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All But the One on Death

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

No Comments

"I'm going to most of the Conversations with Donna Bryant Goertz," said the mom, "as many as I can, anyway," she added. "But not the one on death! I can't bring myself to think about dealing with this subject with my child. I'll wait to face that when I have to."

Why do we sometimes feel so strongly against approaching this subject with our children? We may feel uncomfortable with the entire subject and think we don't know what to say, when really, with a little forethought we can say just the right things. We may think talking about death will frighten our children, give them phobias or nightmares, when really it is the secrecy and avoidance that may be frightening to them. We may think it will destroy their innocence, when really their innocence is protected by the innocent and reverent contemplation of the truth of Life and Death. We may think that talking to our children about death may cause them to feel insecure, timid, or fixated, when really it will give them a sense of trust.

That's why we hide the dead bird or mouse or snake from our children, throw it in the trash before they see it, when really it can serve as the very best introduction they can have to the subject.

It is natural to feel those ways, understandable too. In our day and time, in our place on the planet, where our lives are relatively protected from death, we get the feeling we can almost will the subject away, will it out of our children's lives, almost avoid it altogether. Our life expectancy is long; our infant mortality low. But avoidance is a big mistake. Our children need early, natural, and balanced experience of death that is age-appropriate, that is healthy preparation for the future.



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Because, it's true; we can avoid the subject of death with our children—that is, until it hits us out of the blue, suddenly, unexpectedly, and hard. The very worst time to connect with our children on the subject of death is when we are in the midst of the reeling shock, the gut-wrenching pain, the mind-twisting confusion that can come our way. We do not present the subject well when we are caught off guard.

That's why we are coming together to talk about death right now—so we can think through our thoughts and feelings, prepare our words, consider our actions ahead of time, with leisure and equanimity and calm, in the company of one another. We want to lay the foundation, make it strong and even, set it and return to it many times before we face the moment of truth, a death that impacts us, our families, our community.

Children have many questions about death—unexpected questions, delicate questions, insensitive questions, practical questions, philosophical questions—questions that we cannot answer well while in the state of shock or fresh grief.



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We aim to spend a little time making friends enough so that we can help our children make friends with death. We aim to approach the Whole subject of Life and Death, to contemplate the Mystery, to open our arms to the Certainty, so that we will be ready to support our children. We seek for them to be friendly with the death of a bird, a mouse, a snake, an armadillo, a raccoon, a squirrel, before they are confronted with a dead cat or dog on the street in the front of the house. We

aim to prepare ahead so that we can prepare them to be ready, long before the death of a beloved pet.

We aim to prepare ourselves for the more proximate deaths of elderly and infirm relatives, so that we can grieve in ways that are balanced and healthy. We plan to explore the age appropriate ways to include our children in the experiences of death and of grieving.

Finally, we plan to achieve the balance we need for the possibility that we are confronted with seeing ourselves and our children through the deaths of their friends or a friend's parent. We will hope against hope that we won't find ourselves supporting ourselves and our children through the deaths of those even closer to them. We hope against hope that we won't find ourselves supporting ourselves and our children through worse, but we never know. It's best to cultivate a healthy and balanced relationship with Death as the natural counterpart of Life.



Donna Bryant Goertz, founder of [Austin Montessori School](#) in Austin, Texas, acts as a resource to schools around the world. Donna's book, *[Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom](#)* draws on her thirty years of experience guiding a community of thirty-five six-to-nine year-olds. She received her Montessori elementary diploma from the [Fondazione Centro Internazionale Studi Montessoriani](#) in Bergamo, Italy, and her assistants to infancy diploma from [The Montessori Institute of Denver, Colorado](#).