

Essay

2020 NFDA Pursuit of Excellence Awards: Best of the Best
Category: Best of the Best

Coping with grief as a child

1. Rationale behind the idea:

"When we help our children heal from the pain of the deepest emotional wound of all - the death of a loved one - we are giving them important skills and understanding that will serve them for the rest of their lives."

(Kroen, 2003)

Grief is an event that touches the lives of all human beings at some point in their life. However, if the death of a loved one occurs during childhood it can be an especially traumatic experience, with effects that can last a lifetime, including various mental, neurological, and addiction disorders¹. Unfortunately, children, the elderly, and people with cognitive disabilities are among the "most excluded" during this difficult time. This is due to a misunderstanding of their way of understanding and dealing with grief, as "many adults do not take seriously the curiosity children have about death and believe they are 'too young to understand', but in reality death has a major impact on children of all ages, from childhood to adolescence." (Kroen 2003, p.26).

Depending on their age and their understanding of death, children have different reactions to the loss of a loved one. These range from the idea of abandonment to the belief that they caused the death or thinking that it will also happen to them or another family member. However, they move with an apparent "ease" from play to sadness, and from sadness back to play. For this reason, adults often think that

¹ Traumatic events and the loss of loved ones are commonplace in life. In a WHO study conducted in 21 countries, more than 10 per cent of respondents reported having witnessed violence (21.8 per cent) or suffered interpersonal violence (18.8 per cent), accidents (17.7 per cent), exposure to war (16.2 per cent) or traumatic events involving loved ones (12.5 per cent). The study estimates that 3.6% of the world's population has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the last year (World Health Organization, 2013). The WHO publishes guidelines on mental health care following traumatic events. Available at:

children do not feel pain from the loss. However, they are less prepared than adults to deal with this kind of situation (Kroen, 2003, p.13).

It also happens that adults, in their eagerness to "protect" children from the pain and "horror" of death, avoid talking to them about these issues and forget that when children are not given information, they fill the gap based on their imagination or the experience of other children, who often do not measure or know how to nuance their words. While speaking the truth is always recommended, the person best suited to do so is an adult and not another child, who inevitably has more limited knowledge and often cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality.

2. Detailed description of the program, service or activity.

For San Vicente Funeral Home and its Grief Counseling Center, accompanying grieving children has always been of vital importance. For more than two decades its main objective has been to contribute to their well-being and mental health. For this reason it has designed different programs to accompany them in the grieving process, which include the following:

- **Children's Support Group.** This is a weekly two-hour session for children between the ages of 4 and 12 coordinated by a psychologist who is an expert in working with children. Through games and art, children are given the opportunity to address what they often find difficult to express in words. Their feelings are validated and the fantasies and fears they have about death and its related rites and rituals are listened to and explained. Approximately 12 to 15 children attend these weekly sessions.
- **Support group for parents and carers of grieving children.** Psychological work with children is much more effective when adults (parents, carers or teachers) are involved, because they are the ones who spend the most time with them. The child needs the example and guidance of adults in order for the grieving process to be effective. It is essential that the adult is also working through his or her own grief and in this way can serve as a model for the child, since children learn mainly through imitation. There are ten sessions in which the psychologist talks about topics such as communication of bad news, ethics, and children's different ways of coping according to their age, utilizing different strategies to accompany them in their grieving process.
- **Primary care group for grieving children:** The Grief Counseling Center holds a weekly talk on "**Coping with the death of a loved one**", which covers general topics on reactions to and the working through of grief. Although the talk is aimed at adults, sometimes they bring children. However, because children do not have the same level of concentration, it is difficult for them to

listen to a talk for more than an hour. In order to address this, the **primary care group for grieving children** was set up at the Villanueva chapel of rest. In this space, children who are brought to the adult conference are invited to another room to talk about their experience with other children and engage in playful activities related to loss such as "Let's play dead", "Drawing the before and after", "Questions and answers". Holding this activity in a chapel of rest allows the children to become familiar with this space. If they were unable to attend their loved one's viewing, funeral or wake it can help them overcome any fears and prejudices they may have about it. At the same time, they are helped to recognise and process the symbols and meanings that accompany funeral rites and rituals, which can enable them to grow up without rejection or fear of these spaces for remembering and paying their respects to the person they have lost.

