PARENTAL INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

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Developing a mature death concept requires understanding of five key biological facts: death is inevitable; irreversible; universal; caused by the breakdown of bodily processes; and, with it, all biological and psychological functions stop. Biological explanations are present in children’s death concepts from as early as 4 years old. Once a mature death concept is acquired, at around 10/11 years old, many children tend to combine biological and spiritual ideas to explain what happens after death. Several factors can shape children’s ideas around death, such as experience with animals or death of a loved one. Parental testimony can also play a key role in shaping children’s ideas in this domain, yet, contents of parent-child discussions around death have not been explored. We aim to explore the influence of parental beliefs and parent-child discussions of death on developing conceptions of death.

Participants were 70 children aged 5-11 years old and their parents (N=70). Children were interviewed using narratives about the death of a human, dog and deer, and asked what biological and psychological functions continue after death (e.g., Do its eyes work? Does it feel hungry?). Parents were given questionnaires that allowed them to describe a) their own beliefs and experiences around death and b) how they explain death to their child during conversations. Parent and child responses were scored on functionality (stops or continues functioning) and coded for response type (e.g., biological or spiritual). Parent and child responses were compared to assess the extent to which parents influence their child’s conception of death. Age, religion, and experience with death were also explored as variables.

Preliminary findings indicate that children integrate information gained through parent-child discussions to develop their own ideas and beliefs around death. Several other sources also appear to influence children’s conceptions, such as, television and books.