

Death, grief and suicide in children's television

This article presents a summary of psychologists' and therapists' comments on children's programmes that deal with grief and death.

Loss and grief are subjectively unpleasant feelings, and, understandably, we would intuitively like to protect our children from these experiences. At the same time, death – like birth – is often a part of children's experiences at an early age. Children will have to face experiences such as finding a dead bird by the wayside, a dead pet, or the passing away of grandparents or other close relatives. Existential themes such as death and birth are a part of life. Trying to keep children away from the topic of death means not preparing them for unavoidable experiences, and leaving them alone with painful experiences. It is therefore important for children's television to engage with and reflect on the topic and the phenomenon of death, but also the emotion of grief. In our discussion with experts we showed psychologists and therapists selected programmes from the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival that deal with the emotion of grief after someone has died.

Badger's parting gifts (WDR, Germany)

The animated film *Badger's parting gifts* (original title: *Leb wohl, lieber Dachs*) from the *Show with the Mouse* (PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL finalist 2004) tells the story of a badger who knows that he will soon die. He himself is not afraid, but "his only worry was how his friends would take his death. (...) He had already prepared

them and told them he hoped they wouldn't be too sad when his time had come." Finally, one evening, the old badger died in his rocking chair, and dreamt he was floating away through a tunnel. When the forest animals found him, they were all very sad. They withdrew into their burrows when the winter snow came, but even the snow could not cover up their sorrow. "The badger had told them they shouldn't be sad, but it was hard." When the spring came, they met and told each other all the wonderful things they had learnt from the badger, and were now really good at (cf. Ill. 1). That was the old badger's farewell present.

The experts agreed that the film was aesthetically successful. Erhard Doubrava (Gestalt Therapy Institute of Cologne, Germany) called it "A lovely film, poignant and touching in many ways," but at the same time he had 2 reservations. "As a therapist I would have 2 wishes for this film. Firstly, grief should be encouraged, and not attenuated. So instead of saying 'Don't be too sad when I die,' the badger could have said something like: 'It's normal to be sad. It's part of life. And that's OK. In the winter of sadness, don't cry alone in your burrows. Meet up with each other. Be sad together. Talk about your grief

and maybe think of me. Then healing can happen.' So it's about appreciating what is, and this appreciation supports healing. But wanting to spare others from something – which they could have learnt to deal with, in this case grief – ultimately weakens them. My second wish: not to glamourise death. The long tunnel takes away the frightening aspect of death. I suspect this is what someone who is trying to reassure himself thinks would be good for children. And here too: trying to spare someone from something he could have learnt to deal with ultimately weakens him. 'The badger was not afraid of death,' that would have been enough for me. Nevertheless, a lovely film."

Mille (DR, Denmark)

Mille, finalist in the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2010 in the 12-15 category, tells the story of 12-year-old Mille, who has witnessed her friend's fatal cycling accident. The first episode of the 10-part series begins after the funeral, and shows how Mille deals

**Adriaan –
a coffin for
Spottie
(KRO,
Netherlands)**

The series *Adriaan* tells the story of Adriaan and his dog Spottie in 5 episodes (7 to 9 min.). In the title sequence he recounts:

“I have a dog called Spottie, I love him so. In the mornings he comes to say ‘hello!’ He licks my cheek by my bedside. But when I woke up today, he had died.”

The first episode (PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL finalist 2008) begins with Adriaan and his father setting out to the cabinetmaker to have a coffin made for Spottie. One of the people they meet there is Teun, the cabinetmaker’s son. One of his guinea pigs has recently died. Without any superfluous words, the short story shows how Adriaan and his family dig a grave for Spottie and bury him.

Erhard Doubrawa: “I like the fact that the boy is there while the coffin, this little coffin, is being made. That they arrange a funeral together. The little

remarks were also nice, like the question about whether he’s cold or not cold at the moment when Spottie is being buried. We are shown that the boy is sad. And at the same time the family accompanies him, the father stands by his side, strokes his head. I liked that. I could have imagined a bit more emphasis on the fact that it’s absolutely all right to be sad. It’s appropriate, and it’s a sign that you’ve become fond of someone, and that you want to cry when they’re gone. And that companionship is helpful in such processes, and that friendship plays a part and can grow.”

Dr. Maya Götz (IZI, Munich)

with the experience. She cannot say a single word to the school psychologist, or cry at the funeral. At school she has trouble concentrating and wants to be left alone. She sees how her classmates react and judge her. It is only when an older friend talks about his experiences with a loss that Mille is finally able to fall into her mother’s arms.

Detlef Klöckner (Gestalt Institute Frankfurt/Main, Germany): “The film shows very vividly the elements that can make up a grieving process. And it does this so well, in little scenes and nuances, that it could be used as a textbook film. At the end the right person – her mother – held open her arms at the right moment. At this point Mille had begun to face her own sorrow, which was then able to be resolved. It was touchingly beautiful to watch. When it comes to emotions, there is nothing in this world that hasn’t already been experienced by millions of other people. And still it’s important for every person to be able to feel that this is, for the moment, just his or her own experience. And this is shown very nicely here. There is a time when it’s ‘too soon’ for support, for example when a school psychologist immediately sits down with Mille and tries to build bridges for processing her grief. He operated on the principle: ‘This person is grieving, we need to help her.’ There’s something very devalorising about that; it basically disallows what I am experiencing.”

