Children's concept of an afterlife



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When over a hundred children aged five to eight were asked about their concepts of an afterlife, well over half declared some belief in heaven, but there were indications that this is not necessarily a pleasant place to be. The need to take up children's anxieties about the afterlife is underlined.

INTRODUCTION

There is now an extensive literature on the child's concept of death, mostly from within a Judaeo-Christian tradition[1-14]. Misra[15] working in India found some responses that would be expected from a different belief system.

It is more or less agreed that there are a number of components to the concept, including, for example, notions of universality, causality and irrevocability. It is also agreed that children go through three stages of understanding, from none to partial to complete. Typically a two-year-old will not be able to grasp the essential components of the concept, while a four-year-old may know that death means separation but may not realise that it is permanent or that a dead person is unable to see, hear or move. One can be reasonably certain that by eight or nine children of normal intelligence will have a fully developed idea.

The nine most frequently quoted components (Kane[9]) are shown below:

Component	Average age attained (years)
Realisation	3
Separation	5
Immobility	5
Irrevocability	6
Causality	6
Dysfunctionality	6
Universality	7
Insensitivity	8
Appearance	12

Despite the extensive work referred to above, despite the readiness with which adults invoke heaven when talking to children about the death of a loved one, or a pet, there has been little attempt to discover what children think heaven is like, where it is, how one gets there and so on. A number of studies[5-8, 10] have asked children what they think happens after death but there has been little attempt to follow this up with probes to investigate what children think in detail. Gartley and Bernasconi[3] included two questions on heaven in the dozen or so that they gave to children aged between five and 14. They found a developmental trend with more mention of heaven in the seven- and eight-year-olds than in those younger and greater clarity in the distinction between heaven and hell as children reached eight to nine. It is not easy to generalise from this work since all the children came from the same Roman Catholic school. McWhirter[10] in her study of children aged three to 15 also found more mention of heaven and hell with age, this being especially noticeable after seven. Blum[7] compared Jewish with Roman Catholic children and found that the latter tended to believe more in an afterlife.

The aim of the study reported here was to try to gain some more or less systematic data from children on what they thought heaven was like, from a range of schools and from families of differing socio-economic status.

The age range was chosen partly because the literature on the concept of death suggests that this is a period of change and partly to examine Piaget's stage theory which has often been invoked in this context[11]. Clinical experience of one of the authors led to the hypothesis that children under the age of about seven, who tend to think concretely, who are in what Piaget called the pre-operational stage, would find it impossible to argue that there is no afterlife since to

EDITOR'S NOTE

This informative and well-conducted study on children's concepts of an afterlife will, I am sure, be as entrancing to readers as it was to me. It is a model of how to use scientific research method to find out the answers to questions that have considerable relevance for those counselling children and their parents following bereavement. Particularly surprising is the fact that there were few differences in belief in an afterlife between children in a Jewish or Church of England school and one which was non-religious, suggesting that this concept is probably acquired outside school. The authors conclude that as many problems may be raised by telling children that 'Daddy has gone to heaven' as are answered. Children have particular difficulty, because of their concrete thinking, in figuring out how Daddy can get to heaven if we bury him – isn't he further away from heaven if he is put in the earth? One child recently drew a picture of a beanstalk and postulated that her father had got to heaven by emulating Jack. I liked best the idea of being picked up by God and having to wait 12 days for a flight.

do so would be engaging in abstract thought. While it was acknowledged that Piaget did not postulate clear cut, age-related stages, it was assumed that there would be observable differences between the age groups.

THE RESEARCH SET-UP

The schools and the children

Our research was carried out in three schools in London: a Jewish (school A), Church of England (school B) and non-denominational local authority school (school C).

The Jewish school is an independent progressive day school for girls and boys offering both secular and religious education. It serves an almost entirely social class 1 population. The Church of England school is predominantly Christian but with several children from other religions too. This school does not have an admissions policy discriminating in favour of denomination. The school encourages an awareness of several religions, but the teaching of religious education and the overall ethos of the school is Christian. Many of the children live with and experience problems that arise from unemployment, temporary housing and broken family relationships. The non-denominational school has no one religious base, but rather accepts and acknowledges all faiths. The Church of England and non-denominational schools contained children from a wide range of social backgrounds.

