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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC,  
INTELLECTUAL, AND EXPERIENTIAL VARIABLES  
AND FEAR OF DEATH IN CHILDREN

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A THESIS  
PRESENTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF ARTS

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by  
VANESSA MARIA HAWKINS  
SEPTEMBER, 1978

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INTELLECTUAL, AND EXPERIENTIAL VARIABLES  
AND FEAR OF DEATH IN CHILDREN

by

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## ABSTRACT

The taboo on the subject of death is slowly being lifted bringing about more studies on the cognitive and emotional aspects of death. The present study focused on fear of death. Fear of death has been described as a universal sentiment. It is thought to have an effect on much of man's behavior. Therefore the study of fear of death is desirable in order to better understand human emotions and behavior. Much of the existing research has focused on adults, establishing relationships between fear of death and many variables. The research with children has centered around the cognitive development of the concept of death. Little research has been directed toward emotional reactions of young children. This study examined a number of variables in relation to their influence on fear of death in children: age, sex, IQ, objective knowledge about death, stability of the home environment, actual experience and discussion experience. Subjects were ninety children, ages 3 to 11, who were attending a public school or day care center. After permission for participation was obtained, information on the variables in question was gathered by individually administered tests and a parental questionnaire. The Beauchamp Fear of Death Scale (1974) was the dependent measure. An analysis of the results revealed that age, intellectual levels, and socioeconomic status were significantly related to fear of death. Following the stages of concept development reported in the literature, it was found that fear of death was highest at the 6 to 8 year

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old level. Intellectual levels and socioeconomic status were negatively correlated with fear of death. Discussion of results and implications for future research to determine causal relationships and to aid in developing better death education for parents and children were included.

## INTRODUCTION

Life gets its inner meaning only by the  
ever present knowledge of inevitable death.

Heidegger (1934)

All people must come to terms with the inevitability of death as part of the human condition. Relatively little is known, however, about how a human being copes with the idea that he may suddenly cease to exist. The emotions aroused by death are intense and broad - fear, sorrow, anger, despair, avarice and triumph. The most common one is fear (Hinton, 1967). Fear of death has been described as a universal sentiment (Becker, 1973; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Biren, 1968; Alexander and Alderstein, 1958; Caprio, 1950). Becker (1973) elaborated by stating that fear of death is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune. Differences emerge however in its intensity and manifestations.

Of the suggested components of fear of death, Carson (1974) included fear of separation, of being forgotten and of leaving unfinished business. Additional adult fears listed by Beauchamp (1974) are the fear of the unknown, apprehension concerning loss of things we enjoy in life, the end of opportunities to achieve goals and to finish projects we hold dear, fear of losing control, fear of punishment and fear of what will become of one's dependents. The present research attempted to add some knowledge to the existing findings about fear of death by examining certain variables that may influence fear of death in children. A review of some pertinent dimensions in the research of this topic follows.



### Methods of Investigation: Adults

The study of fear of death has posed many problems to researchers. This is due mainly to the fact that we are dealing with feelings. Feelings are generally complex and are therefore not conducive to facile or accurate verbal expression. Some individuals view probing into the area of fear of death as an invasion of privacy and consequently may be unwilling to give accurate answers.

Investigators have used many different kinds of populations and various techniques to study fear of death. The techniques used to measure fear of death have been partially surveyed by Lester (1967). Direct methods that have been used include questionnaires and interviews. In questionnaires it is possible that the replies may be unrepresentative of the actual beliefs of the subjects and so it is desirable to check the replies by interviewing the subjects. Middleton (1936) made use of a questionnaire in his study of attitudes toward death among college students as did Schilder (1936) in his work with murderers. Other direct methods of measurement of fear of death are forced-choice rating scales and checklists of death attitudes. These scales and checklists have the advantage of relying less on the subjective interpretations of the examiners and several have shown impressive validity and reliability. Some of the better known scales include Lester's Fear of Death Scale (1967), Templer's Death Anxiety Scale (1970), Boyar's Fear of Death Scale (1960), Sarnoff and Corwin's Death Questionnaire (1959), and Dickstein's Death Concern Scale (1972).

Other studies have used projective techniques. These measures have the drawback of being more subjective in their scoring and interpretation. The Thematic Apperception Test has been used by Rhudick and Dibner (1961) to measure preoccupation with death. The use of the TAT involves the questionable assumption that themes involving death indicate a preoccupation with death. Shrut (1958) used a sentence completion test to measure death concern. Indirect methods include Christ's (1961) word association test used to measure response latency to "death" words in an elderly population. Alexander and Alderstein (1958) used both response latency and GSR readings to measure anxiety in response to "death" words.

#### Adult Studies

A brief survey of the adult studies on fear of death show that many variables and populations have been investigated and many conflicting results has been found. Middleton (1936) used the questionnaire method to study attitudes of college students toward death. In his study of males and females ages 15-24 he found 12% had a strong fear of death, 25% were absolutely unafraid and 62% were indifferent. He found no significant sex differences. However, many other studies (Templer and Ruff, 1971; Templer et al. 1971; Lester, 1971; and Lawry, 1966) using different techniques have consistently found females to report higher levels of fear of death than males. One explanation for this rather consistent finding may be that in our society women tend to acknowledge their feelings more freely than men.



