

Listening with an Ethical Presence  
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What is Love? I ask. I'm sitting with a group of 4 year olds and am curious to know what they think.

*Love means you fall in love and you are going to marry.*

*It means you want to be nice and help your little brother.*

*It means you love them.*

*When someone dies you love them. It means you miss them. You have to find a new family if they die.*

*No! No!*

*Every single person will die.*

*He said then you get another family. But that's wrong.*

*If someone dies you turn into a skeleton, then a ghost, then a spirit.*

*Spirit means you're dead.*

*It means that you're a ghost that sneaks into people, that's evil.*

*Love means if you die you put something over the hole so you know where they are buried.*

*A tombstone.*

I am completely unprepared for this. As an early childhood educator I would never consider initiating a discussion about death, evil ghosts and finding a new family. But to these children it seems love and death are inextricably connected and they want to talk about it.

Death is a topic we don't often bring up with children without a reason. If a family member is ill or dying we open the discussion, but most of us avoid it otherwise. And it's not the only topic we avoid. Consider the following:

*Tori: You kill bad guys*

*Kim: Why?*

*Tori: Because you don't have anything else to do with them.*

*Kim: Couldn't you put them in jail?*

*Tori: Yeah, you could do that if you want. Then kill them in jail.*

How many of us have engaged in a discussion on the penal system, violence and the death penalty? I'd guess not many.

These are difficult topics for us as adults to think about and discuss, so it is not surprising that we don't broach them with children. Added to that is our cultural belief

children should be shielded from topics that might be scary or disturbing, or too complex for them to understand. Our vision of childhood is that it is a time of innocence, that our role is to shelter and protect them from the harsh realities of the world. But are we deceiving ourselves?

A group of three year old white girls are playing princesses. A girl of African descent approaches the area. One of the white girls says "You can't be a princess, there are no brown princesses".

Comments like this stop us in our tracks, leave us aghast and unsure of what to do. But should we be surprised that children are aware of racial tensions in our society?

Carlina Rinaldi observes that:

"Children are born searching for and, therefore, researching the meaning of life, the meaning of the self in relation to others and to the world. Children are born searching for the meaning of their existence . . . the meaning of the conventions, customs and habits we have, and of the rules and the answers we provide."

Carlina Rinaldi (2003)

In this search for meaning children look to the adults close to them, observing, listening to all we say and all we don't say. And our silences speak volumes. If our response to difficult issues is to avoid them, brush over them, or find a 'simple' answer, children come to understand that these topics are not to be spoken of. So what is our responsibility?

Many scholars in the field of early childhood are taking the position that adults can open up spaces for dialogue to explore difficult issues. That we have an ethical responsibility to listen, and to listen we must create an openness to questions and to the uncertainty that comes with those questions. We do not need to know the answers, but we must be willing to enter into the dialogue. Scholar and educator Enid Elliot explains it this way: " Issues of racism, violence, gender and sex raise complex questions with no easy answers. Children exploring these issues often do so within a collegial atmosphere of engagement, connection and curiosity. ....Just as we must struggle with our own ethical identities, children struggle to understand their responsibilities in the world. If we believe in social justice how we respond to children provides them with direction for thinking about these questions." Enid Elliot (personal communication)

She calls on adults to be an "ethical presence" as we listen to children, even when listening causes tension and discomfort. But that willingness to be in question, to open the dialogue, to explore issues, to question assumptions can lead both adults and children to new ways of thinking. Perhaps, as Loris Malaguzzi observes, we need to

rethink how we view children: "Those who have an image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don't need that as an image of children. Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths."

The conversation about death continued for days, with children debating what to do if their parents died, how parents sometimes die in war. They discussed how to go about finding someone else to take care of you if your parents died, and how something has to go on the grave of a loved one so you don't forget where you buried them. The conversations were robust and lively, ideas were presented, disputed, consensus was sometimes achieved, sometimes not. And the only people surprised by the topic of conversation were the adults.

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