

Special Article

## School Children's Perception of the Concept of Death

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### Abstract

Death is an inevitable reality of for all living creatures. Children's understanding of the concept of death has been the subject of scientific research and its perception depends primarily on a child's age. Moreover, cognitive development, sex, family, religion, school, technology and mass media, values, attitudes, culture, emotional factors and experiences of death are related to the development of the concept of death in children. Therefore, parents should be willing to discuss about death with their children in order to help them to develop a mature perception on the issue. Moreover, teachers at school, have to educate children on issues related to death, and have a bigger share of responsibility compared to family with regards to the better understanding of the children of all dimensions of the phenomenon of death.

**Key Words:** Perception of Death, School Children

### Introduction

Death and bereavement constitute an integral part in the life cycle of all living creatures. But more specifically, children's confrontation with the concept of death has been the subject of scientific research. The perception of death relates with and depends primarily on a child's age. It has been noted that among younger children the generally held view is that death is reversible and avoidable (Speece & Brent, 1984). As children grow up, they realize that definitiveness and inevitability of death are its main characteristics. A confusion in understanding the subconcepts of death is due not only to children's cognitive and perceptive stage, but it depends also on external causes, such as the environment in which they grow up, teachers' and parents' opinions and attitudes, religious views and their country's culture, in general (Rose, Jolley & Burkitt, 2006). Moreover, it is argued that children initially approach death with curiosity, whereas emotions of stress, fear and sorrow appear later and were adopted as behavioural patterns by the environment (Wells, 1995).

In terms of development, Bacque's research (2001) with regard to understanding of death has

concluded that, during new born age, a person cannot understand the concept of death, but is capable to perceive absence and feel the sentiment of sorrow in the environment. Passing to the next developmental stage, infancy and preschool age, it is ascertained that, while a child can perceive the concept of life in the environment, he still has not sufficiently developed the ability to understand the concept of death and its consequences, since he conceives it more as a state of sleep and inertia (Thanou & Nikolakopoulou, 2006). The inability to understand the notions of permanent and of temporary, which characterizes this stage of cognitive development, plays a crucial role in this form of perception (Bacque, 2001). During school age, a child is capable to conceive that death and the following absence of a person are irreversible and definitive (Thanou & Nikolakopoulou, 2006).

According to Ilg and Ames (1955) at the age of six the emotional factor is added to the perception of death, whereas from the age of seven onwards children are interested in more relevant details, since the feeling of invulnerability is demolished. From now on, they feel that they themselves might die. At the age of eight they deal with death as something less

macabre and less of an emotional event and at the age of nine they confront it as something rational, giving scientific explanations about death. Finally, during adolescence, perception is more mature and conscious and is quite similar to adults' perception. More precisely, an adolescent totally conceives the mortality of all living creatures, understands that death is the natural end of life and is able to assign symbolic and metaphysical interpretations to it (Baum, 2003).

Studies on children's understanding of death have started already since 1930 by pioneers Anthony, Schilder and Wechslep (as cited by Speece & Brent, 1984). All studies realised from 1930 until today examine the complex concept of death, which children understand through time by conquering its different subconcepts, as well as the factors that affect it.

Maria Nagy (1959, as cited by Katz, 2001) used interviews with children aged 2 to 10 to distinguish three developmental stages of the concept of death:

- **At the first stage** (2-5 years) children usually cannot understand the definitiveness of death. They develop an intense curiosity as to what happens to the human body, while at the same time they consider that dead people are in a state of protracted sleep, but generally not different to that of the living.
- **At the second stage** (5-9 years) children understand that death is the end of life, but they believe that possibly there is a way out of it.
- **At the third stage** (9 years and older) death is for children a definitive and inevitable fact that concerns all living creatures.

Moreover, Kastenbaum (1986) recognized four basic factors that affect and contribute to the development and understanding of the concept of death during childhood. These factors are:

- a) children's developmental – cognitive stage, which is directly correlated with their age,
- b) every child's personality and specific individual features,
- c) children's personal experiences regarding deaths, separations or illnesses,
- d) communication, support and information they receive regarding the phenomenon of death from their family and social environment, in general.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Kastenbaum has been criticized for the four aforementioned factors, mainly because he does not take into account cultural and religious influences in shaping the perception of death (Katz, 2001).

### **The structural elements of the concept of death according to Speece and Brent**

After conducting researches, Speece and Brent (1994) pointed out and described the structural elements of the concept of death. These are five subconcepts, which structure the meaning of death in people's perception (Katz, 2001) and which formed the basis for later studies that dealt with children's understanding of this concept. These subconcepts are the following:

1. The synonymous concepts of irrevocability, finality and irreversibility. It should be noted, however, that children up to the age of three cannot understand death as the permanent absence of a person, although they feel it (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Studies have reported that this concept is acquired by the age of five or six (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).
2. Cessation of life and of all functions of the human body that keep it alive (Speece and Brent, 1984).
3. Universality, or else understanding the inevitability of death, which means understanding that all living creatures die. However, researchers maintain that, up to five years of age, most children do not realize the universality of death, including, of course, their own death (McEntire, 2003).
4. Causality, which refers to understanding the biological factors that can lead to death. It is pointed out that children at first school age perceive death as the end of all living creatures characterized by the cessation of bodily functions.
5. Noncorporeal continuity, which, however, has not been thoroughly researched (Katz, 2001).