Considering other factors that influence fear of death Christ (1961), Swenson (1961), Rhudick and Dibner (1961), Cox (1972), Hardt (1975) and Jeffers et al. (1961) found age to be a non-significant factor. These studies have mainly involved people over forty. Fallon (1976) however found a significant negative correlation between age and fear of death when looking at a younger age group (12 to 17 years). Dumont and Foss (1972) hypothesized age to be a significant factor. They stated that people who most fear death are between the ages of 40 and 60. During these years there is much to live for and much to be accomplished yet death is viewed as rapidly approaching. Young adults and adolescents appear to fear death least because they can be reasonably sure of a full life ahead and death is not perceived as an immediate threat. However it has been shown (as will be discussed later) that children do fear death, sometimes with great intensity.

Pandey (1974) found no race differences in attitudes toward death. In occupational groups physicians and soldiers have been the only groups studied who show higher fear of death scores than other professional groups. Constant exposure to death has been offered as one explanation (Dumont and Foss, 1972). It has also been suggested that fear of death may have played a role in the choice of profession by physicians (Feifel et al. 1967). That is that they chose to be physicians due to their higher fear of death and a need to confront this fear. Cerny (1975) found significantly less fear of death in Christian groups as compared to non-Christian groups. Swenson (1961) found that an urban or rural setting had no effect on attitudes toward death. Jeffers et al. (1961) found

that low intelligence was associated with higher fear of death. Lester (1967) concluded from his survey of studies that as mental age or IQ increases fear of death is reduced. Hardt (1975) found that the lower socioeconomic status people had low death concern which he hypothesized as a lack of concern about the future and a reluctance to deal with death as an inevitable conclusion to life.

### Fear of Death and Children

What about children? Anyone who has listened to children talking and playing among themselves knows they are well aware of death. The modern day child has access to television, radio, movies, the press and is informed, often mis-informed, of death and disasters, violence and sensational destruction throughout the world. Still, this age group (ages 3 to 11) has had minimal research attention with regards to fear of death. Ross (1966) found the main component of fear of death in children to be fear of separation. Caprio (1950) felt that children's fear of death includes components of the fear of going to sleep and not waking up, of being killed by burglars, or drowning and of ghosts from the dead.

### Methods of Investigation: Children

There are inherent problems in measurement of fear of death in children under the age of 11. The reading, writing, and comprehension required for the forced-choice questionnaires and checklists are for the most part too complex. The method of choice for use with young children has been interviews (Anthony, 1940; Nagy, 1948; Peck, 1966, Bolduc, 1972; Melear, 1973). Other methods include essays (asking the child to write down everything that



comes to mind about death) or drawings of death (Nagy, 1948; Maures, 1964). As one can see, most of the indicators used to investigate fear of death in children have been gross and involved mainly clinical judgments in interviews, discussions and fantasy productions. The data do not lend themselves easily to quantification or reliability checks. An interesting development is Beauchamp's Death Perception Questionnaire (Beauchamp, 1974) which combines pictures and questions that are presented orally, and has the advantage of being scored to give an objective measure of death perception. This questionnaire has not been used since its recent development. Beauchamp established its validity by correlating scores from her scale with clinical ratings of interviews and drawings in a pilot study for her dissertation. She reported significant positive correlations (no figures given).

Ethics must always be a consideration when the subjects are children. Investigating fear of death could be a stressful experience and the rights of the individual (such as to understand the nature of the study and to cease participation at any time) must be protected.

#### Cognitive Awareness of Death

The major area of research with children has been concerning the development of cognitive awareness or knowledge of death. This involves understanding the concepts of causality, irreversibility and universality in relation to death. Nagy (1948) studied children ages 3 to 10 using essays, drawings and discussions. She found three stages of development: children ages 3 to 5 deny death as a regular process, children ages 5 to 8 see death as

a person, children ages 9 and above see death as a recognized process which takes place in us, the dissolution of bodily life. Melear (1964) studied children ages 3 to 12 using the interview method and found an age progression through 4 stages: a) a relative ignorance about death, b) death is a temporary state, c) death is final but the dead still function biologically, d) death is final with the cessation of all biological functioning. Steiner (1965) also found stages in the development of the concept of death: children ages 4 to 5 deny thoughts of death but admit to play and dreams about death which they do not see as universal; ages 7 to 8 accept personal death, placing it in the remote future; ages 11 to 12 acknowledge death as a universal and as applicable to them. Beauchamp (1974) found children as young as 5 have a somewhat clear picture of death as far as the concepts of causality, irreversibility and universality are concerned.

Emotional Involvement: Fear

The above studies show that during the ages of 3 to around 11 the child develops the cognitive awareness of death. Is there emotional involvement that accompanies this period of concept development? Griffin (1935) felt that although the child's thoughts about death are vague, the greatest fear in childhood is fear of death. Anthony (1972) found that the thought of death is a source of anxiety to children at a very young age. Beauchamp (1974) found fear of death to be high in a group of 3 year olds. Caprio (1950) felt apprehension and fear of death become apparent around the age of 5 while the concept of death was ill-formulated. McCully (1963) and Waechter (1969) found



young children with fatal illnesses had a morbid concern with death and high fear of death ratings.

