about how this Greek singer died, what kind of illness he had, if the illness it is transmittable and how one can avoid getting infected. He asked me again during break time and I told him that I didn't have any answers and maybe we could discuss that in case there are some good answers.

Here are children's answers regarding their questions:

When someone dies, where does he go?

To heaven (many children)

The bones stay in the grave (George)

To the stars (Nefi)

To the moon (Vasoula)

To the desert (George N.) (*When I asked "why?" the child replied "Because there are not many people there so he can take his sword out of his pocket and disappear!"*)

With the animals or deep down a huge hole in the ground (Costas)

You mean dead people become animals? (*George's question to Costas*)

When someone dies, does he come back to life?

Majority of children: No

George N: He is alive when he comes to our mind. Each time we think of the dead person he is alive in our mind!

Kostas: In case of resurrection?

Emily: Like Jesus Christ...

Michael: Only Jesus did that. Do you know any other?

George N: I won't die. I eat all my food.

Emily: We are all going to die at some point.

Nicol: Even us?

Emily: Yes... (She sighs)

Giorgos: But we will first become grandfathers.

Michael: I don't want to become a grandfather. I will need a stick to walk and I won't be able to run.

Nicol: My grandfather hit himself with a helve and he started bleeding. Here he had it. (She showed her knee)

Teacher's food for thinking

Death is a subject that young children can willingly discuss. They may have experienced the death of a beloved person (grandmother or grandfather), a favorite pet or, even worse, the death of a close family member (brother, mother, father). Discussing death issues should be done discretely, with the utmost sensitivity to children's emotions. One way to do so is through following children's own spontaneous talk. The teacher can listen carefully to children's ideas and become aware of how they cope with the concept of death.

A discussion around death can occur at any time – as it happened with a child's selection of a song. The fact that a child points out that the singer is dead (this happened many years ago) shows that the child was thinking of this issue and possibly wanted to discuss it more with the teachers or the classmates. Maybe he expected that someone else would pick this issue too. Another child also asked a lot of questions. He seemed to fear death and its association to illnesses.

When a child asks what happens after dying there is no dialogue among children. They don't give arguments for their thoughts. They simply state their opinions and often without any justification. However, even this first step can help the teacher shed light on children's perceptions regarding death. What children's answers have in common is the sense of death as something vague, huge, open, and undefined which is somewhere up (sky, moon, stars, desert) or deep down (bones remain in the grave). The child who knew that the singer was dead is more realistic. He is the one who said that bones stay in the grave. He might think that there is a part of a human that stays back and possibly some other part which moves somewhere else. That's probably why he is hesitant towards Costas claim that the dead people become animals.

As a teacher, I could have asked Costas what he meant when he referred to animals. George questioned that instead. It's a pity we didn't have more time to discuss it and get clarifications from the child. The idea of death as a desert is also thought provoking. It was stated by the child who wanted to know more

about illnesses and death. The idea of death as a desert suggests the idea of something being isolated, huge, vague or eerie but in a playful way which allows escape routes. Such answer might not be realistic but it is poetic. It demonstrates children's fantasy and creative way of thinking in dealing with death issues.

Children's answers regarding the possibility of bringing someone back to life provide food for thought for teachers. Children know that death is part of life. Some children question whether they die themselves (Nicol: "What about us? Are we going to die?"). Other children deny death (George: "I will not die because I eat all my food") or imagine old age and the limitations it brings along (Michael: "I will have a stick and I won't be able to run"). Some children consider death as something distant that will happen when they become grandparents. Emily admits that everybody is going to die at some unpredictable point. She sighs as if she deeply realizes that this is human destiny.

Children's presuppositions consist of the followings: a) Death happens at an old age, b) Death comes when someone doesn't eat all his food, c) Death comes unexpectedly and d) growing older is negative and restricts our body movements.

Some children connect death with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and hope that, someday, dead people will be alive again. However, Michael questions it and implies it was a unique case. George expresses the idea that people can live so long as we remember them. Such a thought is deep, sensitive, delicate and poetic and can give hope even to adults.

Further questions and activities

It is not necessary to go deeper regarding death issues except for children want to know more. Each time we should listen to children's views respectfully and, through questioning, help children think deeper without creating unnecessary fears. When children feel confident, they can discuss any issue they wish. Some of the questions below have already been asked by the children. There is room for more questions if children show interest.

- Where do we go after we die?
- Can we escape dying? How?
- Can we live again? In what ways?
- Can we be dead and alive at the same time?
- When I say, "I am dead", am I really dead? What do I mean?
- Are dried flowers dead?
- Are fruits dead?
- Is a stone alive or dead?

- **Death and re-living in nature:** Children can experience the concepts of life and death through nature. There are many examples. Leaves fall in autumn but they are green again in spring. Some animals fall asleep during winter but wake up in spring. Birds fly away before winter but come back when the weather is warm again. Swallows return back to their nests, flowers wither but also flourish constantly. Children can be encouraged to observe life and death in nature, note examples and represent them through dramatic play.
- **Death and re-living in arts:** We show children pieces of art that could be connected to the idea of death or life in many different ways. Children could discuss symbols, colors, shapes, motives and how they suggest the idea of death or life.
- **Drawing death and life:** Fold a piece of paper in two. Allow children to draw in one half “death” and in the other half “life”. What attributes would they highlight?
- **Creating a map of “where we go when we die”.**
- **We listen to different types of music.** What type of music would be suitable for death? What type of music would be good for life? What are the criteria we are using?
- **Deaths that occurred accidentally or because of our own fault.** There is an example that occurred in the kindergarten described in the items called “Poor Snail! It’s Disappointed!”