**Grief & Loss Counseling**

**Book Report: When Dinosaurs Die**

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*When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* is a children's book that is part of the "Dino Life Guides for Families" series. The book is written by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown, authors of the popular Arthur television show and book series. *When Dinosaurs Die* has been in print for almost 20 years, and is well known and well used by counselors and families alike. Reading through the book and also through some commentary online, I was a little surprised to find that there are strong opinions both for and against this book.

First, let me explain the overall structure of *When Dinosaurs Die*. It is written in a question and answer style, covering a variety of topics such as: what it means to be alive and dead, some common causes for death, how grief feels, saying goodbye, rituals and customs, what happens after death, and ways to remember. The style allows the reader to skip in and out of topics; it does not need to be read cover to cover in chronological order. Thus, the reader can gauge the needs of the child or children and adjust the pages read accordingly. However, it can certainly be read in its entirety, particularly if the topic of death is a general one and the audience is mature enough to handle the content.

Some of the many strengths of *When Dinosaurs Die* include: the straightforward and frank discussion of death, the illustrations with dialogue that support the text, and the lists of coping skills, rituals, and a great list of ways to remember someone. The open and direct style of discussing death is refreshingly different than many books on the same topic whose audience is children. But while many children's books use veiled metaphors and avoid discussion of causes or physical affects of the body, *When Dinosaurs Die* discusses topics that many adults wouldn't even think to discuss with other adults, much less a child (at least in the dominant, mainstream culture of America). The book allows adults the opportunity to discuss the questions many children have, which is a nice focus for the possibly grieving adult who may have difficulty bringing up topics on their own. The question and answer format and the glossary of terms also encourages children to ask further questions that may not be included in the book, rather than having a pat answer or closure that inhibits discussion at the end of other children's books. The illustrations, consisting of cartoon dinosaurs in clothes, also soften the reality of the topic slightly; having illustrations or pictures of humans could potentially trigger readers more than the authors likely intended. However, the illustrated dinosaurs are depicted in human context and in dialogues typical of grieving families, thus making them more relatable. For example, a child asks if he will get sick and die like his uncle, and his older sister replies that it is unlikely. For young children, the dialogue of real world, concrete examples can be more helpful than the more abstract text. Another great feature of When Dinosaurs Die are the lists that are provided. One list is of activities children can engage in when they are feeling mad, in ways that will keep them from getting into trouble. The book also covers a variety of customs and rituals in which people (or dinosaurs) engage to say goodbye to the person who has passed. The book ends with the many ways in which a child can remember a loved one, including making a scrapbook, planting a tree in their honor, and including him/her in drawings.

Reading online comments about this book made me realize that its format requires the adult reader to consider their audience before presenting it. I should also stress that it would be imperative that the adult sit with the child as they read; handing this book to a child to read on their own is not recommended. Some considerations to make are the type of death (i.e., illness, suicide, accident), the stage of grief and developmental age of the audience, and the treatment of elderly people in the book. It is important to note that the book is frank in its coverage of the violence of war and physical accidents, substance abuse, suicide, and the death of babies and children. While this can be very helpful if the loved one died in such a manner, it may cause further questions or even trauma for children whose loved one died in a different manner. It might be best for the adult reader to use their judgment and skip over certain parts that do not pertain to the audience's experience. Consideration of the age and grief of the audience is also important. Children who have not experienced a loss of any kind will engage with this text much differently than a child who just lost a loved one. Additionally, a 3 year old will respond differently than an 11 year old to the text, so the adult reader should be prepared to answer different questions from different age groups. Finally, a point that was made on online discussions that I would not have considered is that way in which the book addresses elderly people. The book implies that you will die when you are old, and several online readers stated that the children became preoccupied with worry that older friends and family would die soon. Thus, it would be important to stress with children that many people live to see 90 or 100 nowadays, so there is no reason to think that people will die simply because they are older. Taking these considerations into account would make this book ideal for discussing death with children.

The book *When Dinosaurs Die* is a refreshingly open book for children that avoids sentimentality and provides truthful answers and helpful suggestions for coping skills. With some considerations on the part of the adult reader, I would highly recommend this book in the constellation of books about grief for any therapist or parent.