### Children Studies

The conclusions about death attitudes in children are that individuals pass from a state of non-awareness to an increasingly clear conception of death. Underlying the development of death attitudes is a strong emotional component of fear. One of the remaining questions is which factors influence the intensity of fear of death in children under the age of 12. This age period when death attitudes are developing has been almost neglected. Mitchell (1967) states that from the moment of birth the external environment, which is a complex of physical, mental, emotional and social factors will modify the child's inherited and congenital make up and will be reflected in the child's attitudes about all things, including death. Conflicting results have been found regarding many of the variables studied. Chronological age has been shown by some to have no significant influence on fear of death scores in the young age range (Jennings, 1976; Hardt, 1975). This is consistent with the majority of adult studies. Others have shown age to be a strong factor with the existence of a negative correlation between age and fear of death (Fallon, 1976; Cox, 1972; Beauchamp, 1974). One study (Melear, 1973), looking at the concept development of death, found a positive correlation between age and fear of death.

Sex differences in the children studies of fear of death have been found by Raubo (1971) using interviews and questionnaires and Iammarino (1975) using the Death Anxiety Scale. They found females to exhibit higher fear of death scores

than males which is consistent with adult studies. Others (Fallon, 1976; Cox, 1972; Hardt, 1975; Beauchamp, 1974) found no sex differences on fear of death scores.

The relationship of IQ and fear of death scores with children has been consistent with adult studies. Beauchamp (1974) and Maurer (1964) found that children with higher IQ and achievement levels yielded lower fear of death scores. This is similar to adult findings (Jeffers et al. 1961; Lester, 1967).

Other variables of interest include SES, objective knowledge about death, the stability of the home environment, the opportunity to discuss the topic of death, and actual experience with death. Little, if any, research has been done relating these variables to fear of death in children, although several authors have suggested their possible importance. Hardt (1975) found that adults in the lower SES levels were less concerned with death and posited that they were less fearful. Tallmer et al. (1974), studying children ages 3 to 9, concerning their conception of death found lower SES subjects had a more adequate concept of death. This was felt to suggest the presence of less fear. Objective knowledge about death in relation to fear of death has not been extensively studied. Most people believe the more one knows about a thing the less one fears it. Mills, et al. (1976), going along with this view, suggest that increased knowledge about various aspects of death can serve to reduce fears and misunderstanding. Beauchamp (1974) showed that 3 to 5 year olds who understood the concepts of universality, causality and irreversibility did show less fear.

The stability of the home environment has been shown to have great influence on emotions and behavior. Clinical experience with children has



produced evidence of the negative results of an unstable home environment, resulting in phobias, anxieties and behavioral problems. One might hypothesize that the home environment would have an effect on fear of death. Iammarino (1975) found that 9th graders living with only one parent had significantly higher death anxiety than children living with both parents. Cox (1972) found that the marital status of adults was a good predictor of fear of death. Married individuals were less fearful than divorced or separated individuals. Elderly people who live in familiar stable surroundings have been shown by Dumont and Foss (1972) to be less fearful of death than those who live in hospitals, rest homes or nursing homes. These studies suggest that the home environment and fear of death are related and that the more stable situations are conducive to less fear.

Since the topic of death has become more openly discussed today the idea of how much and when to discuss death with children has arisen. Many hypotheses about the pro's and con's of discussing death with children have been given but without much empirical data. Kubler-Ross (1974) stated that many parents avoid the topic of death on the pretext that it will be too much for the children. The children are often told unconvincing lies and unbelievable stories. This hesitancy on the part of parents often reflects the parents own inabilities to cope with death. Dumont and Foss (1972) felt that parents are unwilling or unable to discuss death with their children in a manner that will not produce anxiety. In fact, by evasion and deception parents appear to be harming rather than helping their children in the development of their view of death. Mills et al. (1976) stated that it is likely that a child's ability to cope

with a particular death may be facilitated if prior discussions of death in general have taken place. Kubler-Ross (1974) felt strongly that more harm is done by avoiding the issue of death with children than by taking the time to sit, listen and share. Mills et al. (1976) asserted that it is more helpful to permit the young to inquire about death and to share memories, observations and feelings with adults.

Actual experience with death has also been suggested to be related to fear of death. Typically, a person's first contact with death comes quite early in life, between the ages of 3 and 8. This can be a pet, family member or close friend. Without these direct experiences the child discovers death in more indirect ways (T.V., overhearing discussions, play). Individuals have reported a wide range of responses to the direct initial contacts with death including curiosity, awe, wonder, and fear (Dumont and Foss, 1972). Bolduc (1972) has shown that young people (ages 9 to 14) who had experienced the death of a parent or sibling had a better understanding of the concept of death. However, looking at the relationship of actual experience with death to fear of death, Langer (1976) and Lester and Kam (1971) discovered that people who have been exposed to death exhibit higher fear of death scores. In contrast Feifel and Branscomb (1973), on the other hand, found experience with death to have no effect on the level of fear of death (in a group of adults).

