



# BUTTERFLY KISSES

*Losing a loved one is one of life's most difficult challenges and even more so when a child is involved. Unlike an adult who needs to heal from a loss, a child has to first understand the concept of loss before their journey towards healing takes place. LOREN STOW explores this deeply emotional topic.*

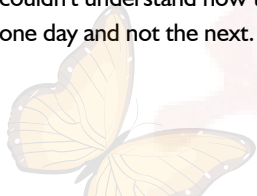
Within the span of twelve months, Bianca van Deventer's children experienced not only a violent armed robbery in their home and the resultant upheaval in their lives, but their father also passed away unexpectedly from a rare case of cerebral malaria. This 32-year-old mother of three explains how her children (10, 8 and 32 months respectively) are still in almost daily therapy more than two years later. "Our idyllic life on our small holding in Pretoria East was shattered by the armed robbery, which lasted for hours. Our house was ransacked and what they didn't take, they destroyed. My son was pulled out of his bed in the middle of the night, something that he's never recovered from. And then months later the children also lost their father to cerebral malaria," Bianca shares, still obviously traumatised herself.

In Bianca's experience, the death of their father was followed by what seemed to be a million questions from their children. "No one prepared me for the questions they would ask, constantly, day in and day out," she says, explaining that they just couldn't understand how their father could be healthy and alive one day and not the next. Because of the nature of a disease like

cerebral malaria, the children didn't see their father in hospital before his death. He looked really sick and although it was a heart-wrenching decision for Bianca to make, she didn't want the children to remember him like that.

More than two years later Bianca has good days and bad days. "We still cry together and we do things to remember their father. But some days I wonder how much longer they will grieve for. I want to move on, but for my children it's really difficult, after all no person can ever replace their father," she shares. "But some days I wonder how much longer they will grieve for; I want to move on, but my children cannot." There are still times of total relapse for the children, especially when changes occur in their lives like a new school year or a new teacher. She continues to remind her children that their father will always be in their hearts and they make a special day of his birthday by doing something fun to remember him. "They make him Father's Day cards and always wish him a merry Christmas before opening their presents," Bianca reveals.

No one ever really knows how they will cope with a traumatic event or devastating loss until they are firmly in the midst of it and, as Bianca explains, when you are a parent you have to put your children first.





### ONE DAY AT A TIME

Hlengy Zwane, a 31-year-old Johannesburg-based clinical psychologist explains that bereavement is a unique experience for every child, depending on the circumstances and their individual personality. “Coping with death and trauma is really unique to each child, and there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach,” she explains. However, Hlengy urges parents and caregivers to remember that no matter what the situation, the reaction to the child should always include elements of validating their feelings, letting them know that they are understood, leaving them with feelings of being loved, and always remind them that they are not at fault. “Children often blame themselves in some way, no matter how unrelated they may be to the actual death or trauma, so it’s important to remind them time and again that it wasn’t their fault,” she advises. The time following a death or trauma can be confusing for a child and they seldom react in ways that adults understand. A child does not have the vocabulary to express themselves, especially if they are under five years of age, so they will react differently. Because of this, children also often isolate themselves, act out, become angry, regress in their behaviour, are confused or blame themselves.



### THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNSELLING

Claudia Abelheim, a 29-year-old educational psychologist who works for FAMSA in Johannesburg, explains that the long-term effects of death and trauma depend very much on the age of the child and their developmental phase at the time of the trauma or loss. “Without the proper help, a child can become psychologically stuck at the age when the loss occurred,” she warns, “and depending on their age can develop a difficulty in trusting other adults and the world around them, be unable to meet the needs of others, become inflexible, rigid and controlling, as well as have identity issues.” The counselling process gives the child a safe space in which to explore and understand the concept of death and their feelings around it. “A professional counsellor understands how to help each unique child to come to terms with feelings that they may not even understand and how to move on without holding onto feelings of anger and resentment,” Claudia explains.



### PARENTS MATTER

While it is important for a child to see a therapist following a death or trauma, Hlengy explains that parents and caregivers play an important role in the child’s understanding and healing process. She encourages them to be

there for the child, become attuned to the child, and let them know that you are physically and emotionally present for them. This can be done through play, which is how children learn, whether it be through dolls, artistic expression, singing songs, reading books or even playing physical games. Children will often act out their feelings during play and it gives the parent or caregiver the opportunity to give the child the words to understand and express their feelings. “Play with the child, even though it may be hard at times to find the energy. Tell stories, read books and use your interactions to share the ‘true’ story of what happened in a gentle and loving way,” Hlengy urges. Claudia agrees that parents play an important role in a child’s healing process and underscores the importance of listening and validating a child’s feelings. “Let the child know that what they are feeling is allowed,” she reiterates.



