

BADGER ASSEMBLY STORIES

SENSITIVE ISSUES

Ages 7-11

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Badger Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

This book contains 30 assemblies for children aged 7 to 11 covering a range of topics and issues that may be considered 'sensitive' or difficult to talk about. We sincerely hope that you never have to talk about the death of a pupil or a teacher from your school, but if you do, we have included some words and stories that are designed to help you, your colleagues and your children deal with a very difficult event.

Much as we may wish to shield our children from the sadness and horrors of the world, that is not possible. We have, therefore, addressed these difficult topics with sensitivity and empathy and have tried to find a positive note to reflect on, as much as possible.

Each assembly has been carefully researched and written to act as an introduction to a particular topic and as a stimulus for further discussion. Some assemblies require simple props, used as visual aids. These are listed at the start of each assembly.

Each assembly begins with an introduction for teachers containing some basic information. Then follows an introduction for your pupils. Many of these introductions are interactive and are written to encourage responses and engagement from pupils as well as to test understanding of a topic.

All the assemblies have also been matched to the SEAL aspects of learning (social, emotional and affective learning):

- Self-awareness
- Managing feelings
- Motivation
- Empathy
- Social skills.

The assembly 'story' uses a wide range of stimulus material:

- Original stories based on real events.
- Real stories.
- Factual information.

Follow-up

Each assembly offers a simple conclusion, plus a reflection and a prayer.

A short list of follow up questions and/or activities are also suggested. Further information for teachers, along with suggested books and websites are listed at the end.

Each assembly is designed to be used flexibly: choose the most appropriate follow up activity or series of questions that suits your pupils and your school.

We have written the assemblies to be self-supporting so you can take them straight from the shelf and use them, but if you do have the time for a little preparation first to adjust the tone and story for your school's particular situation, we would definitely recommend this approach.

Roger Hurn and Jane West

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I DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT: GOING TO A CREMATION

Introduction for teachers

Most people choose to be cremated these days and so the cremation of a loved one is something that children will almost inevitably have to face at some point during their time at school.

It's very important to make sure that the children understand that the person being cremated is not in any way hurt by this process, so try to avoid references to burning when explaining cremation. Modern crematoria expose the corpse to intense heat – not flames – and it is this that reduces the body to ashes. Explain that these ashes are put into decorative urns that the family can then either bury or keep. Some people choose to have their ashes scattered in a place that had meaning for them during their lifetime. Indeed, many football fans have had their ashes scattered on the pitch of their beloved club.

However, some children may be concerned that being cremated could affect the dead person's soul. If this is the case, point out that for believers in an afterlife, souls are immortal and are not affected by the process of cremation.

Props

A decorative urn.

Introduction for children

Have you noticed that when a character dies in a TV soap opera they always have a traditional funeral? This is because it's more dramatic to have mourners standing around an open grave.

But did you know that today in Britain most people actually choose to be cremated when they die? Cremation is considered to be environmentally friendly because it doesn't use up any land in the way that a burial does. But what is a cremation and what's it like going to one?

I'm going to read a story written by a teacher about why he went to a cremation and what happened there.

STORY: GOING TO A CREMATION

Mandy was a girl in my class. She was bright and friendly and funny. Teachers shouldn't have favourite pupils, and I don't, but I did like her a lot. Mandy was suffering from a very bad illness that the doctors couldn't cure. Mandy knew this but she never seemed to let it get her down. She always tried her best in class. She never made a fuss or got into silly squabbles with the other children. It seemed to me that because Mandy knew she wouldn't be around for ever she was making the most of the time she had.

Mandy couldn't play outdoor games like the others but she found ways of joining in wherever she could. For instance, she would sit on a bench and hold one end of the rope while her friends jumped over it. She was also great at games that she could play without moving too much such as, 'What's the Time Mr Wolf?' But most of all Mandy loved reading. She could lose herself in a story.

I remember she said to me once: 'When I read a book I can pretend I'm the main character and I get to have adventures and do all the things that the kids in the books do. It's brilliant.'

Well, I don't know if you'd call it an adventure, but one day I took the class out on a school trip to London. We went to the Natural History Museum. It was fantastic. All the kids in my class loved it and none more so than Mandy. She was determined to rush round the museum from exhibition to exhibition with her friends. But I could see that she was getting very tired as the day wore on. I tried to get her to take things easy and rest but she wouldn't. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

"You must be joking, sir," she said. "No way am I stopping to take a nap."

We compromised. When she couldn't walk any more we borrowed a wheelchair from the museum so she could continue to see all the things she wanted to see.

The next day at school, Mandy wrote in her report that it was the best day out she'd ever had.