On the basis of current research, it is apparent that few conclusions can be made about variables that influence the intensity of fear of death in childhood. The data concerning which variables correlate with fear of death

are sparse and conflicting results have been found. The purpose of the present research was to relate fear of death scores of children ages 3 to 11 to age, sex, IQ, SES, objective knowledge about death, stability of the home environment, and experience with death (discussing and actual). The aim was to clarify existing findings and add some new knowledge about possible relationships. It is hoped that this knowledge will prompt future researchers to look for causal relationships. As Nelson and Peterson (1975) stated, death is a real but often frightening and emotionally charged matter to young children. The more that is learned about fear of death in childhood and the factors that are related and possibly influence the level of this fear, the better professionals and parents can help children to cope with it.



### Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between fear of death and several basic demographic, intellectual, and experiential variables in a young population. Children ages 3 to 11 were chosen because this is the period of cognitive and emotional involvement and also the time when interventions to lessen the fear of death could be most effective.

**Dependent Variable:** Fear of death score - measured by the Beauchamp  
Fear of Death Scale (Beauchamp, 1974)

**Independent Variables:**

1. Age - 3 years to 11 years
2. Sex - Males and females
3. IQ - as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn, 1959)
4. SES - as measured by the U. S. Bureau of Census Scale (1963)
5. Stability of home environment - as measured by the marital status of the child's parents and the living arrangement of the child determined by parental questionnaire. This variable was not analyzed statistically due to the great diversity between the number of subjects in each group. (Mean fear of death scores, standard deviations, and number of subjects for each level of these groupings are presented in Table 10.)
6. Objective knowledge about death - as measured by the score on a 5 question test developed for this study.
7. Actual experience with death - family member, close friend and/or pet determined by parental questionnaire.
8. Experience of discussing death with parents - determined by parental questionnaire.

Hypotheses:

1. Three age groups (divided to parallel the stages of concept development) will not differ significantly in their fear of death scores.
2. Males and females do not differ significantly on their fear of death scores.
3. There is no significant correlation between IQ and fear of death scores.
4. There is no significant correlation between SES and fear of death scores.
5. There is no significant correlation between objective knowledge about death and fear of death scores.
6. Children who have experienced the death of a family member, close friend, or pet do not differ significantly on fear of death scores from children who have not had this experience.
7. Children who have discussed death with their parents do not differ significantly on fear of death scores from children who have not discussed death.

## Method

### Subjects and Design

Ninety children, 45 girls and 45 boys, served as Subjects. The age range was 3 years to 11 years. There were 10 Subjects at each age level, 5 males and 5 females. (See Table 1 for Subject distribution.) The children were volunteers from a public school and day care center located in a southern city of 40,000 people.

### Materials and Procedures

Permission was obtained for the children to participate in this study from school administrators through interviews and from parents through letters. (See Appendix D) Fifteen parents refused to allow their children to participate. (See Table 2 for distribution of refusals by age and sex.) After the permission forms were returned the children were given a description of the study. They were told that they would be asked to volunteer to take some tests that involved seeing some pictures and answering some questions, and that some of the questions would examine their feelings about death. The children were then given the opportunity to volunteer. Because of the nature of the subject matter and in line with the ethics of research the option to stop participation was left open at all times during the study. The volunteers' names were accepted by the examiner from the teachers until the age and sex requirements were filled. Parental questionnaires were then sent home with each child.



The measure of fear of death was Beauchamp's Fear of Death Scale taken from the Beauchamp Death Perception questionnaire (Beauchamp, 1974). (See Appendix A) This instrument was chosen as the dependent variable due to objective scoring, reported validity, ease of administration, and use with a wide age range. The children answered Yes or No to 10 questions which accompanied 10 pictures. The answers were scored objectively with a high score indicating a high fear of death. The maximum score was 10 points.

Socioeconomic status (SES) was determined using the procedure specified by the U. S. Bureau of Census Scale (1963). The score was determined by the occupation and education of the major wage earner in the home.

Table 1

Distribution of Subjects by Age, by Sex

Sex	Age in Years									Total
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Males	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45
Females	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45
Total	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	90

Table 2

Distribution of Parental Refusals by Age, by Sex

Sex	Age in Years									Total
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Males	1		2	2	1		1		1	8
Females	1	1		1		2		2		7
Total	2	1	2	3	1	2	1	2	1	15

The measure of IQ was the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn, 1959). This test gives a measure of the child's IQ by testing his receptive vocabulary. This test was also chosen because of its wide age range (2-1/2 years to 18 years) and because of the ease of administration.

Objective knowledge about death was measured by a questionnaire consisting of 5 questions. A correct response is scored in such a way that a high score means more objective knowledge about death. (See Appendix B)

Age, sex, marital status of parents, living arrangements of the child, actual experience with death and discussion experience was determined by a parental questionnaire. (See Appendix C)

The tests were administered in individual sessions in a quiet room provided by the schools. A relaxed atmosphere was provided and every effort was made to reduce any anxieties which the children might have had about being alone with the examiner.

#### Statistical Procedures

The following statistical procedures (column 2) were used to analyze the variables (column 1) investigated in this study.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Statistical Procedure</u>
Age - 3 to 5 yrs. 6 to 8 yrs. 9 to 11 yrs.	ANOVA (1 x 3)
Sex - males females	ANOVA (1 x 2)
IQ	Pearson Product Moment Correlation
SES	Pearson Product Moment Correlation

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Statistical Procedure</u>
Objective Knowledge	Pearson Product Moment Correlation
Age, IQ, SES, Obj. Know.	Multiple Regression
Actual Experience - family member/friend pet	ANOVA (one way) ANOVA (one way)
Discussion Experience	ANOVA (one way)



## Results

There were seven hypotheses under consideration in this study.

