

## Helping Children Understand Life Cycles

by Marilyn Spaw Krock

The reason we spend so much time with young children examining the wonders of nature, is to help them appreciate God's plan for the world and for all living things. Being concrete thinkers, young children really only understand that which they experience with their senses. They do not have the capacity for abstract thinking. That ability develops slowly as they mature.

In taking time to notice the cycles of nature, a foundation can be laid for future understanding of religious beliefs. Young children have a difficult time understanding death. Life after death is impossible to explain to them. Having experienced natural phenomena (such as a dead-looking tree sprouting leaves in spring, a bird hatching from an egg, a beautiful butterfly emerging from a "lifeless" cocoon, a flower growing from a bulb), when they do master abstract thinking, "new life" and "eternal life" will have deeper meaning.

Death means the end of life on earth as a child knows it. When a person dies, they are no more. It seems simple enough, but adults often want to soften the reality by using metaphors. Death is irreversible. If an explanation states a person "went away" it implies they went by choice and can return. Saying "went to a better place" can lead a young child to feel that the deceased person found a place better than being with the child. If the child was deeply attached to the deceased, it can create a very deep hurt. Likewise, trying to explain Heaven is futile since even adults can't comprehend the reality of eternal life. It is too abstract! In our adult faith, we believe that after death we will enjoy God's presence eternally. It gives us consolation in our grief at the loss of loved ones. Telling a young child that God or the angels "took" the person away tends to make God a "bad guy" who took away the beloved. Some adults still harbor resentment toward God for losses they have suffered. Saying the person "went to sleep" sounds reversible, when will the person "wake up"? This can, also, contribute to sleep disturbances in young children by making them fearful of sleep; they not be able to awaken.

Remember that children experience grief as much as adults. Their reactions are just as uncontrollable and can result in a variety of disturbances, such as regression, tantrums, misbehavior, attention seeking. Adults in the child's life need to respond with love and understanding which is often difficult when they themselves are deeply enmeshed in the grieving process. Don't shut them out, they need your love.

Although dealing with death is difficult, one of the best ways to prepare a child to accept the life experience of losing a person they love, is to allow them to really experience the death of a pet. Allow a natural grieving process to take place when the child can reconcile to the death and adjust. These experiences are part of growing and learning. Later, when the child is ready, a new pet can be selected.

One of the best children's books on this subject is Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (Bantam Books, ISBN#0-553-34023-9). Although it is a secular book, it deals in concrete reality that children can understand. Get it now, read it often - before it's needed!

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