



CHILD CARE OPTIONS
www.childcareoptions.ca

**Child Care Options Resource
and Referral Program**

#100 – 6846 King George Hwy.
Surrey, B.C. V3W 4Z9

Canada

Phone:
604-572-8032

E-mail:
childcareoptions@options.bc.ca

ARTICLES & ACTIVITIES

Written by Ruth Beardsley

Nicholas was our Friend

Nicholas was a very special person to everyone who cared for him. He attended our integrated day care program for just over a year. When Nicholas was born, his parents knew he had multiple medical problems and they faced the very difficult decision of how they would care for him. Nicholas, who was two and a half years old when he passed away, had many ups and downs during his short life. He went from appearing to be relatively healthy and thriving to almost dying during several hospitalizations.

What was important, though, is how he touched us all, and how we still feel saddened by his death. While Nicholas was at G.F. Strong Centre, attending Integrated Day Care, he learned to sit unsupported and transfer a toy from one hand to another. We all remember him being very active at naptime when he twisted, shook and frequently disconnected his gastric feed tube. He seemed, at times, to be very mischievous, as if he were planning how to roll off his mat or shake his tube loose. He had a very deep chuckle when he laughed and seemed to enjoy being outside in the sun and the wind. Before Nicholas, I had never experienced the death of any child I had cared for. In fact, the process involved in dealing with the death of a child was a new experience for everyone at the day care centre.

Nicholas attended our program full time until two days before he passed away. Although we had noticed some deterioration in his health over the previous two months, his death was fairly sudden. When I got the message that Nicholas had passed away over the weekend, I quickly told staff, relieved them from their child care duties and provided them with a place away from the children where they could gather. Over coffee we had the opportunity to share memories of Nicholas. The next step, that same day, was for staff to meet and talk about how we would inform the children. The following list summarizes how we chose to deal with the children.

1) We decided to be open, honest and use language the children could understand. For example, we said, "Nicholas has died. When he was born his body didn't work quite right. He died because his body was worn out and stopped working. He will not be coming back to day care."

We kept it simple and waited for questions to come, particularly from children in the younger age groups (one- to three-and-a-half-year-olds). For the older children, staff went into a little more detail about how the internal body works and some of the different beliefs about death and dying. We wanted to try to make sure the children did not equate a child who has special needs with dying.

2) We asked the music therapist at our centre to use music time to express our goodbyes to Nicholas.

3) We sent a letter to parents explaining what we had told the children. We also told parents to expect questions over the next few weeks and that we hoped they would help us answer them in a way they were comfortable with. We acknowledged that there are many different beliefs about death and what happens to the body and soul.

4) We got books from the library and put together a bibliography of resources to attach to the parents' letter.

I also phoned Cathleen Smith an ECE instructor at Douglas College in New Westminster, British Columbia and arranged for her to come and talk to the staff. She came that same week and showed us a videotape of two children who had attended day care centres and later died. She spoke openly about the feelings around the death of a child.

All of these efforts, which were done simultaneously, helped staff and children deal with the feelings they had about losing a friend and a child. Some staff members became philosophical; others expressed feelings of sadness and, in some cases, relief. As the staff talked and supported each other, it created a special bond that gave everyone strength.

The reality of death was not as immediate for the children, although a two year-old child in Nicholas' group asked many questions about him not coming back, both at the day care and at home. With the music therapist, the children talked about how they remembered Nicholas and sang a song called "Nicholas was our friend." Even with the very youngest age group

(one- to two-year olds), when asked what they remembered about Nicholas, using gestures and simple words we sang:

Nicholas wiped his nose with his arm, Nicholas was our friend.

Nicholas had a blue seat, Nicholas was our friend.

Nicholas used to wave his arms, Nicholas was our friend.

Nicholas liked to shake toys, Nicholas was our friend.

Nicholas liked to clap his hands, Nicholas was our friend.