They were as follows: 1) the three age groups will not differ significantly in their fear of death scores, 2) males and females will not differ significantly on their fear of death scores, 3) there is no significant correlation between IQ and fear of death scores, 4) there is no significant correlation between SES and fear of death scores, 5) there is no significant correlation between objective knowledge about death and fear of death scores, 6) children who have experienced the death of a family member, close friend, or pet do not differ significantly on fear of death scores from children who have not had this experience, 7) children who have discussed death with their parents do not differ significantly on fear of death scores from children who have not discussed death.

The age variable was analyzed by dividing the children into 3 age groups that parallel the stages of development in understanding the concept of death established by the literature. The stages are 3 to 5 years, 6 to 8 years and 9 to 11 years. Analysis of variance procedures indicated a significant main effect for age and fear of death. (See Table 3) The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. Further examination of mean differences by Scheffe tests was performed and it was determined that the middle age children (6 to 8 years) had significantly higher fear of death scores ( $p < .05$ ) than older children (9 to 11 years) but did not differ significantly from the younger children (3 to 5 years). The younger group did not differ significantly on fear of death scores from the older group of children.



Table 3

Summary of ANOVA and Scheffe Results  
For the Age Variable

Source	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	D.F.	F Ratio	Sign.
Treatment	54.5	27.25	2	6.174	.01
Within	384	4.414	87		
Total	438.5		89		

Scheffe

Group Comparison	t	Sign.
Young (3 to 5) to Middle (6 to 8)	-1.107	ns
Young (3 to 5) to Old (9 to 11)	2.343	ns
Middle (6 to 8) to Old (9 to 11)	3.45	.05

The second hypothesis under consideration dealt with the influence of sex upon children's fear of death. ANOVA results indicated that there was no significant difference between the fear of death scores of boys and girls. The null hypothesis is accepted. (ANOVA results are presented in Table 4.)

The third hypothesis questioned the possible relationship between IQ and fear of death scores. The Pearson Product-Moment technique was employed to correlate Subjects' scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test with fear of death scores. (The findings are presented in Table 5.) There was a negative correlation between fear of death and IQ scores which was significant at the .02 level. Higher IQ scores tended to go with lower fear of death scores, and lower IQ scores went with higher fear of death scores. The null hypothesis was rejected.

SES was examined in relation to fear of death scores. Again the Pearson Product Moment technique was employed to correlate the SES scores with the fear of death scores. These results are presented in Table 5. A negative correlation was found between the two variables which was significant at the .002 level. Higher SES scores went with lower fear of death scores and lower SES scores went with higher fear of death scores. The null hypothesis was rejected.

The fifth hypothesis examined objective knowledge about death in relation to fear of death. (Pearson product-moment correlation results are presented in Table 5.) The correlation was not significant. The null hypothesis was accepted.

Table 4

Summary of ANOVA Results for Sex Variable

Source	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	D.F.	F Ratio	Sign.
Treatment	.15	.15	1	.0241	ns
Within	547.65	6.2233	88		
Total	547.8	6.155	89		

Table 5

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Results  
For IQ, SES, and Objective Knowledge

Variable	Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level
IQ	-.2159	.02
SES	-.2536	.002
Obj. Know.	-.0996	.175



The above variables (excluding sex) were then analyzed by a multiple regression equation to determine which are the strongest predictors of fear of death in children. (The multiple regression results are presented in Table 6.) Presented in order of their strength - Age, SES, and IQ obtained significant regression coefficients ( $p < .05$ ). The regression coefficient for objective knowledge was not significant. The four variables combined accounted for 16.3% of the total variance of the fear of death scores.

The question concerning the importance of actual experience with death (close friend or family member) was analyzed using a one way ANOVA. The ANOVA results indicate no significant differences between fear of death scores for children with this experience ( $n=49$ ) and those without ( $n=41$ ). Results are presented in Table 7. The effect of the death of a pet on fear of death was also examined. (ANOVA results comparing children who had experienced the death of a pet ( $n=53$ ) to those who had not ( $n=37$ ) are reported in Table 8.) No significant difference was found. The null hypothesis was accepted.

The final question concerned the possible influence of experience discussing the topic of death with parents on fear of death of children. Children who had discussed death ( $n=68$ ) and those who had not ( $n=22$ ) were compared on fear of death scores. (ANOVA results are presented in Table 9.) No significant differences were found so the null hypothesis was accepted.

(Mean fear of death scores, standard deviations, and number of subjects in the levels of the variables analyzed are presented in Table 10.)