Each headteacher was asked to select at random 40 children (10 children from each age group five, six, seven and eight years) and therefore there was not an equal number of boys and girls (70 boys and 50 girls). Of the 120 children selected, one child refused to participate, 12 were absent on the days when the interviews took place and incomplete data was collected from four. The final sample was thus 103: 60 boys and 43 girls, aged five to eight, with 39 from school A, 27 from school B and 37 from school C.

An attempt was made during the pilot study to ask the children about their denominational identity or current religious practice, but it was found that the majority of the children did not know and as the parents were not included in the study it was decided that this question should be excluded. The ethnic origin for the majority of the children was Caucasian (75%), with 18% Asian, 4% African, 3% Afro/Caribbean and 1% other.

Collecting data by interview

The interviews were conducted by two female researchers, both of whom interviewed children from each age group in all three schools. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interviews followed a standard format. A short story with pictures as used by Lansdown and Benjamin[13] was read with each child. The story concerned an old lady who ran a shop where children would go to buy sweets. One day the old lady had died. Immediately after the story had been read, the researcher asked the child, 'What do you think happens next?' The researcher then guided the interview based on a questionnaire of 36 items.

The initial objective was to determine whether the child believed in a concept of afterlife. If not, the interview was terminated shortly after exploring their belief in God. If the child did believe in an afterlife this was explored further along six main themes.

- How do people get there?
- What does it feel like to be there?
- What does this 'place' look like?
- What do people do there?
- Can they come to life again?
- Can we communicate with people who have died?

On completion of the interview the children were asked to draw what their idea of an afterlife looked like. The tapes were then transcribed verbatim and the answers categorised within the themes stated above. For example, answers to the question 'What does it feel like to be there?' were analysed on the basis of 'pleasantness'; answers to the question 'How do you get there?' were categorised according to broad methods of travel. Quotes from children are given below.

Before the main data were collected each interviewer observed the other and discussed the session in order to obtain some degree of inter-interviewer reliability. Subsequent analyses of results obtained showed no significant differences between the interviewers in the proportions of affirmative or negative results. Unless indicated otherwise, all results quoted are pooled.

OUR FINDINGS

Belief in an afterlife

Looking at ethnic origin or socio-economic status, we found no significant differences in the numbers of children who declared a belief.

It was assumed at the outset that there would be some between-school differences in the numbers of children believing in an afterlife, since two schools have religious affiliations. This was shown to be the case, with the secular school (school C) having a lower proportion than either the Jewish school (school A) or the Church of England school (school B). These differences, however, were slight and did not reach statistical significance (see Table 1).

Table 1: Belief in an afterlife by school
(in percentages of total count)

	School A	School B	School C	Total
Yes	68	70	59	65
No	28	26	38	31
Uncertain	5	4	3	4

The hypothesis that all, or at least almost all, children aged up to about eight years would have some belief in some form of existence after death was not upheld (see Table 2).

'Some people do believe in heaven... yes. But I don't believe it and I'm certain it doesn't happen... what can happen is a dead body, there is nothing special in it.' (six-year-old)

Several distinguished between the human remains and some form of soul.

'Her shadow...it would float up from the ground. The skin goes into the ground and the shadow goes up to heaven.' (six-year-old)

Table 2: Belief in an afterlife by age
(in percentages of total count)

	Age 5	Age 6	Age7	Age 8	Total
Yes	50	71	59	77	65
No	50	25	38	15	31
Uncertain	0	4	3	8	4

Heaven and hell

Most children who affirmed that there is an afterlife talked of heaven, with 25% of the total spontaneously mentioning hell. In many cases there were links between the two places.