In our two- to three-and-a-half-year old age group, staff used real flowers as props to tell the following story about a mother and her children: One little flower was not as strong as the others and some days he could not hold his head up or stretch his leaves. His mother encouraged him but knew it was getting harder and harder. One morning the mother saw his petals still folded from the night. A big tear fell from her face. Soon the little flower had toppled over and she knew that the little flower had died.

The group then talked about Nicholas dying on the weekend and how they would not see him again as their friend. Then they talked about the things that reminded them of Nicholas. A few days later, when the music therapist came, this group didn't seem particularly interested in singing, as they had already discussed and dealt with Nicholas' death in their own way.

In the oldest group (three-and-a-half to six-year-olds), the children said: "Nicholas will always be part of us, he lives in our hearts like Jesus does," "Nicholas went up to heaven in a balloon." and "Nicholas' body just stopped working."

The children sang as if singing to Nicholas:

Nicholas went to heaven in a balloon, Nicholas was our friend.

Nicholas had the runny nose, Nicholas was our friend.

Nicholas will always be part of us, Nicholas was our friend.

When Nicholas died, his family had a small ceremony on a boat. They sang "Puff the Magic Dragon," threw baby roses in the water, blew bubbles and released some balloons. It had been a calm day, but as the balloons were released, the wind picked them up as if Nicholas were present and the balloons were swept away.

Nicholas was our friend.

At the time of Nicholas' death. Ruth Beardsley was the director of Integrated Day Care at G. F. Strong Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Books to share with children and families:

Adult Books

- Esterling, Linda and Bell, Jacque. What Will I Tell the Children? Omaha: University of Nebraska Medical Center. 1986.
- Grollman, Earl A. Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child. Boston: Beacon Press. 1990.
- Heegaard, Marge. When Someone Very Special Dies - Children Can Learn To Cope With Grief. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications 1988.
- Gaffney, Donna A. The Seasons of Grief' Helping Your Children Grow Through Loss. New York: New American Library. 1988.
- Johnson, Joy and Johnson, Marv. Tell Me Papa A Family Book for Children's Questions About Death and Funerals. Omaha: Centering Corporation. 1984.
- Knowles, Don and Nancy Reeves. But Won't Granny Need Her Socks? Dealing Effectively With Children's Concerns About Death and Dying. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1983.
- Simon. Norma. The Saddest Time, Niles. Illinois: Whitman, 1986.
- Stein, Sara B. About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children together. New York: Walker, 1974.

Picture Books

- Althea. When Uncle Bob Died. Cambridge, England: Dinosaur Publications, 1982.
- Blackburn, Lynn Bennett. Timothy Duck - The Story of the Death of a Friend. Omaha: Centering Corporation, 1987.
- Brown, Margaret Wise. The Dead Bird. New York: W.R. Scott, 1965.
- Buscaglia, Leo. The Fall of Freddie the Leaf. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982.
- Clifton. Lucille. Everett Anderson's Goodbye. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1983.
- Carlstrom, Nancy White. Blow Me a Kiss, Miss Lilly. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
- De Paola, Tomie. Nanna Upstairs and Nanna Downstairs. Puffin Books, 1973.
- Jamieson, Doug. The Last Visit. Waterloo, Ontario: Before We Are Six, 1975.
- Kremetz, Jill. How it Feels When a Parent Dies. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.
- Mellonie, Bryon and Ingpem, Robert. Lifetimes, The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1983.
- Rogers. Fred. When a Pet Dies. New York: Putnum, 1988.
- Sanford. Doris. It Must Hurt A Lot. A Child's Book About Death. Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1985.
- Schein, J. Forget-Me-Not.. Toronto: Annick Press, 1988.
- Stolz, Mary. King Emmett the Second. New York: Greenwillow, 1991.
- Thomas, Jane Resh. Saying Goodbye to Grandpa. New York: Clarion Books. 1988.
- Wild, Margaret. The Very Best of Friends. Toronto: Kids Can Press. 1990.
- Viorst, Judith. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, New York: Anthereum, 1971.