Table 6

Summary of Multiple Regression Results for  
Age, IQ, SES, and Objective Knowledge

Variable	Multiple R	R Square	RSQ Change	F
Age	.30716	.09435	.09435	9.16727*
SES	.38582	.14886	.05452	7.60798*
IQ	.39782	.15826	.00940	5.38978*
O.K.	.39946	.16305	.00166	3.27286

\* Significant at .05 level

Table 7

Summary of ANOVA Results for  
Actual Experience Variable (Family Member - Close Friend)

Source	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	D.F.	F Ratio	Sign.
Treatment	.409	.409	1	.068	.999ns
Within	525.586	6.041	87		
Total	525.995	5.977	88		

Table 8

Summary of ANOVA Results for  
Actual Experience Variable (Pet)

Source	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	D.F.	F Ratio	Sign.
Treatment	1.683	1.683	1	.270	.999ns
Within	549.034	6.239	88		
Total	550.717	6.188	89		



Table 9

Summary of ANOVA Results for  
Discussion Experience Variable

Source	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	D.F.	F. Ratio	Sign.
Treatment	7.577	7.577	1	1.228	.270ns
Within	543.140	6.172	88		
Total	550.717	6.188	89		

Table 10

Mean Fear of Death Scores, Standard Deviations,  
and Number of Subjects per Groups for Variables  
Analyzed by ANOVA

Variables/Groups	N	Mean Fear of Death Score	Standard Deviations
Entire Sample	90	6.9444	2.4876
Age 1 (3 to 5 years)	30	7.3	2.211
2 (6 to 8 years)	30	7.9	2.116
3 (9 to 11 years)	30	6.03	2.19
Sex Males	45	6.9	2.4
Females	45	7.0	2.5
Marital Status			
Single	2	10.000	0
Married	76	6.776	2.538
Divorced	5	6.600	1.517
Separated	7	8.143	2.116
Living Arrangements			
Both Parents	76	6.776	2.493
Mother Absent	1	10.000	0
Father Absent	13	7.692	2.016
Actual Experience (fam. mem./ friend)			
Yes	49	6.939	2.349
No	41	7.108	2.586
Actual Experience (pet)			
Yes	53	6.830	2.318
No	37	7.108	2.736
Discussion Experience			
Yes	68	6.779	2.430
No	22	7.430	2.650

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is any significant relationship between selected variables and fear of death in children. The variables investigated were age, sex, IQ, SES, objective knowledge about death, actual experience with death and the experience of discussing death with the parents.

Age was found to be significant, specifically children ages 6 to 8 had higher fear of death scores than children ages 9 to 11. No other significant differences between groups were found. Several explanations could account for this finding. Some researchers (Nagy, 1936; Melear, 1963; Steiner, 1965; and Mitchell, 1967) have described this middle stage of development of the concept of death as having bits of knowledge. Children ages 6 to 8 are coming into awareness but still have fantasies and incomplete knowledge. Death is understood to be final but many children during this stage still believe that the dead person functions biologically. This brings fear of suffocation, of being buried alive, and of pain into the picture. It was stated that younger children (3 to 5) do not have enough knowledge to be fearful of death. It is still reversible and avoidable. Becker (1973) feels that the 3 to 5 year old lives in a world of living and acting things. He doesn't know what it means for life to disappear forever, nor does he theorize where it would go. Older children have had more exposure and chances to question and rationalize their feelings. Gesel (1940) states that around 9 the child accepts death realistically without marked interest, realizing the biological essentials. Another



explanation of the higher fear of death scores during the 6 to 8 year old group is that this is the time for leaving home, starting school, making friends, being accepted. All fears could be heightened during this stage.

No significant sex differences were found in this study. This supports the findings of Middleton (1936) and Beauchamp (1974). However, the overwhelming outcome with adults is that females exhibit higher fear of death than males. It seems possible that the sex difference in emotional involvement with death does not emerge until adolescence or after. This is perhaps due to the greater acceptance in our society of the expression of feelings by women than by men.

The finding that fear of death was negatively correlated with IQ is consistent with the adult findings (Lester, 1967; Jeffers et al. 1961). It seems to be true that children and adults with high intellectual capacity fear death less than individuals with lower IQ scores. Among other things, high intellectual capacity is often described as a tendency to be realistic, rational, and less superstitious. These characteristics tend to be associated with less fear. Individuals with high intelligence have greater mental resources with which to cope and accept situations and circumstances.

The negative correlation of fear of death with SES is in the opposite direction to the relationship suggested by Hardt (1975). The present finding suggests that low income groups are concerned with death and do fear it. It appears that there are fundamental differences between individuals in various income levels. Lower income families provide the child with less stimulation, contact

and personal interactions than higher income groups. Children from these lower income families have been shown to have less effective problem-solving abilities and consistently lower IQs than those in higher SES levels. Mothers in lower income families have been shown to be less responsive to their children (Bee, 1974). With all of these factors present, one might hypothesize that lower SES would be associated with higher levels of anxieties and fears in general, since there are fewer opportunities and resources available to dispel these fears.

Objective knowledge was found to be in no way related to fear of death scores. It may well be that simple understanding of the facts and biological process is not enough to reduce the level of fear. Emotional maturity and acceptance must also be present.

The multiple regression equation involving age, IQ, SES and objective knowledge revealed that all of the above variables accounted for only 16.3% of the total variance of the fear of death scores. Age, SES and IQ would appear to be useful as predictors of fear of death in children. Still, other variables are involved. Weaknesses in the testing instrument could be playing a significant role in the scores and it is hoped that future research will uncover these.