In the activity "**Let's play dead**", one of the children represents a body and the others explain the differences between someone who is alive and someone who has died. Then the child who was playing dead gets up (the children have already identified that he was alive because he was breathing and laughing) and chases another child who will have the turn to play dead.

Children begin to acquire the general concepts that are key to understanding death such as: "**non-functionality**", meaning that the dead person does not feel pain, hunger, cold, heat or desire to go to the bathroom; he does not see, hear, breathe, smell, feel or think, etc; **universality**, which means that every living organism dies; **irreversibility**, which refers to the fact that the person who has died cannot come back to life, that it is something definitive; and finally, that **every death has a cause**, that is to say that the causes are physical and must be explained. (Díaz, 2016, pp. 28-43). All these concepts are explained to them through examples with games, stories and very simple and easy to understand words in order to avoid the use of euphemisms or "made-up" words.



With the activity "**Drawing before and after**", children express their feelings through drawing what has changed after the loss, their most special memory or what they would like to say to their loved one.





- **Celebration of Children's Day:** In Colombia, Children's Day is celebrated on the last Saturday in April each year, and San Vicente Funeral Home is not indifferent to this commemorative date that is celebrated in their honour.

This celebration seeks to provide a therapeutic exercise for children who have lost a loved one. With the guidance of the team of psychologists from the Grief Support Unit, the children acquire tools that help them in the grieving process and participate in activities that allow them to deal with their emotions and the absence of their loved one. The celebration involves a range of activities: story reading, music, dance, plastic construction, drawing and play. Approximately 80 children attend this activity and attendance increases every year.

“Los niños viven en la fantasía y la realidad, se mueven entre ambas muy fácilmente, de un modo que nosotros los adultos ya no recordamos”.

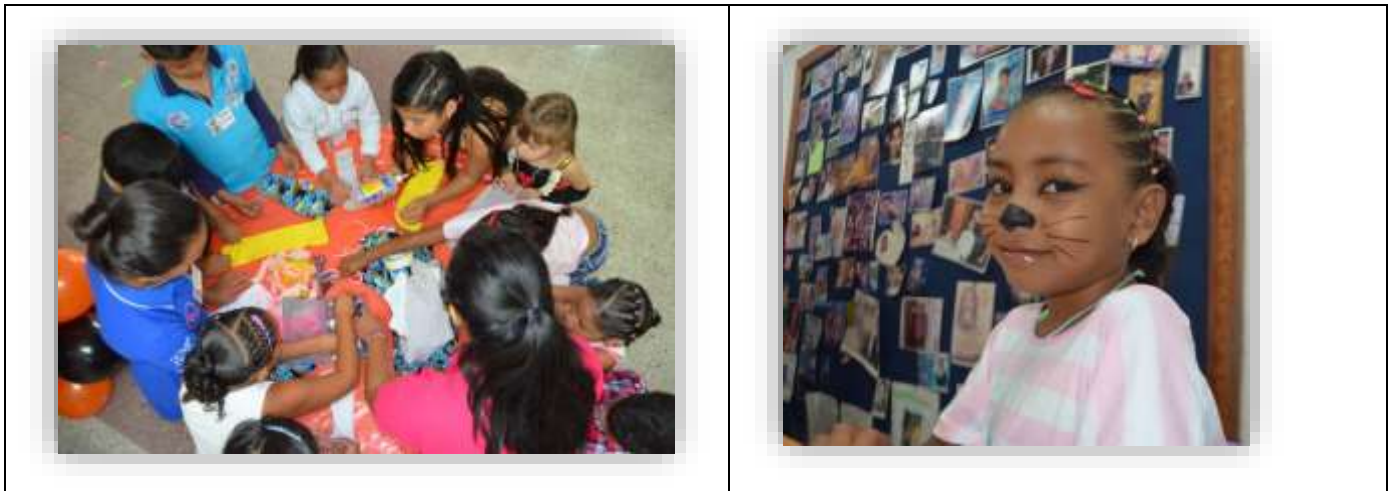
Maurice Sendak

#DíaDeLosNiños





- **Halloween Party:** this party is held on the last Saturday in October. Since this date is socially recognized as an opportunity for children to dress up as a character that is meaningful for them, the Halloween Party aims to offer a space for play and recreation for children who have lost a loved one. This activity makes it easier for them to use play as a way to communicate and express their inner world. It also contributes to the work of building the self after the loss, as it works on the ability to enjoy and do something they like through play and interaction with other children. Approximately 90 to 120 children attend this activity.





