



**K-12 DEATH AND DYING
CURRICULUM**

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS AN OUTLINE FOR A DEATH CURRICULUM WITH AGE-APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS RELATED TO DEATH AND DYING. EACH GRADE'S CURRICULUM REPRESENTS A SMALL UNIT, A SIDE COURSE – LIKE FLASH OR WASHINGTON STATE HISTORY.

ACCORDING TO THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE, THERE ARE THREE MAIN REASONS THAT DISCUSSING DEATH IS DIFFICULT: WE AVOID TALKING ABOUT WHAT UPSETS US, WE FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN WE DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, AND THAT DEATH IS OFTEN CONSIDERED A TABOO SUBJECT. WHEN TALKING TO YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH, IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT CHILDREN ARE ALWAYS LEARNING. IF YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT THE DEATH OF PETS AND IT REMINDS YOU OF AN UPSETTING LOSS, CHILDREN WILL NOTICE THE CHANGE IN YOUR BODY LANGUAGE AND EMOTION, AND THEY'LL START TO ASSOCIATE DEATH WITH THOSE EMOTIONS.

IT'S TREMENDOUSLY IMPORTANT TO BE COGNIZANT OF YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE SUBJECT MATTER AND THE WAY THAT YOU CONDUCT YOURSELF IN FRONT OF CHILDREN, EVEN IF THAT MEANS ADMITTING THAT YOU AREN'T THE PERSON TO TEACH THIS LESSON. (YOU CAN CONTACT A NONPROFIT TO COME IN AND TEACH.) IT'S ALSO OKAY NOT TO BE ABLE TO ANSWER STUDENTS' QUESTIONS. BEING HONEST – INSTEAD OF TRYING TO PULL SOME ANSWER OUT OF NOWHERE – WILL BUILD A SENSE OF OPENNESS BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS, AND IT'S BEEN PROVED THAT CHILDREN (AGES 4-9) RESPOND VERY WELL TO THIS TYPE OF OPENNESS AND HONESTY. YOU ALSO NEED TO BE PREPARED FOR QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS THAT SUGGEST THE IDEA OF DEATH BEING A MALEVOLENT FORCE.

LASTLY AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, PLEASE DO YOUR BEST TO KEEP AN OPEN MIND WHEN TEACHING YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT DEATH.

GRADE SCHOOL

In grade school, the main goal isn't to teach a lot about death, but to try and instill a sense of comfort in the students when talking about death. Show death not just in actual occurrences, but in art and literature. Elementary schoolers should have access to an array of death-related books – in and out of the classroom – and in addition, the art classes should give children the opportunity to create death related artwork. Another important factor to building comfort will be to make sure that the students know they have a safe space to go if they start to feel overwhelmed by the subject matter. Offer the counselor's office as a place of refuge.



K-5 Field Trips

**Parks, farms, observatories,
museums, veterinary clinic, pet
aquamation/funeral home**



GRADE ONE: CYCLES OF NATURE

Grade One is a bit too early to start talking about human death, so you want to start with cycles. Life – and by extension, death – is a never ending cycle. Too few schools acknowledge the importance of spending time in natural settings as a child, taking nature walks with students will allow them a helpful learning experience that isn't afforded at most schools. You can use the nature walks to start by teaching basic cycles: seeds grow into plants that then make more seeds, eggs develop into birds that lay more eggs, etc. Highlight that trees die and fall over, turning into nursery logs, which allow a whole new micro-ecosystem for life to flourish in. If possible, start a small class farm, giving the class an activity to work on together. Demonstrate the few stages of the life cycle of the plants, and in the end, the students can take home some veggies (if you choose to grow edible plants). Teaching these cycles as early as possible:

Sets the groundwork for later lessons about other, more in-depths topics dealing specific cycles, and Shows that death isn't innately a bad force or the end of a good life, but instead, it's all just part of one big cycle.

Resources

Books: The Invisible String; Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs; Ida, Always; The Fall of Freddie the Leaf

Film: www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=6392732n

GRADE TWO: INTRO TO DEATH IN ARTWORK

In the very early grades, children are especially creative. Their imaginations interact with the real world, almost functioning as an augmented reality, and as such, artwork is very important at this age. In the second grade, you and your class will start looking at artwork associated with death all around the world. Based on your students' personalities, you can show them images with a range of intensity from Dios de la Muerte skulls to Frida Kahlo's Girl with a Skull Mask. Then encourage your students to draw what they think death looks like, or ask similar questions like "What does a ghost look like?" or "How would you draw your soul?" Expand on drawings of natural cycles from previous the previous unit.

Resources

Books: The Scar, The Tenth Good Thing About Barney

Art: Use your judgment and your knowledge of your students. Share with them anything that you deem art, that is appropriate for your class, and that also signifies death or dying in some way.

