

## **Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

### *Discussion of Death as an Affirmation of Life*

**H**AVE YOU EVER HAD a pleasant talk with your child about death? Last week preschool children in Room 3 joined in a class discussion about what dying means. Popcorn, a Room 3 guinea pig, was giving signs that he probably wouldn't live much longer. Before taking him to the veterinary hospital to make his transition more comfortable, it seemed important to give children a chance to say good-bye to the guinea pig who had been with them so long.

At Circle, the teacher wisely opened the discussion with a story. "Once upon a time," she said in a positive voice, "there was a guinea pig named Popcorn at the White Pony School in Room 3." Creating a story about a difficult situation allows children to distance themselves emotionally if needed. The teacher continued by talking about how lucky the class had been to share love with Popcorn as long as they had. She reminded the children that Popcorn had gone to the doctor weeks before but had come back to spend more time with them.

Still using a pleasant, very nurturing tone, the teacher told the children that Popcorn was sicker and that he was going to die. She asked if any of the preschoolers knew what "die" means. One of the four-year-old boys raised his hand and said, "You die when you go in a hole and people throw dirt on you." The teacher explained that people aren't buried until after they die. She didn't offer a definition of death but affirmed ideas that the children presented about it. Two children talked about their grandparents dying. One little girl said that when Popcorn's spirit is around her, she wants him to be happy.

The teacher mentioned that Popcorn's main teacher-caregiver was crying, and she drew a sad face on the easel paper. "We can have sad feelings about Popcorn dying. But we're also happy that we get to see him before he goes. I would like to say good-bye to Popcorn before he leaves for the animal hospital. Would anyone else like to give him some love?" The children lined up behind the teacher and then waited to talk with Popcorn and tell him how much he had meant to them. Afterward, some children drew pictures of Popcorn. Children will be attending Popcorn's memorial in the school's pet cemetery soon.

In the not-too-distant past, dying was very much a part of life. My mother was at home with family when grandparents died in their supportive presence. Today it often seems more difficult to talk about death. One mother told me that when her children said they saw a dead bird, she told them it was really just resting. She wasn't ready to deal with the subject.

The discussion about Popcorn is an example of how helpful it is to ask children what they know about dying. Young children often incorporate death into their dramatic play episodes, so it's a concept they are trying to understand. Perceptions of what death means vary according to developmental level. Preschoolers tend to think that dying is just temporary. Encouraging children to express ideas and questions can help correct misunderstandings and allay fears. As in this class-room, the overriding idea when talking about death can be love.

Recently, two little boys were talking behind the huge tree in the Room 1 yard. "We're going to die tomorrow when the lava comes," one commented. "Yes, this is our last time of living," they agreed lightheartedly. Most of all, talks about dying can heighten everyone's sense of how precious it is to be alive.

*Talk to Susie or Ellen Evans if you would like recommendations for books to help children deal with death and grief.*

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