

The Language of Death and Grief

Key Stage 2, 3 and 4

Subjects covered: English Language, PSHE. Art and Design.

Lesson Aim

To get pupils used to discussing death in an open way and to explore why our society has difficulty using the “real” words such as death and dying.

Objectives

Pupils will

1. Explore the word death and the many euphemisms used.
2. Think about what the word means to themselves and to others.
3. Consider why it is difficult to use the “real” words.
4. Consider the origins of these words and phrases.
5. Design and produce a condolence card (extension work)

Time

Approximately 40 minutes (not including design of condolences card).

You Will Need

A selection of condolence cards and/or death notices from a newspaper.

A large sheet of paper for pupils to write down words and phrases. One for each pair.

Felt tip pens

The Language of Death

1. Introduce the session by explaining that pupils will be exploring the many words and phrases used rather than the actual words of dead, dying and deceased. Have on display the selection of condolence cards, and/or death notices.
2. Split into pairs and give each pair a large sheet of paper.
3. Pairs to write down all the different words and phrases they find in the cards and obituary notices plus any others of their own that come to mind.

4. Produce a master list that everyone can see.

Discussion

Why are these euphemisms used – what message does this give to children and young people

- For many, death is still a taboo subject – we use euphemisms when uncomfortable.
- To protect children. Discuss if children/young people might find some words confusing or condescending e.g. asleep/lost/gone away. Seek views on which words your pupils would prefer to be used.
- For religious reasons. Pick out those which have a Christian basis e.g. *in heaven*. Any other religions represented?
- To lessen the pain/make something good out of something very bad e.g. *at rest, at peace, reunited with*. Which imply that life that carries on in some form? Do they lessen the pain or do they just confuse?
- Professionals e.g. doctors and undertakers use the substitutes as much as anyone. (some would say more so!) Should they?

Close by reminding of the following:

Using the word “death” can be just too painful for some people.

An often-heard comment by those seeking to help is “I did not know what to say”. Because we do not often speak about death in normal conversation, we rely on stock words and phrases. We often say nothing in our concern not to cause more hurt, yet saying nothing is the most hurtful thing of all.

End of Session

We often use humour when we feel uncomfortable.

It is OK to laugh about death and some people have humorous comments on their headstones e.g. Spike Milligan: “I told you I was ill”.

Extension work

Pupils to design a condolence card and to write what they consider are appropriate words or a suitable poem to go into it. (This is a helpful activity to repeat if a death occurs within your school community.)

Debate why death is a taboo subject: society denies ageing; less respect for the elderly; grandparents often do not live close by; greater expectation that the medical profession can save lives; death is hidden as fewer people die at home; infant mortality rates low and child deaths are rare, unlike Third World countries; increasingly secular society funerals shorter; rituals in decline?

Teacher's Notes

Euphemisms and comments

Lost.....	young people are told to find things that they lose
Asleep.....	death and sleep are different
Gone away....	to where? why? what is wrong with staying here?
In heaven.....	safe, happy place, for good people only?
With the angels	looked after, must be a good person, angels do not exist?
In a better place	what is wrong with here
Taken	by whom - alludes to no control over our death
At peace/At rest	often used after a long and painful illness, comforting
Kicked the bucket	people who were being hung were stood on a bucket and the bucket kicked away.
Six Feet Under	
Pushing up the daisies	

Brown Bread

Cockney rhyming slang for dead