GRADE THREE: DEATH FEEDING LIFE // THE FOOD CHAIN

As a continuation of the lessons from grade one, you'll want to start students' education about real-world, usable, less generalized, information regarding the food chain. There are two main upsides to teaching the food chain. First, you get to "travel the world" while teaching one of the most fundamental forces of nature. Ecosystems all over the world

TV series: Planet Earth (specifically the "Great Planes" and "Shallow Seas" episodes)

Books: *Death is Stupid, Where Do They Go?* covers the world that have unique food chains. Because of this, you and the class can study anything from freshwater coral reefs to arid tundra, allowing a lot of flexibility with lesson plans. You could teach the hierarchy of an urban forest, where the most violent organism you'll find is a Strangler Fig, or you could teach the food chain of a savannah, where a buffalo can lose its newborn calf to a smart pack of lions or hyenas. But that's just half of the beauty of teaching this subject.

The second half is a focus on places where the natural the food chain has been interrupted, or where species that would normally line the bottom of the charts hold their own against predators through intimidation or strategy. You can talk about small animals who use bright colors and potent toxins to avoid being eaten, who have evolved to avoid vibrant patterns for their own safety. You can talk about small mammals that dig their way underground, and the larger mammals that evolved to dig up these passageways for a quick meal. Most importantly, though, you can teach students about human beings, and the nearly immeasurable effect that we have on any ecosystem we move into. Talk about how we learned to use tools, and the ways we used that to make shelter, and so on.



Resources

Books: *The Invisible String*; *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*; *Ida, Always*; *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*

Film: www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=6392732n

GRADE FOUR: PET DEATH

This lesson may be difficult to teach, depending on your students, but it's a good point to start discussing the rituals and behavioral patterns that people often exhibit during times of grief and loss. You can use pet death as an example for understanding grief, and there are many resources aimed at children about this subject. Teaching children at a young age that it's alright to feel sad, and that they should share their feelings with friends and family, can be one of the most important emotional lessons that you teach. It sets the groundwork for your students to work on exhibiting empathic tendencies, and decreases the likelihood that they bottle up their emotions, which can cause a myriad of other issues. This lesson also informs students of what to expect when another human dies, except through the lens of a pet.

Teach about what a funeral is, and the many ways to handle a corpse, from cremation to natural burials. This lesson should highlight the key emotions that people might feel when faced with the death of a loved one (namely sadness and anger) and healthy and effective ways to deal with them. Try to teach this in a way that makes it obvious that it's okay to feel whatever you feel, and that you don't have to feel either or both of these emotions. Highlight that there isn't just one way to handle a body, and that people have devised many different ways.

Be aware that you may have students raised with particular beliefs about the treatment of bodies after death. It may be confusing or offensive to them when they hear about the other ways that people treat the dead. Try your best to continue the discussion while reminding everyone to have an open mind and not to be judgemental of other people's beliefs. This lesson can be very important but also difficult, so just keep in mind that the comfort of the students comes first. Don't force them to talk about anything that makes them visibly uncomfortable. Let them know that they're free to leave the class if they're upset by the subject matter and offer the counselor's office.

Resources

Books: The Goodbye Book, It Must Have Hurt A Lot

Film: Brother Bear



GRADE FIVE: ANATOMY OF DEATH

Fifth grade is generally when students learn about their bodies, during FLASH (Family Life And Sexual Health). You can take advantage of this pre-planned curriculum to add anatomical death education before the FLASH curriculum begins. Learning about what will happen to your body and mind before you die is a right that all humans deserve, and an important foundation to the opinions that your students will form throughout their lives. You can either teach this part as a lecture or break the class into groups that each make a presentation of their own. This unit has four main concepts.

Concept 1: Death Is Irreversible

While most of your class will have a solid understanding that death is permanent, it's nonetheless important to state explicitly and in a learning environment that there is no way around death. Explain that death isn't something to be avoided at all costs. Death is a part of life, and if you get to live, you get to die. Take care not seem either too foreboding or matter-of-fact about this topic.

Concept 2: Brain Death and Bodily Death

There is a distinction between brain and bodily death, and there are diseases that cause one before the other. Teach your class that a person can die with their body still working, and that brain death is the ceasing of higher functioning in the brain due to physical trauma or a degenerative disease (generally).

Concept 3: Everything That Is Alive Eventually Dies

Death is inevitable. Everyone who is alive right now should understand this about death, including your class. A common misconception that is spread through discomfort with talking about death is that there is one way that humans naturally die, like once your body reaches an old enough age you just "of old age". You can talk about the imperfect replication of DNA (which causes aging), and/or environmental factors that accelerate the degradation of bodies (like air pollutants or even the rays of the sun), and/or how immune systems become more susceptible to evolving diseases over time, but make sure to emphasize that "natural causes" isn't a way to die.