'The oldest person in heaven protects the people... If someone comes up to heaven by mistake and he's supposed to go to hell, well then they've got to be protected.' (seven-year-old)

'Everyone who dies turns into a monster

and lives in hell, except for the bible characters who are perfect, so they go to heaven.' (eight-year-old)

'When you die you get a recap of your life and all the bad things. All the bad things that happened to you and that you did. There are loads of rooms and a long corridor and there are different people in each room. Like in each room there is a bad thing, like when you were a child and something bad happened or you did something bad, you go back to that and feel it at that age. The corridor is black and white and red. On the gate of each room it will tell you what is going to happen in that room. You see other people but they don't comfort you, they start being nasty to you, especially in the last room, that is where all the bad things altogether come toward you. They stay in hell until all the bad things are over, and they go... into the next room and into the next. You can't stop going to hell. Then they go to paradise, it has lots of rooms too but they are all white and no bad things happen... First through hell and then into paradise. They relive their whole lives in a short time.' (eight-year-old)

'In heaven there is a King and Queen who work with God... The King and Queen decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.' (eight-year-old)

Getting to heaven

Children facing death not infrequently ask how they will get to heaven. The answers to this question were overwhelmingly in the catagory of flying or floating up to the sky, as shown in Table 3.

'God picks you up – you have to wait 12 days for a flight and then the flight takes eight hours.' (five-year old)

'First go to hospital and go in a car or a bus or something with some clever people who'll know how to get to heaven.' (six-year old)

'When they are dead on the ground, a missile is under there. It doesn't explode, it just rides the person up to heaven and never stops going up till it sees the clouds.' (six-year old)

'With a ladder.' (seven-year old)

'It's like an invisible escalator – goes up into the clouds.' (seven-year old)

'It takes one year because they move very slowly, they go one inch an hour.' (eight-year old)

Table 3: How one gets to heaven
(in percentages of the children who believed in an afterlife)

Flying or floating	48
Mechanical means	2
Being taken	21
In a container	8
Own volition	3
Don't know	19

The characteristics of heaven

Only two children who believed in an afterlife were uncertain about the characteristics of the place that people go to. Almost half (42%) thought it more or less like earth as we know it.

'They just do normal things that humans do. The children go to school, the older people do to work and the retired ones go to the pub.' (eight-year old)

The remaining 56% saw it as different: 43% saw it as pleasant, 36% as unpleasant, sometimes rather frightening, with the rest neutral or uncertain. Heaven is not always a place where much happens, either. 46% reported people there as active and 43% as passive.

'Everything is brown, different shades of brown...because all the people arrive in their coffins and their coffins are brown.' (six-year-old)

'It looks like you're trapped...looks grey... Heaven is not a nicer place than here but I have to go.' (six-year-old)

Heaven is small, only about 200 cms.' (seven-year-old)

'Heaven has no sound, the sound it has is the sound of the wind and the rain and thunder.' (seven-year-old)

'It's a better place than earth and you get things you want...a computer, driving licence, a football...it's a good place, relaxing, nothing goes wrong like on earth.' (seven-year-old)

"It has a worrying feel because people might lie and have bad dreams.' (seven-year-old)

'Heaven is a fun place for old people.' (seven-year-old)

'You can have a big party up there. You rob things from earth... like drink and only the dead people can come up and down... so the policeman will never find out... it'll be the unsolved mystery.' (seven-year-old)

'Heaven is not a nice place, lots of animals, red like blood 'cos people have died and have blood. looks like a dungeon. Feels sad.' (eight-year-old)

'Light, faded colours, talk very quietly... it would be very sad.' (eight-year-old)

A small number were clearly concerned about overcrowding.

'Heaven is 1,000 metres big... if it gets full they will have to give them somewhere else. Another Jesus in another country. Jesus takes them to the other heaven by carriage.' (six-year-old)

Some saw heaven as a place to be made better.

'...in the sky is God and God makes them better.' (six-year-old)

The irrevocability of death

Of those who believed in an afterlife, 49% said there is no return. Of the rest, 15% said that one can return from heaven, or wherever one is, in human form. Almost 14% said that one can visit, 6% asserted that the dead return as ghosts.

'People in heaven are preparing for another life, they could start all over again as a little baby on earth.' (six-year-old)

'People in heaven can come down and visit us, they just ask God, "Can you make me a forcefield so I don't get burnt in the sun?" So they just go down, down, in the house.' (six-year-old)

'They visit us at night when we're all asleep and they can see our dreams.'

