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978-0-521-19459-4 - Children's Understanding of Death

Edited by Victoria Talwar, Paul L. Harris and Michael Schleifer

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CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

In order to understand how adults deal with children's questions about death, we must examine how children understand death as well as the broader society's conceptions of death, the tensions between biological and supernatural views of death, and theories on how children should be taught about death. This collection of essays comprehensively examines children's ideas about death, both biological and religious. Written by specialists from developmental psychology, pediatrics, philosophy, anthropology, and legal studies, it offers a truly interdisciplinary approach to the topic. The book examines different conceptions of death and their impact on children's cognitive and emotional development; it will be useful for courses in developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and certain education courses, as well as philosophy classes – especially in ethics and epistemology. This collection will be of particular interest to researchers and practitioners in psychology, medical workers, and educators – both parents and teachers.

Victoria Talwar is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University. She is a graduate of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and Queen's University, Canada. She specializes in the social development of young children. She has published numerous papers in various journals including *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Law and Human Behavior*, and *International Journal of Behavioral Development*.

Paul L. Harris is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Education at Harvard University. He is a graduate of Sussex and Oxford universities and has previously taught at the University of Lancaster, the Free University of Amsterdam, the London School of Economics, and Oxford University. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. A developmental psychologist with interests in the development of cognition, emotion, and imagination, Harris is currently studying how young children learn about history, science, and religion on the basis of what trusted informants tell them, rather than from first-hand observation. He is the author of *The Work of the Imagination* (2000).

Michael Schleifer is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Québec in Montreal. He is a graduate of Oxford University (Philosophy) and McGill University (Psychology). His past appointments include being Professor of Ethics at McGill University and Clinical Psychologist at the Montreal Children's Hospital Department of Psychiatry. He has published more than one hundred articles in philosophical, psychological, and educational journals and has edited works on identity, cooperation, the development of judgment, morality, and emotion. His latest books are *Talking about Feelings and Values with Children* (2006) and *How to Have a Dialogue of Mutual Respect with Your Teenager* (2007).

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Children's Understanding of Death

FROM BIOLOGICAL TO RELIGIOUS
CONCEPTIONS

Edited by

Victoria Talwar

McGill University

Paul L. Harris

Harvard University

Michael Schleifer

Université du Québec à Montréal



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Contributors

RITA ASTUTI London School of Economics	MARGARET M. MAHON George Mason University
BENJAMIN BEIT-HALLAHMI University of Haifa	MIRIAM MCCORMICK University of Richmond
PAUL L. HARRIS Harvard University	MICHAEL SCHLEIFER Université du Québec à Montréal
RAY MADOFF Boston College Law School	VICTORIA TALWAR McGill University

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Preface and Acknowledgments

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH: FROM BIOLOGICAL TO RELIGIOUS CONCEPTIONS

This book examines different conceptions of death and their impact on children's cognitive and emotional development. It not only addresses practical and clinical issues related to children's developing understanding of death, but also focuses on theoretical and philosophical aspects linking children's concept of death to religion, morality, politics, and law. The material is drawn from a wide range of disciplines including psychology, anthropology, philosophy, medicine, education, and the law. This collection will be useful for courses in developmental psychology and clinical psychology, certain education courses, and philosophy classes – especially in ethics and epistemology. It will be of particular interest to researchers and practitioners in psychology, medical workers, and educators (parents and teachers).