The actual experience variables (family member, close friend and/or pet) proved to be insignificant. This is congruent with the findings of Feifel and Branscomb (1973). These results imply that children are aware of death from many sources and that actual experience is not of such impact to increase fear of death above the already present level.



The experience of discussing the topic of death was also found to be an insignificant variable. The implication would appear to be that the parental discussions were not of sufficient impact on children to reduce fears. The relevant point that was not considered in this study was the quality of the discussion. The parental questionnaire needed to include questions that would get at the quality of the interaction. An alternative approach would be to interview the parent and child to determine the details and quality of the parent-child discussions of death. As Dumont and Foss (1972) suggested, parents are often unable to discuss death in an appropriate manner, in a manner that would not produce anxiety. In the present study over two-thirds of the parents said that they had discussed death with their children. It is possible that some of the parents felt this was the "desired" or "appropriate" response and did not accurately reflect the actual occurrence of such discussions. The results of this study also suggest that the parents who did discuss death with their children were not effective frequently enough to cause a decrease in the fear. Possibly this discussion experience could be made effective by training parents and by sharing the responsibility with schools and teachers. Mills et al. (1976) have prepared a book which illustrates a course in death education to be used in elementary schools which suggests an interplay of informational and emotional approaches which would stimulate a deeper understanding and freer expression of children's thoughts and feelings about death. A course could also be designed for parents to guide them in ways to answer children's questions and to allow them to explore their own feelings.



Due to the fact that this study is designed to be correlational and a manipulation of subject variables, no causal relationships may be inferred. It must be realized that this subject group could be biased due to the refusals of the non-participating parents and the volunteer requirement. The most fearful subjects may have been left out. Naturally, the findings have to be considered in terms of the sampling limitations and as being tentative with respect to the broad spectrum of all children. The present investigator feels, nevertheless, that the findings can serve as a fruitful springboard for further research.

It is hoped that further research will be designed to evaluate the quality of the parent's explanations and discussions about death with their children and to determine the effect of these discussions. Also other variables that play a role in the level of fear of death in children are still unknown. Experiments to discover causal factors need to be set up. Future research could be designed to validate and check the reliability on existing measures of fear of death. If repeating this study the present investigator would include a second dependent measure. Beauchamp's questionnaire has not been used extensively. Validity and reliability have not been firmly established. The possible weakness of this instrument could have influenced the results of this study. By having a second dependent measure, a check could have been made on the validity and more strength could be given to the results. Still, the results of this research could help make possible more effective training of parents, teachers, and children. Individual programs and approaches could

be designed for specific needs of various groups. We must grasp the meaning of death for the individual if we are to expand our understanding of behavior and life's patterning (Feifel and Branscomb, 1973).

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APPENDIX A



## BEAUCHAMP FEAR OF DEATH SCALE

Materials: A set of orally presented questions accompanied by pictures.

### Questions:

1. Show me the people who would be frightened if they were dead?
2. If this lady were dying would dying hurt?
3. Are this dog and cat afraid to die?
4. Would it hurt these fish to be dead?
5. These people are not afraid to swim. Would they be afraid to be dead?
6. Would this lady feel frightened if she were dying?
7. Is this dead elephant frightened?
8. Would these pheasants be afraid to be dead?
9. If this boy gets burned it would hurt. If he were dying, would dying hurt?
10. Show me the animals who would be afraid if they were dead.

Pictures: on order

Procedure: The examiner reads each question clearly and in a conversational manner. The subject responds with "yes" or "no" either verbally or with any discriminable indication. Restating or rephrasing a question to make it comprehensible to the child is permitted.

Recording: The examiner puts a check mark in the appropriate column (yes or no) beside the number corresponding to the number of the question. The subject is encouraged to answer each item. If an answer of "I don't know" is given, the examiner might say, "What do you think?" or "Tell me what you think."

Scoring: The object is to determine whether the child exhibits fear, only a yes answer is given a point. The score, then, is the number of yes answers recorded.

BEAUCHAMP FEAR OF DEATH SCALE



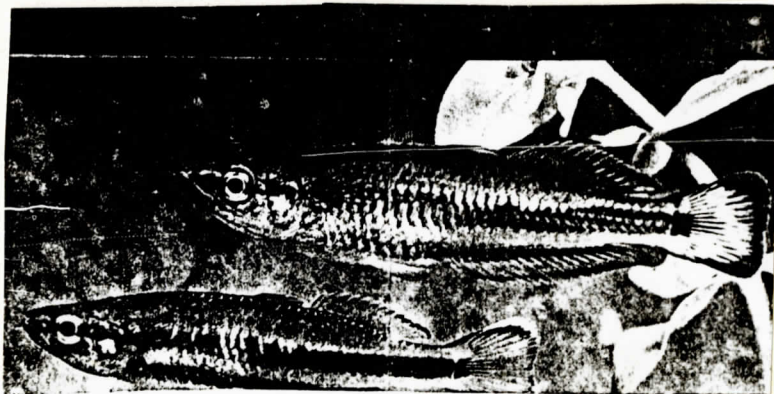
*Show me the people who would be frightened if they were dead.*



