

The Gift of the Rhinoceros Beetle: A Teachable Moment on Dying and Death for Young Children

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Abstract

The gift of the Rhinoceros Beetle offers early childhood educators recommendations for including experiential learning with the difficult issues of dying and death. This article focuses on a series of experiences an early childhood classroom had with the life cycle of a Rhinoceros Beetle and uses developmental theory to frame the process of learning for young children. The article offers recommendations for adult child interaction and classroom discussions that lay a foundation to support understanding and coping in young children.

On a hot July morning, the center director found an interesting looking beetle upside down on the sidewalk. Thinking it was dead, she asked her husband to wrap it in a plastic bag to place in her purse to show Ms. Becky, the preschool teacher. Later that morning, his gold and black spotted body gleamed as Ms. Becky carefully took the beetle from the bag, “We have a present!” she sang. The children quickly gathered around her and a mixed chorus resounded of “Ooo...Look at him!”, “Yuck”, and “Hey, bug!”. Slowly lifting itself, the beetle waved one spindly black leg as if on cue. To the children’s delight (and the director’s dismay), the beetle was alive! After their initial look at the beetle, they put him in a peanut butter jar to make sure he did not hurt anyone. He sat by the computer, and children stopped by all day to check on him. The children had recently talked about stag beetles, but the photo of a stag beetle from a Google image search indicated that he was not a stag beetle. Ms. Becky typed ‘rhinoceros beetle’ into the Google image search engine and there he was! A *Dynastes Tityus* or Eastern Hercules beetle! This unanticipated teachable moment led a classroom of 2 ½ -3 ½ years-old children to discover many concepts during the following months--not the least of which included preparing the children for future grief experiences.

Ms. Becky and the children used the Internet to determine if the beetle was poisonous or aggressive. The class made observations and discovered many interesting facts about their newly found insect friend. The Eastern Hercules beetle was now known just as “Beetle”. Beetle was a male because he had a horn. As an insect, he had 6 legs and an exoskeleton (University of Kentucky Entomology, 2008). He had black hairs and barbs on the ends of his 6 legs. His two hard, glossy outer wings were called ‘elytra’, and they gave him a polished look. There was a big horn on the thorax and another on the head. On each side of the large thorax horn, there was a little horn. There were also coppery hairs between his abdomen and thorax.

The Internet search revealed he was not dangerous. A parent, who was an entomologist, confirmed that Beetle was an Eastern Hercules beetle and that he was not aggressive. They discovered he was a fruit eater and that he would preserve very well after death. When he died, he could join the other dead bugs—a cicada, butterflies, moths, dragonflies, a bee, and a caterpillar in the science center. As Beetle stayed in the classroom, his colors deepened and grew darker. Beneath his black horn, Beetle’s little face reminded Ms. Becky and the children of a hedgehog with smooth black eyes. The children also learned that after an Eastern Hercules beetle comes out of hibernation, it only lives approximately 3 months. Knowing his life span was short, Ms. Becky began preparing the children for Beetle’s upcoming death by teaching them that his body was going to be alive for a short amount of time. She also taught them that if something can be alive, at some point it will die.

She told the children that while Beetle was alive, they would feed him, pet him, blow kisses, and play with him. She also informed them that soon there would be a time when he would not move or eat. "He won't even tinkle or poo-poo anymore, will he, Ms. Becky?" asked Franklin, a spunky almost 3 year old, to which his friend Carolyn, (age 29 months) said "Gottahaftalove him now, 'cause hegonna die".

They prepared a terrarium for Beetle in the science center with magnifying glasses close by to watch him as he moved around. The children offered him a piece of a banana. He buried his face in it and ate. The children said "He loves it, he's a pig!" Beetle knew what he liked and did not like because the pieces of apple the children put in the terrarium went uneaten. The children continued to marvel in their newest classroom addition as they observed these preferences.

The children knew they were not allowed to independently take the beetle out of the terrarium. Even though the children sometimes did not follow various classroom rules, they always honored the rule of not taking the beetle out of the terrarium themselves. Beetle often went to the playground with the children to hang out on their hands and to be petted. They could hold him in the palm of their hand, if the teacher's hand was below their hand. The children were not allowed to put their mouths on the beetle but could blow him a kiss, and they always washed their hands after playing with him.

As the weeks progressed, Ms. Becky knew it was almost time for the beetle to die. She reminded the children that the beetle had hibernated through the winter and would only live for a short time longer. She again talked with the children about the meaning of death. She said, "When a body is alive you can do things-run, play, eat, dance, and be scared, hurt, or happy. When someone's body dies, the body will not move or dance. It won't be hungry, scared, happy, need to eat, drink, or go the bathroom."

To reinforce the concept of death, as they discovered dead bugs on the playground, they would discuss the differences between Beetle and dead bugs. As she and the children discussed the differences between bugs that were dead and alive, Ms. Becky always made a point to say bodies change as they move through the life cycle.

