

# Children Learn That 'Dying Isn't a Vacation'

BOSTON, Aug. 25 (AP) — Away from the boisterous noise in the rest of building, hushed children listen to dirges, touch a plastic-shrouded dead frog and peer into an open coffin in a museum exhibition that teaches them about death.

The exhibition at the Children's Museum bears a warning, "This is an exhibit about death and loss," and tells children in a videotaped puppet show: "Dying isn't a vacation. It's not like going to visit your grandmother. You don't come back again."

"We have a commitment to children, to make life less threatening to them," said Janet Kamien, who developed the

project with a team of advisers, including child psychologists, authors and clergymen. "Parents have a natural instinct to protect their children from the harsh realities and scary, no-no topics in life. This show provides a vehicle to talk about dying and loss."

Miss Kamien estimates that 450,000 visitors will see the show before it closes in June 1985.

In the exhibition, a television screen repeatedly shows a speeded-up film of maggots devouring a dead mouse. "Everything that is alive now will die, decompose and return to life," a sign says.

In another corner, a series of draw-

ings tells a young boy's memories of his grandfather's death and concludes with, "I still miss him."

A film shows fighting in Lebanon and bloated, bullet-ridden bodies in the streets of El Salvador and contrasts this real death with make-believe death by showing a sneering actor shooting a cowering foe who dies in a pool of blood, but then stands up, laughs and shakes hands with the "gunman" after an off-screen voice shouts: "Cut! It's a take!"

Violence on television "can be scary and confusing, even for adults," a narrator says in an even voice.

Painted in big white letters on one

wall are slang terms for death: "Put to sleep," "Six feet under," "Belly up," "Croaked."

## Most Popular Display

The most popular display is a dead frog entombed in clear plastic, and children run their fingers over its back, touch its eyes, pull its legs.

"This frog must have died 1,000 years ago," one boy told his mother. "Yuk."

Another display, devoted to the rituals of death, includes a gravestone, an empty open coffin, burial robes from various religions, embalming chemicals and makeup used on corpses.

Children can pick up telephones and listen to funeral music from around the world including Bach, the bugle call "Taps" and songs from Africa.

Parents often linger longer than their

children. Asked for their feelings about the show, many children answer, "I don't know." But around the exhibition, children and parents have been encouraged to post their opinions on bulletin boards asking for "talkback."

"I like this exhibit because I love my grandmother dearly and the doctor said she might die," wrote a girl named Lindy. "And I don't want her to so this makes it a little easier."

An 11-year-old wrote: "I think your exhibit is O.K. But when kids come here to have fun it makes them go home with a sad feeling."

And one 8-year-old boy simply said, "I hate thinking about death."

### **Strong Reactions to Show**

The planners designed the show to make sure families did not wander in by accident.

The videotape about violence on television is shown inside a curtained booth with a sign above the entrance saying, "Parental Discretion Is Advised."

Miss Kamien said the show, conceived six years ago by a museum staff member who was dying of cancer, has generated strong responses since it opened in June.

"The reactions have been generally positive with extremes at either end," she said. "Some people have said, 'How dare you present this topic in a children's museum?' and others have said, 'Thank you so much for being brave and courageous enough to do this.'"

"We thought it should be done," she said. "Death is a compelling issue for adults. It's got to be a compelling issue for children."