- **Group clinical care in educational institutions and guidance for teachers:**
As an integral part of the work of sensitization and culturalization of issues related to death, dying and mourning, San Vicente Funeral Home provides conferences and workshops for teachers from different educational institutions. Similarly, in the case of a death of a pupil or teacher, a tribute is held with the children to say goodbye to their classmate or teacher and support groups are formed to talk about the grieving process.



- **Playground:** as part of its grief support programs San Vicente Funeral Home has designed an activity called "playground". Its objective is to offer an educational space focusing on play through which different strategies for dealing with grief are introduced based on the recognition that death is part of life.

This "playground" has five different "stations" through which participants pass. Each station highlights the different feelings and thoughts that a person goes through in the grieving process and is accompanied by a story in which a caterpillar has a conversation with a guayacan tree about life and death.

All the games are designed to encourage dialogue and encourage participants to take an active part in the discussions based on their own experiences. Ideally, an adult should accompany the process and guide the activities in order to facilitate understanding and orientate the discussions when necessary.

The following image presents an introduction to the story and the objective and description of the playground, as explained above.



THE GUAYACAN TREE AND THE CATERPILLAR

Introduction to the story:

Life is full of experiences, some sad and some happy but always enriching. Death is one of them.

Just as a caterpillar goes through a series of stages in its process of transforming into a butterfly, the grieving process is similarly a process of transformation.

In this game we will learn about life and death and discover different ways of dealing with the loss of a loved one.

Accompany this little caterpillar as it faces a variety of challenges that it must overcome in order to accept its new life as a butterfly, helped by a wise guayacan tree.

The guayacan tree and the caterpillar (game 1)

STORY: The wise old guayacan tree was helping the caterpillar who didn't want to start her transformation into a butterfly.

"But why must I do it?", the caterpillar complained. "Nobody asked me whether I wanted to."

"Don't be afraid," replied the tree, "sometimes we just have to accept change."

Jigsaw puzzle

Description:

Components: individual jigsaw pieces

Number of players: 1 to 6 people

Age: 3 years and up

Objectives

- Identify different situations that happen throughout life from birth to death.
- Promote group cohesion through teamwork





The guayacan tree and the caterpillar (game 3)

STORY: The caterpillar was pensive and did not move, so the guayacan tree consoled her: "I know you are feeling a lot of things, but if you express them you will feel a lot better."

Skittles

Description:

Components: six coloured skittles, ball and bowling track.

Number of players: 1 to 6 people

Age: 3 years and up

Objectives:

- To provide a space in which children can identify and describe their emotions in relation to the grieving process.
- Encourage children to reflect on how to handle and express their emotions during the grieving process.



The guayacan tree and the caterpillar (game 4)

STORY: "Sometimes you will feel like giving up. I know it will be difficult," the guayacan continued. "But come on, cheer up, trust that you will make it. I used to be a little seed and look at me now."

Gale

Description:

Components: gaming mat and roulette

Number of players: 1 to 6 people

Age: 3 years and up

Objectives:

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings and thoughts through play.
- Help children to relate to each other through games and teamwork.
- Generate discussion and reflection on cultural beliefs and prejudices.



The guayacan tree and the caterpillar (game 4)

STORY: "You are not alone; I will be with you through the ups and downs of the journey until the day you finally become a beautiful butterfly." After thinking about what the wise old guayacan had said, the caterpillar smiled and set off on her journey.

Ladder

Description:

Components: game board and dice

Number of players: 1 to 6 people

Age: 3 years and up

Objective:

- Identify positive and negative approaches to dealing with grief as well as concepts related to death.





Finally, despite the contingency we are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic during the year 2020, San Vicente Funeral Home continues to provide online psychological care to children and their caregivers, as well as holding various meetings through Facebook Live to answer questions from the community at large. In addition, useful material on the care of children during quarantine is regularly shared through our social networks and e-mail.