The concept of death, therefore, develops gradually. In fact, all researchers conclude that, by the age of ten approximately, children have perceived death as a biological fact that happens inevitably to all living creatures and one that is caused by a non-reversible damage in bodily functions (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

Consequently, the idea of death is formed by multiple factors and structured by various partial notions. There is no doubt that understanding the

concept of death is a difficult process for children, but it is a necessary one, since there will be important consequences for a child, in case he does not fully and thoroughly understand it. More precisely, if a child considers that someone is temporarily dead and that he will come back, then separation and absence of the dead person are even more difficult to deal with. Moreover, if a child does not understand the cessation of bodily functions, then this may lead him to worry too much about the pain a dead person might feel, something that hinders the child's readjustment. In addition, if a child is incapable to understand death as a universal phenomenon caused by biological reasons, then he may feel guilt and shame for the death of a loved one, since he thinks that a bad thought or act of his may have killed him (Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1990).

### **Factors that influence the perception of the concept of death**

Many factors contribute to the formation of a mature concept of death, which have been repeatedly and thoroughly examined by researchers. The following are considered the main and most determining factors: age, cognitive development, sex, experiences of death, social environment as well as emotional factors.

#### **Age**

According to studies, the exact age of understanding the elements that form a mature concept of death has not been defined yet. However, most researchers agree that age plays a fundamental role in children's ability to understand (Hunter & Smith, 2001). Children seem to comprehend firstly universality and irrevocability and secondly cessation and causality, whereas around the age of nine or ten they have formed a clear view on death (Kenyon, 2001). Candy-Gipps, Sharp and Peturn (1984-1985) concluded that universality and irreversibility are gained at the age of six or seven. In addition, Childers and Wimmer (1971) maintained that universality goes with age, while Speece and Brent (1992) and Vianello and Marin (1989) came to the conclusion that most children understand this concept easier than all others by the age of seven. Hyslop-Christ (2000) found that children aged three to five were unable to understand finality and irrevocability, whereas

children aged six to eight were able to do so (Hunter & Smith, 2008).

A study by Reilly, Hasazi and Bond (1983) regarding the understanding of death causes, reported that infants and preschool children mentioned as causes of death mainly non natural causes, such as violence and accidents. On the contrary, children aged eight to nine mentioned natural causes, like heart attack or illness, while eleven year olds often named spiritual causes as well, e.g. God's invitation. Atwood (1984) concluded that infants have a limited perception of the subconcept of cessation, while according to Hoffman and Strauss (1985) and Speece and Brent (1992) children understand first the cessation of visible functions, like movement, as opposed to non visible ones, like thought. Furthermore, Vianello and Marin (1989) supported the idea that most children begin to understand their own mortality by the age of seven or eight (Kenyon, 2001).

#### **Cognitive development**

Researchers have also conflicting views regarding the influence of cognitive development in understanding the concept of death, which is usually examined based on Jean Piaget's stage theory of intellectual development. Specifically, Piaget describes four stages in children's intellectual development:

- The sensorimotor stage (from birth to 2 years), when children know the world through sensations and movement.
- The preoperational stage (2 to 7 years), when children represent objects with symbols.
- The concrete operational stage (7 to 12 years), when children can think logically and solve concrete problems.
- The formal operational stage (12 years and up), when a person conceives abstract concepts, since he has developed abstract thinking.

Researches by Cotton and Range (1990) and Lazar and Torney-Purta (1991) came to the conclusion that understanding the structural elements of the concept of death depends on a child's cognitive stage (Hunter & Smith, 2008). On the other side, Townley and Thornburg (1980), who dealt with children in the preoperational and concrete operational stages,

discovered that the ability of conservation is not necessary in order to understand death.

Moreover, there are studies that focus on children's intelligence and argue it affects their understanding of universality, irrevocability and cessation. According to Orbach, Gross, Glaubman and Berman as well (1986), this occurs because children use their intelligence to better organize information concerning death (Kenyon, 2001). In general, a mature perception of death requires the following cognitive abilities by children: classification, ability of conservation and conservation of numbers (Kenyon, 2001) and, according to Piaget's theory, children in the preoperational stage find it difficult to comprehend all aspects of the concept of death due to reduced ability of conservation (Hunter & Smith, 2008).

