

Boston Children's Museum

A Great Place to Grow

news

Contact: Drew Souerwine
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Project Advisors for
ENDINGS: An Exhibit About Death and Loss

Jean M. Cummiskey (B.A., Political Science, Emmanuel College; M.A., Political Science and Urban Environmental Policy, Tufts University) is a senior planning associate for HMO planning and development for Blue Cross of Massachusetts. She is also an instructor on Politics of Aging and Politics of Health Care Planning and Reform at Emmanuel College.

Rabbi Earl Grollman (B.A., University of Cincinnati; M.H.L., Hebrew Union College) has been the Rabbi of Congregation Temple Beth El in Belmont, Massachusetts for 33 years. His interest is in the subject of children in crisis, and he lectures internationally on the topic. His book Talking About Death won an award of citation from UNESCO.

Alfie Kohn (B.A., interdisciplinary, Psychology and Philosophy, Brown University; M.A., interdisciplinary, Psychology and Philosophy, University of Chicago) is interested in death and its relationship to literature. Mr. Kohn has taught courses in this and other subjects at Tufts University and Phillips Academy. He has been published in the *GEORGIA REVIEW*, *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY* and *THE NATION*.

Gerald P. Koocher (A.B., Psychology, Boston University; M.A. Psychology, University of Missouri; Ph.D., Clinical and Developmental Psychology, University of Missouri) is Director of Training and Senior Associate in Psychology at Children's Hospital Medical Center. In addition to his clinical investigations and research with children and death Dr. Koocher was consultant on articles, chapters and books on children and death and loss.

Rabbi Harold Kushner (B.A., Columbia University; ordained, The Jewish Theological Seminary) has been the Rabbi of Congregation Temple Israel in Natick Massachusetts for 18 years. Confronted with the death of his teenage son, Rabbi Kushner wrote When Bad Things Happen to Good People. He is also the author of When Children Ask About God.

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Susan Linn (B.A., Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Boston; Ed.M., children's television and exploration of puppetry as a tool for self expression and communication, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Ph.D. candidate in counselling and consulting psychology, Harvard Graduate School of Education) created and implemented a staff position of Puppet Therapist at Children's Hospital Medical Center, which uses puppets to help children talk about their feelings. She also consulted the Museum in the "What If You Couldn't ...?" exhibit and curriculum unit. She has been an instructor in human development for Lesley College and published several articles.

Martin Norman (B.A., M.A., Psychology, Boston University; Ph.D. Clinical Psychology, Boston University) has been a consultant to the Museum for nine years. Dr. Norman's special interest is in children at risk and their families. He has run outreach programs at Judge Baker Guidance Center and Children's Hospital. Currently, he co-directs the Belmont Counseling Center.

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Background Information on ENDINGS: An Exhibit About Death and Loss

This is an exhibit about death and loss. Talking about death is almost always difficult. We made this exhibit because we believe that children's ideas about death may often be more frightening and confusing than the way it really is. Therefore, we offer this exhibit in the hope that it will provide children and adults an opportunity to share their ideas, feelings, beliefs and questions about death. Although we do not feel this is a scary exhibit, it is likely to stimulate questions and remarks that you will want to talk about with your children.

Introduction Panel ENDINGS: An Exhibit About Death and Loss

EXHIBIT BACKGROUND:

The Children's Museum's interest in the subject of death and loss began ten years ago. Staff members began to realize that children are often confronted with these issues at very early ages whether through the loss of a pet, a person, or even a playmate moving away. They almost always have questions and misconceptions about it.

These feelings were confirmed as other staff observed, for example, how many children had misunderstandings about stuffed animals and the life cycle of animals in the natural history exhibits. The Museum began working on possible ways to present these issues in an exhibit format.

Discussions began with advisors from a range of disciplines: psychology, theology, literature, medicine, history, philosophy and the arts. Each brought to the discussions their personal views as well as a perspective from the field of specialization that demonstrated how broadly the Museum could approach the topic in an exhibit format.

Issues and problems emerged clearly from these discussions which included:

- . Families need an opportunity and the "permission" to discuss dying, death and loss in a forum which encourages and aids dialogue.
- . Everyone has had some loss -- even young children. Death of a pet, a grandparent or even a playmate moving away, brings the issues to the foreground for children.

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- . Adults need ways to confront and accept death and loss themselves so they can effectively help their children.
- . Parents want, but may be unsure how to deal sensitively and truthfully with children over these issues. Urbanization limits the number of spontaneous instances which often trigger such dialogues in more rural settings.
- . Adults and children often need "permission" to express their emotional responses to death and loss. Sorrow is an expected response, but many are unaware that anger, guilt and relief are also common experiences. Nor do children understand that part of mourning may also be a celebration of the dead person's life and therefore might include stories and laughter.
- . Few families prepare for these issues before there is a pressing need. Everyone needs to know how to find additional resources once the topic has surfaced. But, while available literature abounds, it is unlikely to be sought out under the pressure of a family crisis.
- . Many people may not feel at ease offering or accepting comfort from others at the time of loss. This is magnified by cultural differences. For example, a person who may be "comfortable" at a wake can be "completely lost" when visiting a Jewish family sitting Shiva.
- . It may be easier to approach this topic in a comfortable setting among other interesting experiences than it is to decide to seek it out by itself.

EXHIBIT COMPONENTS:

This exhibit makes use of songs, stories, games, dioramas, videotapes, live and dead animals, as well as artifacts relating to the ritual surrounding death, past and present, in our own and other cultures. The exhibit is one in which the interaction is designed to be between family members and the materials themselves; it is meant to feel personal and offer some privacy. Furthermore, each visitor may choose to enter the exhibit, pass it by, or leave at any time. Exhibit components include:

1. Learning About Death. This section explores some of the predictable developmental stages that children experience in their continuing efforts to understand death.

- . A simple game like "peek-a-boo" can help young children distinguish between "out of sight" and "gone forever".
- . A videotape illustrates how "make-believe" death in TV and movies is technically done. This is presented in juxtaposition to a newsreel clip of war showing "real" death. All death on TV is not "make-believe".
- . An activity helps children sort the differences between what is alive, what was once alive and now dead, and what was never alive.

2. Experiencing Death. This section examines natural life cycle issues and the facts of death, specifically that of a pet and of a relative.

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Project Staff for
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Elaine Heumann Gurian, Project Director, Exhibit Center Director. She holds a B.A. in art history from Brandeis University and a master's in education from Boston State College. She was a consultant on the film "Joan Robinson: One Woman's Story". Active in the museum community she is treasurer of the American Association of Museums (AAM), vice president of CECA/International Council of Museums (ICOM) and is a member of the executive board of AAM/ICOM.

Janet Kamien, Project Developer, holds a B.F.A. in theatre from Boston University and a master's in special needs and museums from Lesley College. She was the Developer of the "What If You Couldn't...?" exhibit and the six-unit curriculum kit developed under a sub-contract for the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. She is also author of a book by the same title for middle school children. She was the co-project director of "Us and Them", a videotape about people with disabilities. As former head of The Children's Museum design and production staff, she was selected as one of a nine-member delegation to India consulting on interactive exhibit design. In 1983 she received the Massachusetts Association for Retarded Citizens Distinguished Citizen Award.

Signe Hanson, Project Designer, Chief of Graphics for the Museum. She holds a B.A. from Smith College in literature and sociology, and has studied at Boston University School of Fine Arts and at the New England College of Art. She served as designer on other Museum exhibits and projects. She has been illustrator of several commercially published books and recently returned from a one-year sabbatical in Norway where she worked as a graphics artist for an advertising agency.

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