### A SAFE WORLD

Claudia urges parents and caregivers to understand that following death or trauma, a child’s world is turned upside down, making routine an important element in establishing feelings of safety and security. She advises sticking to all the normal rituals and routines you had before the death or trauma to help your child feel safe and looked after. Hlengy adds that parents should not be afraid of routines that involved the loved one that was lost, suggesting that these routines should not necessarily be replaced. “It can be healthy and healing to continue with routines that they had with their deceased loved one,” Hlengy explains. “It not only helps them to remember that person, but it honours their memory of that person.” So, if bedtime was usually followed by story-time, or Saturday mornings were reserved for a walk in the local park, then this should continue if at all possible.



### MYTHS & MAYHEM

There are many myths surrounding children and grief in every culture, all of which can cause long-term damage to a child’s emotional and social development. “They can become clinically depressed teenagers, develop personality disorders, hold long-term anger and bitterness, and indulge in antisocial and promiscuous behaviour,” Hlengy explains. What many people don’t realise, she explains further, is that the period of emotional development during childhood is incredibly important for the rest of a child’s life.

**Myth: Avoid the topic of death at all costs.**

Many people try to protect a child from death by not discussing it with the child and not including the child. However, this is not the best approach at all, Claudia explains that talking about death is very



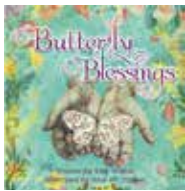
important in the process of helping a child to understand and also enabling them to feel comfortable enough to talk about death, ask questions and share their feelings.

**Myth: Children don't grieve for a long period of time.**

It may take time for the child to understand the concept of death, but the event is recorded in their memory. Children grieve differently. "Children play in order to cope. Because they're playing doesn't mean that they've stopped grieving. And in many cases, the grieving process can occur years later, and especially when there are triggers to the memory," Hlengi shares.

**Myth: Children don't understand death.**

Many times children are ignored in the process, not considered during funerals and left on the sidelines. "Children are very aware of death from a young age; even below the age of five they start to understand the concept of death and are simply trying to make sense of it in their minds," Hlengi states and she suggests always being honest and never assuming that a child doesn't understand.



For more information and help, contact:  
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**BUTTERFLY KISSES**

The title of this article is inspired by the book **'Butterfly Blessings'** by Kim Witkin (Balboa Press, Aug 2012) for the express purposes of opening a dialogue between parents and children about the concept of death. It is simply written with beautiful illustrations that are emotionally laden and cathartic. "It is actually a true story of my own sister's death following a long fight against cancer," explains Kim. "The book covers our childhood, our separate lives as adults and then the story of her death, but the book also looks at the blessings that are still part of our lives after death."

Kim has a keen understanding of how difficult it is for many families to talk about death and loss, especially because Kim and her sister both had young children at the time of her sister's death. "I believe the book is valuable for children, but also for adults." It takes an inherently challenging subject, simplifies it beautifully, and uses the powerful tool of story-telling to promote the healing of the reader. To find out more about purchasing a copy of this book, e-mail Kim directly on [kimwitkin@hotmail.com](mailto:kimwitkin@hotmail.com).

**WHEN IS A LOSS TOO SMALL?**

According to Hlengi, no loss is ever too small. Whether it be the death of a pet, a nanny that is replaced, a friend who leaves school, or a special toy that is broken, no loss is too small to be taken seriously. "Children form attachments to objects, people and animals which sometimes a parent or caregiver cannot always understand." The emotions that a child can feel when losing something they are attached to is literal and looms large, and each loss should be dealt with accordingly. "Don't treat a child as if their emotions don't matter, and never dismiss a child," Hlengi concludes.

**MAMKHULU – THE GRIEVING CHILDREN**

Mamkhulu is a local non-profit organisation that was created by Heather Stephens, a 66-year-old Canadian-born teacher and trainer, the aim to assist children-in-need to deal with trauma and death. Heather is the volunteer Chief Operating Officer of the section 21 company, based in Nelspruit that uses tools such as personal story-telling through youth support networks manned by trained facilitators, as well as hosting support camps and having support groups in schools.

The idea behind Mamkhulu is to create the much-needed support for children who often have no caring and loving adult in their life to assist them to deal with their loss and to move through it. "Many children feel guilt and even sometimes shame, especially if their loved one died of AIDS, so it is terribly difficult for these children to cope," Heather explains. In addition, Mamkhulu has found that many children are pushed onto extended families who are already overstretched and they end up suffering abuse and are even forced to work like slaves to pay for their space in a new home. "A lot of abuse happens in these instances," Heather reveals, "and the child has not even started to deal with the death of their loved one, they end up feeling totally alone."

The loss that a child suffers is difficult enough, but the additional social, emotional and financial challenges that vulnerable children in need face compound the challenges tenfold. If you would like to find out more about how you could assist, or if you are interested in the Mamkhulu programme for your community, please visit [www.mamkhulu.org](http://www.mamkhulu.org) for more information or e-mail [mamkhuluheather@gmail.com](mailto:mamkhuluheather@gmail.com). 