### **Sex**

Bibliographical references regarding sex as a factor that differentiates understanding of death are limited in number. Existing references are limited to the subconcept of causality and they detect a diversification between boys and girls. They argue, i.e., that boys tend to suggest more violent causes of death than girls, who usually attribute it to accidents or illness (Kenyon, 2001). Tamm and Granqvist (1991, 2001) have discovered during their research that, when trying to draw death, boys usually manifested more violence than girls, girls expressed more of the psychological aspects of death, sorrow, distress and, finally, that boys tended to personify death more (Tamm & Granqvist, 1995).

### **Experiences of death**

Studies have established that children who have experienced the death of a person close to them or of a pet or whose own life is threatened by a serious illness, seem to develop the concept of death differently than their peers without such experience.

More specifically, Orbach, Weiner, Har-Even and Eshel (1994-1995) argued that children grasped better the death of a relative than that of a stranger. Moreover, Hyslop-Christ (2000) came to the conclusion that children who have lost one parent to illness perceive death as more "real" than children with no similar experience (Hunter & Smith, 2008).

Jay, Green, Johnson, Caldwell and Nitschke (1987) reported that children with cancer became more aware of their own mortality as well as of the causes that may lead to death. At the same time, according to Clunies-Ross and Lansdown (1988) children with leukemia understood irreversibility and cessation as attributes of death better than healthy children. Other researchers (Reilly, 1983) agree that such experience is positively connected with developing the concept of death and, more specifically, the subconcept of irreversibility and universality (Kenyon, 2001).

### **Family**

Concerning the institution of family in aspects related with death, Silverman et al. (1995) distinguish two types of parents: a) parents who are willing to discuss with their child about death or – in case the family experiences death and the subsequent mourning - "allow" the child to participate in mourning, in every ritual, as well as to express his sentiments and thoughts over this incident, b) parents who are negative and avoid any discussion on such an issue, considering that in this way they protect their child from a traumatic experience. In the first case, a child is allowed to develop a mature perception of death. On the contrary, in the second case, information given to children on the sensitive subject of death is vague, even cryptic. Parents keep their children away from anything related to death, aiming at protecting them from the emotional pain it causes, but what they finally achieve is to deepen their anxiety and confusion of perceptions (Hunter & Smith, 2008).

### **Values, attitudes, culture**

The perception that children develop of death differentiates depending on the values and culture of the country in which they were born and live. In countries with political instability, conflicts and terror attacks, values are different than those in countries with peace and people's attitudes adapt accordingly. War with its fatal results is a death experience for children in a war zone, where the values and attitudes of citizens are different. This is related to the fact that these children experienced daily incidents of violence and death around them, something that possibly stirred discussions on death inside their family (Hunter & Smith, 2008).

### Technology and mass media

There is no doubt that modern technology contributes to the formation of the concept of death by children. It is through mass media that deadly news are transmitted in a flash all over the world and children are their recipients, as well. Moreover, video games, movies and the internet, to which children have almost constant access, project death repeatedly and intensively (Hunter & Smith, 2008).

### Religion

Young children that have not yet understood the irreversibility of death believe that it can be reversed by a magical, miraculous way, as presented in Christianity, for example, with the resurrection of Christ (Ellis & Stump, 2000). While by the age of nine this idea matures and children understand the irrevocability of death, later on they revise and tend to believe in reincarnation, in a continuity of the dead person's energy or spirit. Furthermore, according to Candy – Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun (1985) children who belong to a religion whose message is the afterlife, believe in the spiritual, noncorporeal continuity of human (Kenyon, 2001).

### School

After family, school is the second most important centre in a child's life and it plays an important role in forming the perception of concepts like death, since it aims at children's overall development. Researchers argue that it is good for teachers to raise the issue of death, in order for pupils to form a real image of it, both as a precaution as well as when a child experiences death, so that he can manage the ensuing pain (Stevenson, 1999). Regarding school's role, teachers think that they have a bigger share of responsibility compared to family and that they play a more important role in educating children on death issues, first of all in understanding all dimensions of the phenomenon of death: biological, psychological and metaphysical dimensions (Frangoulis, et al., 1996). However, some teachers feel uncomfortable discussing death with their pupils because of inadequate training and preparedness (Jackson & Colwell, 2001).

### Emotional factors

Given that death causes various intense and negative sentiments, some researchers have

turned to the study of sentiments' impact on cognitive understanding of this concept. Because infants are incapable of fully understanding the causes of death, they may often feel guilty and liable for the death of a loved one, which impedes understanding of this concept, whereas anxiety and fears about death, that some children may feel, distort the subconcept of universality (Orbach et al. 1994).

### Conclusions

Perception of death is primarily connected to and depended on a child's age. During school age, a child is in a position to understand that death and the subsequent absence of a person are irreversible and definitive. More precisely, an adolescent fully perceives the mortality of all living creatures, understands that death is the natural end of life and is capable to ascribe symbolic and metaphysical interpretations to it.

Parents should be willing to discuss about death with their children in order for them to develop a mature perception and not be negative towards these issues.

Moreover, teachers at school, who play an important role in educating children on issues related to death, have a bigger share of responsibility compared to family with regards to better understanding all dimensions of the phenomenon of death.

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