GRADE FIVE: ANATOMY OF DEATH

Concept 4: Your Body Exists After Your Death, and What Happens To It

The last of these four concepts is what happens to your body after you die. In this part you can teach about rigor mortis and the buildup of gas inside of a corpse. Call back to the Grade Three unit and talk about scavengers that will feed off of a human corpse. You can also use this as an opportunity to teach about chemical embalming and its negative environmental effects, as well as burials and the ways that they affect a body's interaction with the world after life functions cease.

Resources

Infographic websites:

Imperfect dna replication and aging

<https://www.the-scientist.com/features/how-we-age-35872>

Physical signs of death and bodily function shutdown

<https://www.sharecare.com/health/end-of-life-issues/the-physical-signs-of-death>

What happens to your body after you die

<https://www.sciencealert.com/what-happens-to-your-body-after-you-die>

Books: Bridge to Terabithia, Will the Cat Eat My Eyeballs?



In middle school we start the transition from talking broadly about death to talking about human death and its specific implications, not just emotionally but monetarily and societally. Grade Six will be the first instance of this, when we want to teach the students about death all over the world. Grade Seven is the study of a universal emotion: grief, which all humans feel with varying intensity. Grade Eight will start to taper the subject matter down to a more personal point of view that will be more impactful to the students lives.

GRADE SIX: DEATH FROM A GLOBAL VIEW

People have been experiencing death and learning to deal with it in different ways for hundreds of thousands of years. This unit will focus on history across different areas of the globe, the unique ways that societies have handled death, broadening students' views not just on death, but also on cultures and beliefs in general, which is crucial to the creation of an open-minded generation. Through learning about the many different ways of handling the body, the spirit, and the loved ones of the deceased, students will begin to understand more about death as just another force of nature to be respected. You can learn about how people in small villages will mummify their dead and leave them in the house, sitting in a chair or lying in a bed for all to see. Or about Hinduism, where cremation is a requirement in disposing of earthly remains. You can also teach this unit in conjunction with the world history curriculum commonly taught in sixth grade. Integrate the topic of death into common education, rather than teaching it as a standalone unit.

Resources

It's easy to get information about death rituals and traditions from different parts of the world through a simple Google search. The guy in this seems very Eurocentric, but the video is educational:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFt8-WdstQ>

Books: From Here to Eternity, If Only



GRADE SEVEN: GRIEF

Teaching angsty seventh graders about grief and sadness may at first seem a little daunting, but it shouldn't be that scary. In this unit you talk about some of the simple psychology behind what people feel after the loss of someone they love. You're going to start out really simply, teaching the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Once your students are familiar with these, you'll move into the causes of grief, from losing a parent to misplacing your headphones. Grief isn't a switch, it's a very gray scale. There are different kinds of grief, from grief that isn't intense enough to notice immediately to overwhelming, life halting grief that doesn't seem so bad when you wake up in the morning. Explain that it's fine to feel whatever you feel, give students tools that they can use to help themselves or others in grief. (Make sure they're eating and sleeping, equipped with an outlet to express their emotions, and have access to good hugs). This unit provides an important foundation for what the students will be learning through Grade Twelve, laying a groundwork for later discussions about sudden vs anticipatory grief.

Resources

Many psychologists are more than willing to visit classrooms; Meditation exercises; Classes and workshops: Art Grief Workshop, Teaching Legacy Building

Books: My Mommy Has Cancer, Once Upon a Hopeful Night



GRADE EIGHT: LAWS ABOUT DEATH IN THE U.S.

This is the last of the middle-school lessons and transitions into the more personal and substantial lessons of high school. Since most eighth-grade classes will be learning about the history of either the United States or their own state, you'll take this opportunity to start teaching your class about the rights and laws associated with the bodies of deceased humans (including funerals). Learning about these laws will provide an important transition into the knowledge that the students will gain in the next few years.

In the United States, laws dealing with dead bodies seem very complicated at first, but in actuality, they're pretty commonsensical. Students should get a pretty good general grasp of what is and isn't legally allowed. Hold discussions about the importance of religious freedom, and the burial traditions that are religious versus laws that govern burials. This can be a particularly colorful discussion, because the students learned about different traditional burial methods in sixth grade, and now they can see which of the modern traditions are legal or not in the United States.

Resources

Books: Final Rights, Straight Talk About Death and Dying, Straight From the Siblings Another Look at the Rainbow, Help For Hard Times - Getting Through Loss

HIGH SCHOOL

The significance and importance of a death plan stems from the fact that we may not be able to control the factors surrounding our own deaths. A death plan helps people record and communicate their wishes in case they aren't in a state to make decisions near the end of their lives. Your death plan speaks for you when you can't, allowing family and friends to avoid the stress of planning your death experience for you. Throughout high school students will write and revise their death plans at least once a year, because their wants are probably going to change.

