



Living in a foster home (above right), the 15 year old girl who drew this remembers a happier time before her grandmother died (house on left)

Artfully educating the hearts of grieving children

Dr Anne Black shares the creative bereavement work our colleagues in America are undertaking with bereaved young people from hugely diverse backgrounds

The heart of the adult must open alongside that of the child, so together they can fully explore life and death and love.

When children are touched by death for the first time, or any time, they come in contact with the mystery of life, with a sea of swirling emotions, and they search for those who can help them navigate their changing world internally and externally. Today, more than ever, our children are faced with new challenges and losses that will shape who they become and how they will view the world.

As educators, parents, mental health practitioners and concerned adults, children need our guidance to help them master death awareness and emotional literacy skills. Otherwise, a child's natural curiosity can be suppressed and emotional numbness can result. Additionally, children need adults who have done the needful work to support them in remaining emotionally present and spiritually open in the face of death.

When death is openly discussed and processed, children do not grow up fearing it. Sadly, a high percentage of our children are not included in conscious death and grieving practices. Consequently, the need for primary prevention programmes in our schools is paramount to teach children the necessary skills to emotionally survive in a world that increasingly exposes them to loss on a large scale so they can grow through such losses, open and engaged.

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A primary prevention

When Penelope Simpson and I met in 1989, we recognised an unmet need – supporting and strengthening grieving children. Blending our educational, psychological and creative legacies, we created the HEALS programme (formerly Hospice Expressive Arts Loss Support) in 1990 and The Center for Creative Healing in 1993. We were passionate about finding effective ways to teach death education, provide bereavement support, offer death crisis interventions, and use the expressive arts to instill social and emotional literacy skills.

The art of healing childhood grief (1990) has evolved into a comprehensive bereavement and expressive arts curriculum guide to help facilitators easily reference specific grief situations and age groups. The manual is rich with activities and expressive arts approaches. Now in its fourth edition, we are humbled by the richness of this resource.

As we began working with grieving children in educational settings, we began training school counsellors, therapists and volunteers to work through one of their own losses. This increased the pool of those who were instructionally and emotionally able to facilitate this heartfelt (and artful) approach. Each training session unveiled the vast losses carried in the human mind, body, and heart, and the many losses rooted in childhood.

While death education is the cognitive focus of the HEALS curriculum, expressive arts is its cornerstone. Art therapies give children access to a more easily understood language – their bodies. We

quickly discovered that, as children used their bodies through movement, art, sound and writing, along with meaningful ceremonies, they were able to explore and release the thoughts and feelings held in their inner world.

With practice, we noticed that children became more creatively able to express themselves through the arts. The children also became more able to express themselves verbally. As these children were held within a circle of caring classmates or friends, they were able to be vulnerable, share their stories, thoughts and feelings, and to respectfully discover the inner world of others.

Within two years HEALS began responding to a wide spectrum of death crises. Our hearts broke open, quickening our individual transformations, as we supported an elementary school where two teachers were murdered; a high school where a Romeo and Juliet suicide occurred; a day care center where a four year old boy accidentally died beneath a car driven by his father; a parochial school where a second grader's mother committed suicide; faculty and students before and after a beloved high school principal died; third and fifth grade classrooms where a student died from leukemia, affecting her class and her brothers; the close friends of a high school student who committed suicide after being diagnosed with terminal cancer; and a multicultural group where a member's father was shot by a policeman and died during a high speed chase.

Each crisis became our teacher (and humaniser), as we humbly and compassionately entered into a stunned school that was looking for help to navigate the storm. In a few schools we were proactive, and peacefully confronted engrained patterns of denial and resistance. Fortunately in most cases, as we professionally sat with educators and explained our programme and how we work with children, a confidence and a relief was experienced, and a collegial relationship developed.

The HEALS framework

The school-based bereavement programme was designed to guide children through the following eight sessions:

1 We are not alone with our loss

Acknowledges that each member in the group has experienced a loss and gives an opportunity to share their loss and to determine any areas of question, concern, confusion, or misunderstanding.

2 Telling the story

Provides an opportunity for each child to tell where they were when they first learned about their significant person's death, how they found out, and explore how they felt at that time.