NOTES

¹ *Unicef* (2012). Progress for children. A report card on adolescents. http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_for_Children_-_No._10_EN_04272012.pdf [16.04.2014]

² *Hilda N. Shilubane et al.* (2013). Suicide and related health risk behaviours among school learners in South Africa. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/926> [16.04.2014]

³ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/hlth66a-eng.htm> [16.04.2014]

⁴ after J.W. Goethe’s novel from 1774

⁵ Summary of guidelines taken from i.a. von Fisher, Jane et al. (2011). *Adolescent Mental Health in Resource-Constrained Settings: A review of the evidence of the nature, prevalence and determinants of common mental health problems and their management in primary health care*. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 57(1), 9-12.

SUICIDE: A SPECIAL CASE

Degrassi, a youth series from Canada, tells of the suicide of hockey star Cam in an episode entitled “Bitter Sweet Symphony.” He has killed himself in the school greenhouse, and the students now have to deal with this event. The reaction of his girlfriend Maya initially seems hard to understand: she wants to practise for her big audition. We hear the voice that makes the daily announcements, accompanied by string music: “There is no right way to respond to a suicide. Some of you might feel sadness, grief, anger, guilt, others may be less affected. All of these emotions are completely normal. But no matter how you feel the best thing you can do is to stay over, talk to your parents and teachers and friends and even more important: listen. Listen to what others have to say. Just know that you are not alone.”

The series depicts various reactions from the friends, ranging from deep dejection, anger, self-reproaches, and thoughts of following his example to indifference and black humour. Everyone suffers in his or her own way, only Maya’s reaction seems incomprehensible. On her mobile phone she has a message from Cam saying how nice their last night together was, and that he will wait for her at lunch break to negotiate the return of her soft toy. When Maya makes a speech at the candlelight vigil in the afternoon (cf. Ill. 4), she surprises those present, and the viewers, with her remarks:

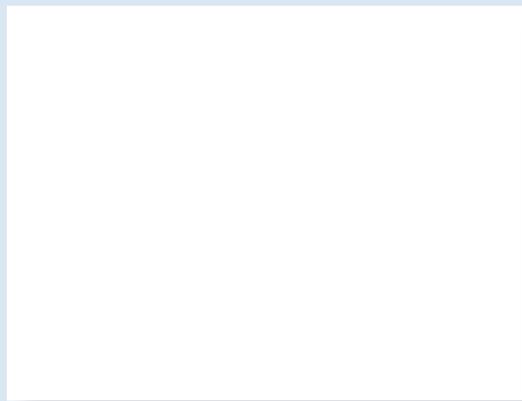
“This is so stupid [long pause]. This is so stupid. Cam doesn’t deserve a candlelight vigil. He made a choice. It’s the wrong one. But us standing here? Feeling sad like this? Everyone blaming themselves feeling guilty. It is no one’s fault! I mean it is his fault!” A friend interrupts: “Maya, he was sick.” Maya responds: “He should have fought.” Friend: “He was really sick.” Maya: “He should have fought harder. Or found someone to help. I would have helped him! But he didn’t give me the chance. Cam had so many reasons to stay, but he just checked out. Well, fine! But I’m not lighting any candles. And I won’t cry.” She leaves the scene.

Worldwide, suicide is one of the most common causes of death among adolescents, according to Unicef.¹ Over 20% of South African adolescents reported that they had attempted suicide at least once during the past 6 months.² Boys are 2 to 3 times more likely to kill themselves than girls (cf. e.g. statistics from Canada³).

Suicide happens, and it is therefore a subject for children’s and youth television

Like every death, suicide is associated with pain and grief for the bereaved, and should thus be referred to with appropriate honesty. At the same time, it is a special case. This is because there are clear indications that the number of acts or thoughts of suicide increases after news coverage or fictional accounts of suicide (the “Werther effect⁴”), especially among adolescents. It is not a straightforward relation of cause and effect. The media do not directly trigger suicide, but they can confirm people who are at risk of suicide in the belief that it is the right way to solve their problems. Adolescence is a period in life characterised by many insecurities and a high level of emotionality. The media can offer adolescents ideas and patterns of action for dealing with their own feelings and their social environment. Quality programmes for children and adolescents should always be prosocial and life-affirming, and this means, amongst other things:⁵

No unnecessary attention to or emphasis on suicide, e.g. in the title. **No popularisation of self-inflicted death**, especially in the case of celebrity suicides. **No models for how to carry out suicide**, e.g. by depicting details of suicide in particular places. **No representation of suicide as a solution to problems**, or of simplified reasons for suicide. Corresponding care should be taken in the portrayal of motivations. **No positive or approving assessment** of suicide. No farewell letters or the like should be shown or allowed to have an effect. **No romanticisation of suicide**. This applies particularly to the representation of the reactions of relatives and friends. **No blaming** of bereaved, or expressions of regret from relatives. There is a danger here that individuals who feel unappreciated will inflict harm on themselves so that others will suffer in a similar way and will talk about them.



The path chosen by the *Degrassi* series is thus highly successful, from a pedagogical point of view. Space is given to the various feelings that people experience when confronted with suicide. The only scene in which the young people talk about their own guilt takes place in the background. In the foreground is the girlfriend Maya, a character viewers can relate to. The narrative does not take the expected, clichéd path, but invites us to think. If nothing else, the charming message on Maya’s phone makes it clear that Cam had plenty of reasons to live. Maya’s speech is touching, and her departure is surprising and moving. At the same time, the viewer knows that her reaction, “And I won’t cry”, will be too difficult to maintain – because suicide leaves not just a lost life, but deep wounds.