Communications with the dead

One interviewer probed on dreams and their function and found that 32% of her sample who believed in an afterlife also believed that it is possible for the living to communicate with the dead via their dreams.

'We can see people who have died in our dreams - when we have nightmares and it's scary.' (seven-year-old)

'When you are dead you sort of fall asleep and go to the land of dreams in heaven.' (seven-year-old)

Miscellaneous points

A small proportion, 19%, believed in God but denied an afterlife. About half mentioned animals in heaven. One seven-year-old spoke of animal heavens: a jungle one, a park one for different kinds of animals where you can go to get dogs and cats.

DISCUSSION

Klink[16] concluded her book on children and religion by hoping that it would be a challenge to psychologists and educationalists to address themselves to the theme of 'the child and faith'. The most striking conclusion from the data presented here is that this topic remains a challenge.

The Piagetian-based hypothesis that more of the younger children would tend to declare a belief in an afterlife than the older ones was not borne out. Piaget's theory in the context of children's understanding of illness has already been challenged by Eiser[17], and it is not upheld here. Eiser discusses a number of alternative approaches based on the role of social interactions and their effect on cognitive development; these are likely to prove more fruitful than stage theory.

It was daunting to note that for many of these children heaven is not

necessarily a fun place; it may be boring or even frightening.

It would be easy to see the origin of the idea of floating up to heaven in the received idea that heaven is 'up there somewhere'. It would be easy to read into children's ideas about ghosts and others coming back and say that those who put forward this view are denying the finality of death, or that they do not really comprehend the notion. In our view it is better to let the words speak for themselves and not to try to read into them.

The clinical implications for people working with bereaved children or those who are themselves facing death, their siblings and their parents are evident; we should not assume that 'Gone to heaven' is an answer in itself. It may raise many problems which would need some time to unravel.

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Separation or internalisation when a loved one dies?

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'The loved object is not gone, for now I carry it within myself and can never lose it.'[1] Five years ago Wyn died. We had lived together as friends for 23 years and when she went, part of me seemed to die with her. I was told by many well-meaning people, 'You will never get over her death until you have let her go – you've got to say goodbye'.

I still remember the devastation I felt on hearing these words – I wanted to draw her close to me, into my very being, not tear her away. I felt desperate.

In my work as a bereavement counsellor, clients frequently reflect the same despair:

'I can't let him go, I can't separate from him. How can I push him away out of my life?'

As I worked through my own grief, I was aware of a slow healing taking place within, a peace, a oneness with the world. The joy of living returned, but I was never aware of consciously separating myself from Wyn. It seemed in a strange way that the reverse had taken place; it was as if she had merged within my very self until once more I felt complete.

'.... to rebuild with anguish the inner world which is felt to be in danger of deteriorating and collapsing'[2]

'.... when a death occurs... we lose a sense of self.'[3]

WRITTEN SOON AFTER WYN'S DEATH

Whilst attempting to struggle through the darker period of my life, losing the one I loved having watched her suffer in agony, I died. Not one death, but several: the death of my personality, the death of my inner joy and happiness, the death of myself.

I realised for the first time what 'the valley of the shadow of death' was. Not the death of my loved one, but my death: my death which caused for me the death of everything I loved and enjoyed – music, colour, beauty, the song of the birds, the vastness of the sea, the sky, the heather on the cliffs, my garden, the flowers, my friends, my dogs. Everything seemed to die, and yet the physical forms remained. Every thought, every breath, everything I saw, heard, felt and tasted was of death, a painful death; Wyn had died.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Perhaps the most difficult problem which the bereaved face, and the most difficult for counsellors to understand, is how one lets go of a loved person outside of oneself in the interest of discovering a new relationship with the lost person within oneself. Part of the difficulty lies in the lack of an adequate language with which to express an experience for which no words exist.

In this paper Daphne Brown, who is now a counsellor specialising in bereavement, uses telling quotations, imagery and personal reminiscence to share with us her own successful attempt to solve this problem.

'External objects may change rapidly but it will be many weeks before corresponding changes have taken place in ... their internal equivalents.'[3]

Three months after Wyn's death

I was walking across the field with my dogs when I looked up and saw a pigeon flying against the backcloth of stormy grey clouds. As the pigeon