3 Grieving the loss – feeling the feelings

Increases the child's awareness of how people commonly feel and behave when someone or something they care about dies, and acknowledges that the feelings related to loss may be varied and difficult to have and/or share.

4 Taming the wild things

Teaches that anger, fear, guilt and worry are often natural responses when we lose someone or something special, and explores how to safely access and express uncomfortable feelings.

5 Farewell rituals and unfinished business

Provides the opportunity for children to express and complete any unfinished business they may have with their significant person.

6 Commemoration

Gives the child with an opportunity to affirm the value of the life lived by the person who died.

7 The jewels within: treasuring ourselves

Reminds children that they are strong, powerful and unique, with wise and creative resources that can be called upon when needed.

8 The harvest ceremony

Honours and witnesses all that has been done during the HEALS sessions, both individually and as a group, reminding the children that the techniques and skills learned in HEALS can be used at any time in the future when their feelings need to be safely expressed. And finally the children gain permission to go on.

Child-centered expressive arts are woven into each session to help children explore their inner worlds. When done with awareness and mindfulness, art, movement, sound and writing lets children practise with resources they can use whenever strong emotions begin to block their creative energy.



A 12 year old boy shows what he outwardly projects to the world (left) and what he feels inside his body (right)

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Working with multicultural teens

When Sam lost his father, I was invited to provide a HEALS process for him, seven other group members (including his cousin whose mother died from AIDS two months earlier) and their African American school counsellor. Secondary school students can be tough nuts to crack, so I played some hip, mellow music as they entered the room.

Children of any age respond to aesthetics. These high school students were no exception as they were immediately engaged and curious looking at the *objets d'art* in the centre of our circle. After setting the tone and establishing why we had come together, I invited each person to draw one of their most significant losses or a loss they would like to spend some time exploring. Paper in different sizes, markers, pastels and watercolors were made available, and they enthusiastically began.

While music filled the silence, the room felt deep and respectful as each student engaged in their drawing. After 20 minutes, all were invited to share their artwork if that honored what they wanted. Everyone, with the exception of Sam's cousin, openly and honestly talked about their picture and loss.

Sam's loss was fresh. His father had just been released from prison when he stole a car and was shot by a policeman during a chase. Sam was full of rage. We spoke about safe ways to release strong emotions, and he promised not to do anything risky. After the students left the classroom, the counsellor committed to carefully monitor Sam and then shared that he'd learned more about these students in 45 minutes than during the past three years. Then he added, 'Now I know why your work is called HEALS!'

Time and time again, as openings are created for children to tell their stories, draw their stories, dance their stories and give sound to their stories, we have been astounded by what came tumbling forth – juicy, rich emotion. Each time a tormenting story was unearthed from the recesses of a child's inner world, we simultaneously rejoiced and cried.

Bringing forth this work

New programmes have developed from our initial curriculums, such as the HEALS Pet Loss Program and the Children in Changing Families Program. Other programmes are developing and we are grateful for the pure, clear and strong ways they are coming into form. Our course is sometimes altered and adapted to meet the need but the core approach is constant: when we create safe spaces for each of us to be open and vulnerable, healing occurs.

We do not want to deny the pain and suffering in this world, nor do we want to become fixated on it. Instead, we want to shine a light on what life brings, so children can learn that everything can be discussed, explored, felt and expressed.

Using the expressive arts is a powerful way to help children creatively understand their inner world and move the energy held within each human emotion. As children learn to navigate the ebb and flow of life, they are more able to remain open and connected to the most precious part of their being, their heart. And as the hearts of children open, petal by petal, they come to discover that life and death, joy and sorrow, are all part of the dance of life; they can be resilient, compassionate, expressive dancers choreographing their own creative journey through this world. ■

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All photos in this article are by Anne Black.



This 16 year old girl feels in a hole: her mother died from Aids; her father is in prison (lower left); her heart is broken; the sun is darkened; the stick figures in the lower right are her aunt, aunt's boyfriend, sister, and two cousins, with whom she lives



This picture was drawn by a 15 year old girl. To date, this student has not experienced the death of a loved one. She sees sadness and loss happening to others around her, and she believes it is only a matter of time until someone close to her dies