

## Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

### *Dealing Sensitively with the Topic of Death*

**B**ONES WALKING AROUND at school? Sounds like a Halloween adventure. The real story: On a recent walk, six preschoolers and their teacher happened on some small “head-stones” behind our chicken coops. The teacher explained that special pets who had spent their days at school were buried here. “Wow,” the children asked, “can we dig them up and play with them?” (Developmentally, young children believe death is temporary, so why not bring dogs out to play?)

The teacher explained in a caring way that only bones were left in the graves. Imagine the confusion of one of our parents when her son expressed his concern about a sick dog and bones coming out of a grave. His mother acted wisely, calling the teacher and learning the back story. In fact, the topic of death often emerges in surprising ways: a classmate’s grandparent dies, children find the class goldfish floating, a favorite teacher, like Diane Cobb, dies.

It’s wonderful when the questions and curiosity accompanying these events can be handled naturally and openly. Yet inquiries about death can freeze us into denial. A few years ago, a mother who drove past a dead bird with her sons said it was still alive, just sleeping. When her sons asked if she would ever die, she promised she never would. Children show their beginning awareness of the subject consistently in their play. “He died,” they explain matter-of-factly, pointing to a friend on the floor.

Educator Nancy Rosenow, author of *Heart-Centered Teaching*, remembers her preschool teacher’s response when Nancy was stunned by finding a dead bird outside the classroom. The teacher put her arm around Nancy and validated her feelings by saying, “It’s always sad when we find a dead bird.” A few moments later, she lifted Nancy up to see a nest of baby birds in a

nearby tree and talked about the happiness of new life. Having an adult handle the situation so sensitively helped shape Rosenow’s lifetime view of death.

At this time of year, reminders of death pop up all around us. Halloween often portrays scary, even grotesque images of death: dancing skeletons, bloody masks. (At school, we ask children not to wear frightening costumes.) The Mexican holiday Dia de los Muertos takes a more gentle approach, honoring those departed in the last year. Altars to the person who has passed away are often constructed, favorite foods are made. Dia de los Muertos seems to invite questions about dying and the specific loved ones who have passed on.

Here are some ideas:

**Think about your responses ahead of time.** Children are sometimes traumatized by horrific images around Halloween. Whether it’s a scary mask or hearing that someone has passed away, it’s wise to be ready with a response. “I just say, ‘I’m not afraid of skeletons—go away!’”

**Encourage questions.** We don’t want to make death a taboo subject. Encourage your child to ask questions, asking her first what her feelings and perceptions are.

**Learn about developmental phases.** You can find explanations of children’s understanding of death online. Young children require different answers than older children. We want to explain sensitive matters in terms of the optimistic messages we want children to carry in their hearts.

*October 24, 2012*