



CHILDREN AND MOURNING

Many of us hesitate to talk about death - especially to children. But death is an inescapable fact of life. We must accept it and so must our children. If we are to help them, we must let them know that it is okay to talk about it. By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know; if they have misconceptions, fears or worries. We can then help them by providing information, comfort and understanding.

At the Rose and George Teller Preschool, we had the sorrowful occasion to act on these concepts earlier this year. As a reflection of our core value of encouraging a relationship with nature, we adopted two guinea pigs. Nature couldn't just mean plants, we reasoned, and it shouldn't be just outside. A class pet would teach responsibility and empathy besides the facts about the animals. Even Judaism – as in the Talmud we are taught to feed our animals before we feed ourselves.

Of course we also discussed that one day the guinea pigs would die – but with an average lifespan of 6-8 years, we didn't expect to worry about that for many years.

And so Chocolate and Caramel – named so by the children because of their fur colors – joined our school. Their impact was immediate and dramatic. The children adored them, fretted over their every move and reveled in watching them grow and interact. We researched what their different vocalizations mean, what they eat, where they come from, why they are called guinea pigs and countless other facts. We observed them, drew them, wrote a book of care and general facts and truly came to love them. When especially happy, guinea pigs “popcorn” – jump straight up in the air and wriggle. The children loved this best of all and we teachers laughed as we tried to explain the term to the children – being the generation of microwave popcorn, none had ever seen popcorn pop!

But a few months later, Caramel started to have problems with her eye. Three doctors, 4 medications and an eye operation later, it became clear that Caramel would not survive.

We spoke with several pediatricians and mental health specialists and searched the web. We learned that it is very important to be honest with children, but to choose your words carefully. Saying that death is like going to sleep can make children afraid they may never wake up. Saying that the animal or person was sick and so we sent them to live elsewhere can cause children to think they will be sent away if they get sick. Children often focus on the physical aspects of death – can the dead get hungry? Go to the bathroom? Come back? And every child will act differently and no reaction is more correct than another.

So one sad day we told the children that Caramel needed to go to the vet. That evening we sent an email to the parents explaining that Caramel had not survived and the next day we would be speaking to the children about it.

Here are the words we used:

"Caramel was sick for a long time, and her eye was not getting better. It hurt her a lot. She did not want to popcorn or play with Chocolate anymore. The doctors used all their medicine, but they could not make her better, and she died. When someone is dead, they don't breathe or eat or move or play anymore. They don't sleep, and they don't wake up. Caramel is gone. She won't be in her cage anymore. We are very sad, and Chocolate may be sad, and you may be sad, too. It's OK if you are sad, or want to cry. It's OK if you aren't sad, too. Whatever you feel is OK."

The children's response was truly incredible.

"Where is she? Did they throw her in the garbage can?"

We answered, "She died at the doctor's office. They buried her in the ground."

"Is she asleep?"

"No, she won't sleep, or wake up anymore. Her body doesn't work anymore."

"My eye was sick and it got better. Maybe my doctor can make her eye better. They can give her a new medicine."

"We took her to three doctors. They tried every medicine. We cannot try anymore, because Caramel is dead. She is not alive, and she won't move or eat or play anymore."

"Is she coming back?"

"No, when someone dies, they don't come back."

"Is she in Heaven? My Grammy is in Heaven and when I go there I will see her."

"We don't know if animals go there. Her body is in the ground."

"When dinosaurs died they became fossils. Is Caramel a fossil now?"

"No, it takes a long time to become a fossil. But her body will help the plants and trees grow."

"That would make Caramel happy."

"I miss her. Chocolate misses her. Maybe Chocolate is sad. We should get Chocolate a pet so she won't be lonely."

We explained that we would probably get a friend for Chocolate in a little while, but that Chocolate needed time to understand that Caramel is gone, just as we did. The children also agreed that we should make cards for Caramel and Chocolate. They sat in front of the cage with clipboards drawing and then hung their pictures on the wall nearby.

About a week later, we welcomed a new guinea pig into our classroom. Peppermint and Chocolate are now good friends and the children have come to love her as well. But those condolence cards still line the wall around the guinea pig cage and Caramel and the unfortunate final lesson that she taught us will not soon be forgotten.