One day the children found the beetle upside down and said, "I think his body is dead, Ms. Becky!" But then the beetle caught his leg on a twig in the terrarium and turned himself over. Several days later, though, the Eastern Hercules beetle died. Again, Ms. Becky reinforced the concepts of death: when people die they do not breathe, move, hurt, eat, or come back to life. Ms. Becky then shared with the children that when people die, sometimes the body is buried. Sometimes when our pets die, we bury the body. Given the choice, the children decided not to bury the beetle because they wanted to still look at him with the magnifying glass. So, the beetle was placed in the science center, and the children used the magnifying glass to continue to look at him.

Using a Developmental Lens to Frame a Teachable Moment

The beetle served as a wonderful gift, a teachable moment that helped children prepare for future experiences with dying and death. Teachers of young children can seize such teachable moments to assist children with developing an understanding of and coping skills for issues such as dying and death. As teachers of preschool children, we realize young children are cognitively very different from adults. They have different needs because of their developmental abilities (Rando, 1988). What are the essential elements, then, in preparing children for dying and death experiences?

First, the concepts of irreversibility, non-functionality, universality and normality need to be ever-present in the dialogue between teachers and children (Bowlby, 1980; Speece, 1995). **Irreversibility** means when a living thing dies, its physical body cannot be made alive again. Even though young children see death as temporary or reversible, the dead animal or person will not come back to life (Karns, 2002; Kenyon, 2001; Mendhekar & Lohia, 2010; Wood, 2008). Children often ask if the dead person or animal is "still dead". They want to know the story has not changed, even though they may want the person or animal to come back to life (D'Antonio, 2011; Poling & Hupp, 2008; Rando, 1988). **Non-functionality** means life-defining functions cease at death. A bug, a pet, or a person who is dead will not breathe, move, go to the bathroom, eat, or drink. Neither will it feel heat, cold, or pain (Karns, 2002; Rando, 1988). **Universality** means all living things die. The beetle died. The cat died. The grandparent died.

Finally, **normality** means typical. Our feelings of sadness, anger, despair, and shock are normal. These concepts: irreversibility, non-functionality, universality, and normality, are essential for children as they prepare for dying and death experiences during their preschool years and beyond (Bowlby, 1980; Speece, 1995).

Letting children experience the death of a bug and learning that the bug will not come back to life, all body functioning will stop, all living things die, and our feelings related to those experiences are normal, prepares the way “in some degree for helping a child mourn the death of a close relative or even that of a parent”(Bowlby, 1980, p. 275).

Second, because dying and death issues are new to children, clear communication is important. Children need for us to listen to them and understand their concerns and feelings (Brown, 2009; Karns, 2002; Schuurman, 2012). Listening without evaluating, judging, or trying to fix the problem is helpful. In reality, we do not know how children feel; but we can reflect back their words, assuring them we are listening and affording them the opportunity to clarify and articulate their feelings (Ostler, 2010).

Children also need short, clear, honest responses to their questions, as well as choices about their actions ((Brown, 2009; Karns, 2002; Rando, 1988; Schuurman, 2012). We must focus on answering their questions at their developmental and experiential levels (Dombeck, 2006; Brown, 2009; Karns, 2002; Rando, 1988; Schuurman, 2012; Webb, 2005). In so doing, we build a trusting relationship (Schuurman, 2012).

Young children are trying to work out the differences between being alive and dead. Ms. Becky used the Internet, books, and an expert--the entomologist, to assist children in understanding complex concepts associated with the life and death of the beetle. She provided short, clear, honest explanations that the 2 ½ to 3 ½- year-old children could understand. She and the children often revisited the same questions and concepts as the children grappled with concepts related to dying and death. This repetition allowed the children to construct their own knowledge about the dying and death process.

Abstract concepts used with young children to describe death can lead to confusion and distress (Webb, 2005). If an explanation is not clear, children are quite capable of fantasizing or making up explanations (Rando, 1988). Euphemisms are also difficult for children to grasp (Brown, 2009; Karns, 2002; Rando, 1988). For example, if we say, “We lost Granddaddy”, children may want to search for him. If Grandma died because “she was sick”, children may fear that their own or their parents’ illnesses will inevitably lead to death. If we try to soothe children and say, “Don’t worry, usually only old people die”, children can imagine most anyone older than they are dying and be deceived to the very real possibility that very young, seemingly healthy people can die suddenly. The use of the words *death*, *dying*, *dead*, and *killed* are essential as we talk with children (Karns, 2002; Ostler, 2012).

As noted previously, the children in Ms. Becky’s class decided together that they would keep the beetle in the science center—they made a choice to keep the beetle and not bury it. However, Ms. Becky was concerned that perhaps she confused the children by not burying the beetle. After all, we routinely bury family pets and loved ones when they die. Schuurman (2012), however, suggested that when children are allowed to make informed choices and are given options, they are more likely to regain a sense of stability after a death.