*Are this dog and cat afraid to die?*



*This lady is dying. Does dying hurt?*



*Would it hurt these fish to be dead?*





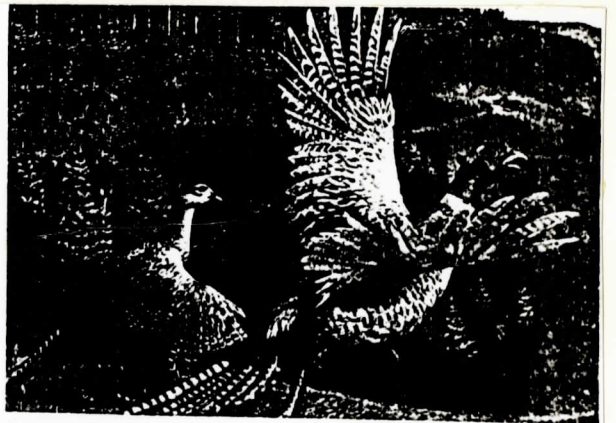
*These children are not afraid to swim. Would they be afraid to be dead?*



*Would this lady feel frightened if she were dying?*

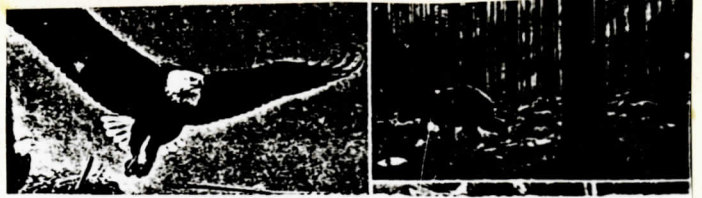


*Is this dead elephant frightened?*

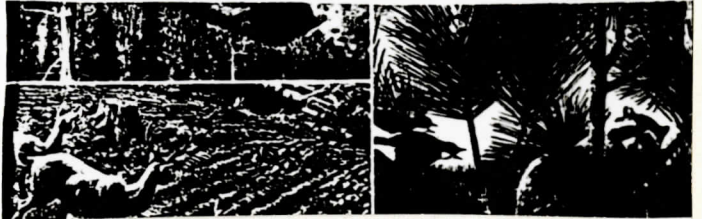


*Would these pheasants be afraid to be dead?*





*Show me the animals who would be afraid if they were dead.*



Fear

Yes

No

1. Show me the people who would be frightened if they were dead?
2. If this lady were dying would dying hurt?
3. Are this dog and cat afraid to die?
4. Would it hurt these fish to be dead?
5. These people are not afraid to swim. Would they be afraid to be dead?
6. Would this lady feel frightened if she were dying?
7. Is this dead elephant frightened?
8. Would these pheasants be afraid to be dead?
9. If this boy gets burned it would hurt. If he were dying, would dying hurt?
10. Show me the animals who would be afraid if they were dead.

Score is total number of yes answers.

APPENDIX B

## OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONNAIRE

**Procedure:** The examiner reads each question clearly and in a conversational manner. The subject responds "yes" or "no" either verbally or with any other discriminable indication. Restating or rephrasing questions to make it comprehensible to the child is permitted.

**Recording:** The examiner puts check in appropriate column (yes or no) beside the number corresponding to the number of the questions.

**Score:** The number of items correctly answered.

Questions:	Score
1. Can people live forever if they wish hard enough?	(no)
2. Do pets die?	(yes)
3. Can a doctor make a dead person well again?	(no)
4. Can people die because they are old?	(yes)
5. Can a person die because her mother gets mad at her or him?	(no)

APPENDIX C



PARENTAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Name of child \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation of mother \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation of father \_\_\_\_\_

Education of mother \_\_\_\_\_

Education of father \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: Single \_\_\_\_\_, Married \_\_\_\_\_, Divorced \_\_\_\_\_  
Separated \_\_\_\_\_.

Child lives with \_\_\_\_\_

The following questions are to determine your child's experience with death.

1. Has your child experienced the death of someone close to him?

yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_.

2. If yes, was it a family member \_\_\_\_\_, close friend \_\_\_\_\_?

3. Has your child experienced the death of a family pet \_\_\_\_\_?

4. Have you at any time discussed the topic of death with your child?

yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_.

Please use this space for comments or clarification of any of the above questions.

APPENDIX D

## LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear parent,

I am a graduate student in clinical psychology at Appalachian State University and am presently working on my Master's thesis. My study is concerned with what factors influence the fear of death in children. It is common knowledge that children are aware of and understand death at a very young age. This knowledge comes through the death of pets, family members, T.V. and play. I am looking at several factors that might influence the level of fear. It is my hope that by learning more about fear of death in children we, as psychologists and parents will be better able to deal with it.

I would like your permission for your child to participate in my study. If you agree, your child will be asked if he or she would like to participate. Your child will be informed that they can discontinue participation at any time if they so desire. The study involves the administration of three scales to your child. One is to measure IQ, The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. One is a five item questionnaire to determine if your child has objective knowledge about death. The other one is a series of ten pictures of animals and people that measures fear of death. This test is in no way stressful. Children who have previously used this test have reported having "fun". The whole process will take about twenty minutes.

I would greatly appreciate your help. Any further questions will be gladly answered.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Hawkins

Yes, my child may participate \_\_\_\_\_.

No, my child may not participate \_\_\_\_\_.

If yes, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire that your child will bring home in the next few days.