This information is available via the following link:

<https://www.facebook.com/unidaddeduelosanvicente>

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¿CÓMO ACOMPAÑAR NIÑOS EN DUELO EN TIEMPOS DE CUARENTENA?

CONÉCTATE A NUESTRO FACEBOOK LIVE EN NUESTRA PÁGINA UNIDAD DE DUELO

MÉRCLES 23 DE ABRIL
4:30 P.M.
PSICÓLOGA: FREDY GÓMEZ SÁDIZ

www.funerariasanvicente.com

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VIVIENDO LAS EMOCIONES EN CUARENTENA

CONÉCTATE A NUESTRO FACEBOOK LIVE EN NUESTRA PÁGINA UNIDAD DE DUELO

JUEVES 30 DE ABRIL
4:00 P.M.
PSICÓLOGA: DIANA PELÁEZ

#YoMeQuedoEnCasa
#UnidadDeDueloUnidadDeDueloUnidadDeDuelo

www.funerariasanvicente.com 337 784 35 57

Unidad de Duelo
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Los niños y la cuarentena: ¿educar o castigar?

1000 años de historia. NUESTRO AÑO de la cultura. NUESTRO AÑO de la cultura. NUESTRO AÑO de la cultura.

¿Cómo contribuye la disciplina en la crianza de los hijos?

¿Cómo enseñar a tener disciplina?

Pasos para disciplinar adecuadamente:

1. Conocer emocionalmente a los niños. Establecer un vínculo de confianza con el que haga "los límites". Tener en cuenta cómo se sienten y cómo se expresan emocionalmente. Tener en cuenta que se sienten y cómo se expresan emocionalmente.
2. Establecer límites, normas y reglas que sean claras y consistentes. La disciplina adecuada es aquella que ayuda a que los niños se sientan seguros.
3. Valer, siempre se es parte del comportamiento, reconocer y aceptar los sentimientos de los niños. "Cuando siento lo que siento. Pero siempre puedo hacer lo que quiero".
4. Hablar con los niños, no gritar, ni castigar, ni usar la fuerza. Hablar con los niños y explicarles que se sienten y cómo se expresan emocionalmente.
5. Decirle y con él establecer la conducta que se espera que él siga.
6. Tener en cuenta, en este momento de la vida de los niños, que se sienten y cómo se expresan emocionalmente.
7. Compartir con los niños, los momentos de la vida que se sienten y cómo se expresan emocionalmente.
8. Enseñar a los niños a disciplinar, con el ejemplo de un adulto que se sienten y cómo se expresan emocionalmente.

Llévense a la práctica los buenos tratos en toda el camino de la crianza y sobre todo en los momentos difíciles.

Unidad de Duelo

3. Benefits for families and the wider community

Accompanying children in mourning is a commitment that involves everyone. By holding support groups, individual consultations, talks and conferences, adults learn more about how they can accompany them, while also acquiring useful ideas and strategies for helping them. The children, for their part, when they are listened to and their feelings are taken seriously, acquire more confidence and feel more secure about the grieving process.

Together, these activities prevent children from experiencing further mental and emotional difficulties as a result of unresolved grief such as depression, post-traumatic stress, suicide, substance abuse, etc. Thus, as Kroen (2003) points out: "Talking about death and the pain inherent in it is an essential step in becoming an emotionally healthy human being." (p.15).

4. Benefits for the company and its staff

According to recent research in Spain, only 25% of children attend the funeral of a loved one. (Carmona, 2019). Although in Colombia there are no studies that provide statistics on their attendance, it is likely not very different from what happens in Spain, which would most probably be due to ignorance, fear and cultural reasons.

The benefit that these programs offer to the company and its personnel is mainly the sense of achievement and pride in providing an important social service, since its dedicated staff contribute to the mental health of the children who will become adults with a less troubled relationship with chapels of rest and funeral rites and rituals.

As witnesses to the last step in the lifecycle, undertakers are indispensable members of society. Help with the grieving process at any age contributes to the establishment and maintenance of social bonds, symbolic acts and respect for others, qualities that distinguish us as human beings.

REFERENCES

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