The children’s decision to keep the beetle in the science center allowed learning to continue. Several weeks after the beetle died, the children made a new discovery. The beetle was not as heavy as he used to be! Dying had changed his body, and it seemed hollow inside. Realizing he was gone and only the exoskeleton was present reinforced the transformation of the beetle through the life cycle. They now compared Beetle’s body to the other shells in the center.

The children still wanted to look at him and frequently asked “Is his body alive?” The answer was always the same: “No, Beetle is dead.” It is normal for children to repeatedly ask the same questions. They want to be reassured the body is still dead, even though they may hope the body is not dead and that the answer will change (Rando, 1988).

One Monday morning after Beetle had died, Philip came to school with the news that Tabby, his beloved cat who had been with him since his own birth, had died. “Hers body is dead, Ms. Becky, Tabby died.” Talking about the beetle before and after its death seemed to help Philip see death as a natural part of life, facilitating his understanding and acceptance. When Philip talked about Tabby’s death, he saw it as a natural process. He knew Tabby was not alive anymore. She was dead. Her body did not function anymore. Philip talked about Tabby’s death in a matter-of-fact way. He seemed to be making sense of her death at his developmental understanding.

In telling the truth, using language and short explanations that children can understand, we will help children to assimilate and accommodate new information about dying and death and help them prepare for future death experiences.

Third, because children have trouble articulating their feelings, thoughts, and memories, we need to help children express them and give them time to play out those feelings and thoughts (Brown, 2009; Karns, 2002; Rando, 1988; Smith, 1991). Play is children's work and serves as an important outlet for their grief. The grief process is impeded if they are not allowed the freedom and opportunity to explore their feelings and thoughts through play (Smith, 1991). We can provide a safe, trusting environment that allows children to ask questions—and sometimes the same question—over and over again without dismissing or belittling the child; encouragement to return with more questions in the future; and enough information to answer the question and allow the child to process, evaluate, and assimilate it (Rando, 1988; Smith, 1991).

Developmental Activities to Support Coping

Similarly, developmentally appropriate activities help children express their feelings (Brown, 2009; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Karns, 2002). Movement and dance experiences help children express feelings of gladness, sadness, anger, etc. Whether the activity includes throwing ice cubes on the sidewalk, tearing a newspaper to shreds, throwing clay at a target, pounding play dough, stomping bubble wrap, or pounding golf tees into thick pieces of Styrofoam, activities can help children express anger and hurt in a very physical, yet appropriate manner.

Other activities to help children express their feelings, thoughts, and memories use words and materials. A sentence stem activity such as, "Tell me about ___", "When you think of ___, what words come to mind?", "Tell me the things you do/did with ___", allow children to talk about people and things that are special to them. Once the words are written, they can be used to stimulate drawing, painting, scrapbooking, storytelling, or collage work. If children complete sentence stem activities for other important events, such as for Mother's Day gifts, they are learning to express their thoughts and feelings. If a pet or grandparent subsequently dies, the activity is not new to them and would be helpful in expressing feelings, thoughts, and memories of the deceased. Talking about death and the dead person or animal helps children deal with fears of death and facilitates their coping for future dying and death experiences (Arnup, 2009).

Adults must model appropriate emotional responses to death and include children in the circle of grief. Children learn to grieve from observing adults (James & Friedman, 1998; Rando, 1988) and if adults hold back and fail to express their own feelings of sadness about a death, children may learn that expressing feelings is not appropriate. When we tell children not to be sad or quickly buy them a new pet or keep them busy with other activities, we are not teaching children healthy coping skills (James & Friedman, 1998). When Ms. Becky says, "I am sad that Tabby died" or allow children to see her wiping a tear when discussing the death of a pet or a person she loved, children learn healthy and acceptable ways of expressing grief (Dombeck, 2006).

Attempting to protect children from issues of dying and death by not allowing them into the circle of grief may be damaging to children. This attempt to protect does not minimize the grief experience, instead, it may teach concepts that will not be helpful for coping with future experiences. Rando (1988) suggests that a "child has a *right* and a *need* to be included...to share her grief with those she loves" (p. 202). Insecurity and abandonment issues may occur if children are kept away from family members struggling with the death of a loved one. If children are not allowed to deal with or process their own emotions, lifelong negative consequences can occur (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Rando, 1988). Children look to teachers as role models of appropriate behaviors regarding dying and death. If we include them in the circle of grief, children learn vicariously appropriate concepts and coping strategies related to dying and death experiences (Bandura, 1986).

Children learn through teachable moments and experiential opportunities (Brown, 2009). The gift of the beetle presented an "unemotional opportunity" for young children to grapple with appropriate grief concepts and develop an understanding of the life cycle and the experience of dying and death by observing and exploring a living and dead rhinoceros beetle. Through this process, the teacher helped them prepare for future grief experiences. Beetle was truly a gift—a gift of preparation for coping with life course events that will touch the children repeatedly throughout their lives.

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