GRADE NINE: DEATH PLAN // DEATH AS AN INDUSTRY

High school is a good time to get more serious and personal about death. In the first year, you'll start to teach students about the death industry. You can start almost anywhere, but the biggest subject you should cover is the funeral and ceremony industry, including the laws that bind funeral homes, the rates they charge, and their marketing of "packages" designed to appeal to those in a state of grief. Talk about how funeral homes sign agreements with graveyards to sell graves at a premium, and lawyers who market their help writing wills to the dying and their families. This unit is a simple one, but you can go very in-depth about the corruption in the legal and commercial institutions of death, teaching your students that there are more options at their disposal than most people know about.

Resources

Invite a mortician or a representative of People's Memorial to speak about how the industry works, both morally and immoral.

You and An Illness in Your Family

GRADE TEN: REVIEW DEATH PLAN // DEATH IN AMERICAN MEDIA

Modern society is built on distracting the population from their individual inevitable demise, and part of your job is to teach your students about death and to point out how it's made to seem worse than it is. One of the biggest perpetrators of delegitimizing death is American media, which dramatizes and romanticizes murder and the taking of lives. Teach your students about the importance of drawing a line between actual death and media-portrayed death. This is vital to instilling an unbiased view of end-of-life experiences, but you don't have to stop there. Use your time with students to teach them about ways that Americans are distracted from death, either by choice or by institutionalized biases. There is so much depth to our collective fear of death. You can choose almost anything that is part of our popularized everyday life, and dive into how it's part of the system that encourages us ignore death.

Resources

Films: Beetlejuice, Steel Magnolias

GRADE ELEVEN: REVIEW DEATH PLAN // ANTICIPATORY GRIEF VS SUDDEN DEATH

In eleventh grade you will be teaching about the differences between anticipated and sudden death of a loved one, and the different effects that each can have. Both anticipated and sudden deaths can be a difficult and traumatic time for the deceased person's loved ones, but they are difficult to deal with in different ways. For instance, anticipated death involves a much more drawn-out and sometimes more painful grief process, but can also be a catalyst for development of the relationships in the dying person's life whereas sudden grief involves less anxiety and suspense but you get nearly no time to prepare and/or come to terms with the person's death. There are different ways to handle all kinds of grief: for instance, therapy can be helpful, but it is more recommended for anticipatory grief, whereas spending time with loved ones and making sure you take care of yourself and those around you is vital to a healthy recovery from the sudden death of a loved one. These lessons will help prepare students for interacting with and handling death in the real world.

Resources

Cinnamon Roll Sunday: A Child's Story of Anticipatory Grief, Flamingo Dream, When a Friend Dies

GRADE TWELVE: REVIEW DEATH PLAN // EOL PAPERWORK // DESIGNING DEATH CURRICULUM

In their final year of high school, students have more than one objective. They will compete a revision of their death plans and be tasked with completing their End of Life (EOL) paperwork, a.k.a. Advanced Directive. An Advanced Directive is essentially a set of legal instructions that govern your body and what happens to it if you're no longer able to make choices. Advanced Directive are extremely important so that family members know what you want and who you want to make decisions. Besides those two tasks, your students have to write their own outlines for a curriculum about death and how they would teach other students from Grades One to Twelve.

By creating this outline and breaking the concept of death into twelve digestible chunks, the students will learn tremendous about death and how it affects different people (including themselves). Through writing this outline your students' crafting their own versions of an ideal death education provides a massive learning opportunity and an opening for evolution in the education around death. Naturally, the parameters of your students' culminating project are up to you, but ultimately they will benefit from their writing.

SUGGESTED FIELD TRIP: NATURAL BURIAL EXPLORATION BY A SACRED PASSING (PRE-PLANNED SCHEDULE)

Day 1

Arrival: ~1pm

Welcome

Intro to the land

Introductions of New End-of-Life Friends (ELFs)

Lunches (bring sack lunches)

Discuss

1. Plan for the three days
2. Logistics of the land: bathrooms / showering, power usage / lights, food, trash
3. Work Projects: One group art project, one involving service to the land

Quick Tour

Set up tents

Start digging green burial plot

Dress the plot

Begin shrouding and laying in for those who also would like to do so, others will participate in ways they feel are meaningful

Dinner: ~7pm

Talking and writing about today's experiences

Day 2

Sunrise shrouding begins (optional)

7:30 am: Breakfast

9:00 am: Sit in conversation about yesterday's activity

11:00 am: Begin land-service project

12:30 pm: Lunch

1:30 pm: Continue land-service project

3:00 pm: Begin group art project

5:00 pm: Dinner

7:00 pm: Closing words

Day 3

9:00 am: Breakfast

10 an: Clean up, come together in a gratitude circle

11:00 Depart



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change it or grow it**

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