Sadly, soon after this, Mandy's illness grew worse and she was taken into hospital where she died. Her mum and dad decided that they wanted to have Mandy's body cremated. The cremation took place in half term. I remember standing on the lawn outside the crematorium building with the teachers, a group of parents and some of Mandy's friends from school. We were a very solemn bunch with our dark clothes and sad faces. But it was a sunny day and one of the children said, 'At least the sun is shining. Mandy would have liked that.'

It was true. Mandy loved to sit in the playground and let the sun shine down on her face. Just thinking of her doing that made us all smile.

When the hearse drove up we all went inside the chapel. I was relieved to see that it was bright and clean and modern looking. It wasn't a gloomy place at all. I was pleased about this because Mandy didn't 'do' gloomy. I took my place in a pew towards the back while the men from the undertakers carried Mandy's coffin on their shoulders and put it at the front of the chapel on the catafalque – which is a kind of raised and decorated platform. The coffin was white and it looked so small as it lay there. I started to feel angry that a kid like Mandy should have had her life cut short. But then Mandy's dad stepped up to the lectern at the front of the chapel and the service began.

Mandy's mum and dad weren't religious so we didn't sing hymns or say prayers, but we did listen to four of Mandy's favourite songs on the CD player. Mandy's mum explained why each of the songs was important and the memories they brought back. Mandy's dad read a poem and then a group of Mandy's friends from school played some recorder music that they'd all been learning together. Mandy had loved playing the recorder. Finally, Mandy's big sister spoke to us all about Mandy. She told stories about when Mandy was little and the funny and daft things she'd done. It was good because, although we were all feeling really sad, it made us laugh. Somehow I knew that was what Mandy would have wanted. She never cried for herself when she was alive so I guessed she didn't want us to cry for her now that she was dead. And I thought it was right that the people talking about Mandy were the people who knew and loved her.

Then when Mandy's sister finished speaking, her dad played one last song. As the music filled the chapel, the curtains in front of the catafalque closed and we couldn't see the coffin anymore. I knew it was going to be taken to a safe place where the coffin would be made very hot until it turned to ash. I knew this wouldn't hurt Mandy because she was dead – she was free from pain and worry and fear and illness forever.

Mandy's family left the chapel and we all followed them out into the garden of remembrance to look at all the flowers and floral tributes that people had sent. Mandy's dad shook my hand and thanked me for coming. I said a few words to him about how it had been a pleasure to have Mandy in my class. I didn't know what else to say. But he smiled at me then turned away to talk to other people. I left soon afterwards. But at least I felt we'd all been able to say goodbye to Mandy and show her family how much she meant to us all.

I heard later that Mandy's family scattered Mandy's ashes on the River Thames. They said it was a way of setting Mandy's spirit free. Well, Mandy always wanted to have adventures and so maybe floating away down to the sea to be carried round the world was a kind of adventure for her. I hope so anyway.

INTERACTIVE FOLLOW-UP

Although nearly all Christian denominations as well as most Eastern religions allow cremation, it is forbidden by orthodox Judaism and Islam.

Questions

1. Why do you think Mandy's family chose to have her cremated rather than have a church service and burial? *(Because they weren't religious. Because they wanted to organise Mandy's funeral service themselves.)*
2. Why did Mandy's family and friends organise the service themselves? *(Because they thought they could do it better than someone who didn't know her. Because it was their way of saying goodbye.)*
3. Why is cremation more environmentally friendly than a burial? *(Because it doesn't take up land.)*
4. Mandy's family scattered Mandy's ashes on the River Thames to set her spirit free. What else could they have done with her ashes? *(They could have kept them at home or buried the urn in the garden.)*

The children may wish to study how different cultures organise the rituals and ceremonies associated with death, for example, the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Conclusion

Mandy lived her short life to the full and when she died the service at her cremation allowed her family and friends to give thanks for having known her.

Further information

The cremation society of Great Britain's website gives general information about all aspects of cremation. www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc/GeneralInformation/Know.html

Advice on how to talk to children about death and cremation can be found at www.hospicenet.org/html/talking.html

NON-INTERACTIVE FOLLOW-UP

Pupils should know that:

- Being cremated does not hurt the person being cremated.
- Cremation does not mean that the body is burned.
- Cremation is environmentally friendly.

Something to think about

Many of us complain and grumble about our lives. Yet Mandy, who was too ill to do all the things that other children take for granted, lived her short life to the full and tried to make the most of every minute.

Reflection

Although it was a tragedy that Mandy died so young, her family and friends used the cremation service as their opportunity to celebrate her life. So, although we may feel upset or angry that a loved one has died we should also remember how lucky we have been to have known them and shared at least part of our lives with them.

Prayer

Lord, we give thanks for the love that so many people bring into our lives and we ask you to help us never to forget them after they have gone. Amen.