



# PLAY THERAPY NEWS

Suzette Turner-Clark, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Registered Play Therapist  
Anchorage Crossings Building 11405 Park Road, Lower Level 40 Anchorage, KY 40223 (502) 744-2070

## Children and Bereavement

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It is generally known that the death of a close family member is a painful event for a child. Five percent of children face the death of a parent before the age of 15 (Currier, Holland and Neimeyer, 2007). Many clinicians have proposed several interventions to help kids with the grieving process, including play therapy (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). The focus of grief work falls into four areas:

- 1) Provide age-appropriate info to a child about death to eliminate any of their misunderstandings
- 2) Focusing on what is missed about the lost relationship and dealing with conflicted feelings for deceased
- 3) Managing a child's intrusive memories and forming positive recollections
- 4) Redefining the relationship from the 'here and now' to a more memory-based association



*Play is a major avenue for learning to manage anxiety. It gives the child a safe space where she can experiment at will, suspending the rules and constraints of physical and social reality. In play, the child becomes master rather than subject...*

*Play allows the child to transcend passivity and to become the active doer of what happens around her.*

—Alicia F. Lieberman,  
*The Emotional Life of the Toddler*

### Play Therapy Treatment For Loss and Grief

The Play Therapist can establish rapport with the child by maintaining eye contact and using tracking behaviors in order to show interest. Several types of toys are supplied in order for the child to easily display their feelings. Scary toys, such as monsters and snakes, can be used to express a child's fears. Baby dolls and kitchenware, can be used to explore family constellation and events that take place within the home setting. Aggressive toys, such as a Bobo doll and rubber knives, can be used to act out hostility, protect one's self from perceived threats and to explore issues of trust and power. Paints, colored markers and clay are expressive methods used to exhibit various thoughts and feelings, to work out problems and to

## Children's Concept of Death According to Age

Sensorimotor (Ages birth to 2) - A concept of death does not exist, although the child can sense when the family routine has changed.

Preoperational (Ages 2 to 6) - As a result of egocentrism, children at these ages have magical thinking. They believe that death can be avoided or it is reversible. The inevitable cessation of body functioning is not understood. Adults should be cautious with statements such as, "the angels took grandma to heaven," which can be perceived literally.

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## Suzette Turner-Clark, LCSW-S, RPT/S

Anchorage Crossings Building  
11405 Park Road, Suite Lower Level 40  
P. O. Box 23526  
Anchorage, KY 40223

Phone: (502) 744-2070

Fax: (717) 924-5806

E-mail: [sturner@ivytech.edu](mailto:sturner@ivytech.edu)

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Concrete Operations (Ages 6 to 9) - Children at these ages understand the irreversibility of death and the inevitable cessation of the body, but many do not realize the universal nature of death. In other words, they are not aware that all those around them will some day die.

Formal Operations (Around age 9 or 10) - Children realize the irreversible, inevitable, and universal nature of death. They realize that death will one day happen to them.

### Play Therapy Treatment (Continued from Page 1)

explore family relationships. Pretend/fantasy toys, such as puppets and dress-up clothes, can be used to investigate different roles and express hidden feelings. Play Therapy provides a safe and trusting environment, which will allow the child to feel comfortable putting forth their thoughts. The child's level of understanding, feelings and body movements are assessed through observation of the play. The therapist can track the child's behaviors, reflect their feelings and convey a

positive belief in a child's abilities. Children's appropriate behaviors are emphasized and encouraged, such as the child's use of creativity rather than aggression for expression.

Other more directive activities include having the child illustrate pictures of their family. Worksheets can be used to allow the child to draw how they feel or a time line can be made to place significant events and add hope by looking toward the future. A child can make a homemade book, including images and photographs of the deceased. A tape recorder can be used to leave messages for family members. Pretending a family member is in an empty chair, the child can pretend to talk with this person. A magic wand can be used to make wishes yet to come and provide hope. Dream catchers can be made to help stop nightmares. Therapeutic children's books are typically read to address certain topics regarding death. The child can produce a weekly newsletter before/after the death of a parent. These are but a few interventions that play therapists can offer to help kids work through their grief and loss concerns.