The first three chapters of the book examine children's conceptions of death in different cultures. All three chapters focus on how children acquire a biological conception of death as well as how they acquire spiritual or religious ideas about an afterlife. Chapter 1, by Rita Astuti, provides an ethnographic account of how Vezo children living in a rural community on the western coast of Madagascar experience animal and human death. She describes how Vezo adults conceive of death and the life of the ancestors, how Vezo children are protected from ancestral threat, and how, as spectators to the rites and rituals that surround a death, Vezo children nevertheless construct an understanding of the ancestral afterlife. In Chapter 2, Paul L. Harris further examines how children develop two distinct conceptions of what happens when we die: a biological appreciation that living processes cease and a spiritual or religious expectation that some processes will continue. Both of these chapters suggest that children's initial conception

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of death has a strongly biological focus. Children come to understand how the end of the lifecycle implies the end of vital processes. On that biological foundation, children then construct a conception of the afterlife – a conception that involves God and Heaven in the case of Christian children, or the world of the ancestors in the case of Vezo children. Chapter 3, by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, examines the changing nature of the conflict between two psychological realities: the inevitable confrontation with the biological facts of death and the impulse to deny, hide, or transcend those facts. He emphasizes the fact that even if death cannot be abolished, medicine and the life sciences can, in many cases, help to postpone children's first encounters with death and all its implications. As a result, we face a dilemma. Do we capitalize on such advances to further protect children from an understanding of death? Alternatively, do we help them to understand its biological reality?

The next two chapters discuss conceptualizations of death from the perspective of those educating and caring for children. These chapters build on the previous chapters by examining exactly how adults can help children understand the biological reality of death and cope with loss. In Chapter 4, Margaret M. Mahon discusses the challenges of discussing death with children in palliative-care settings when either the child is dying or a loved one dies. She underlines the need for medical professionals to help alleviate children's suffering by addressing their fears about death. In Chapter 5, Victoria Talwar examines the attitudes of teachers and school psychologists toward discussing death. She describes different methods of discussing death within a classroom context that can help children understand the concept of death. In both chapters, the authors note the pervasive "taboo" regarding death and adults' (parents, medical and educational professionals) reluctance to discuss death and dying with children. Both authors emphasize the importance of discussions about death in helping children develop their conceptual understanding of death, answer questions about what happens after a death, and help promote children's healthy mourning and grieving when they suffer a loss.

Chapters 6 and 7 analyze, from a philosophical standpoint, the validity of beliefs about the afterlife. Miriam McCormick in Chapter 6 discusses "evidentialism" (the view that we should only believe what is warranted by evidence) and our warrant for holding nonevidentially based "supernatural" beliefs. She argues that children and adults can believe responsibly, even when some beliefs are not evidence based. She examines what norms ought to govern our belief formation and belief maintenance in general. McCormick points out that William James, the great psychologist-philosopher (1842–1910) supports her view. In Chapter 7, Michael Schleifer

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examines the perspective of children concerning thoughts and emotions. For children, these are different from, but as real as, physical objects; they reject “materialism.” Schleifer also invokes the works of William James, showing how he defended the legitimacy of the nonmaterialist perspective that is displayed by children. James accepted beliefs about the afterlife and immortality for which the evidence may be lacking, as McCormick demonstrates. Schleifer further shows that James accepted that there *was* evidence for some of the contentions of religion or spiritualism that are beyond science.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Ray Madoff discusses how society views death from a legal perspective. She examines how the law has constructed and modified its understanding of when death has occurred, the rights of the dead, and the implications for children. She discusses how law provides a form of immortality by protecting the interests of people even after they have died, and more specifically how the law treats children, including the fact that under American law parents can freely disinherit their children whereas in other parts of the world they cannot. Among the many things we learn is that American parents can leave enforceable instructions for their children, including threat of disinheritance unless they marry someone of a particular religion and other such control devices (this is unique to the United States and is contrasted by Madoff with the law in other countries). Another intriguing topic concerns the legal definition of death, again very different among various cultures and legal jurisdictions. Is it the nonactivity of the brain or the heart? The answer, we find, is very different in Japan from the rest of the world. Many other nuggets of information important to our understanding of children and death will be found in this chapter.

We would like to thank Shanna Williams and Sarah-Jane Renaud for their assistance in preparing the manuscript. We would also like to give a special thank you to Andrea Salguero for her patient and diligent help in completing this book.

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