EXTENDED ABSTRACT

After-Death Communication: Parents’ and Their Children’s Understanding and Meaning-Making

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KEY WORDS: after-death communication; spirituality; parents and children; apparitions

Parents and their children have reported meaningful experiences of after-death communication (ADCs; Jeska, 2012), providing insight into the whole-person dynamic for mental and medical health professionals and spiritual directors when working with their clients. Previous literature on children's ADCs had not addressed the parent-child interrelationship nor apparent ADC occurring in children’s current lives. This qualitative study focused on children’s lived experiences of ADC and their parents’ understanding and meaning-making of those realities. Because I had lived with ADCs all of my life, I resonated with participants and shared in their experiences.

ADCs can be direct or indirect communications between the earthly world and what appear to be other dimensions of reality. These contacts are a reciprocal engagement between a physical, living person...
and a spiritual, non-physical being. ADC is one form of Exceptional Human Experience (White, 1997, 1998). ADC can also be classified as paranormal, indicating that which transcends the human dimension of earthly reality. ADCs have been referred to as apparitions, afterlife encounters, encounters with ghosts, or spirits, and many other societal labels (Streit-Horn, 2011).

An ADC in this study was defined as any type of direct communication that a child experienced with a spirit, angel, ghost, or some other non-material being. Sometimes contacts appeared as symbols such as a butterfly or rainbow. The child may have heard, communicated with, seen, been touched, experienced a scent or odor, and/or just had a felt sense of knowing that the non-physical being was present. The main research questions of the study were: (a) For parents: According to interviews, what is the parent’s experience with his or her child’s after-death communications? Are parents able to find insight and greater understanding into the child’s ADC experiences and also find some meaning for him or herself? Sub-questions included: What observations does a parent make when his or her child is experiencing ADCs? Does a parent understand and accept what and why his or her child is experiencing ADCs? Do parents know how to relate to his or her children who are experiencing ADCs? Does a parent feel supported by the community around the phenomenon of ADC? (b) For children: What is/are the meanings of apparent ADCs as expressed in interviews and/or artwork?

Regarding method, I identified participants by recruiting from Facebook groups, online education portals, word-of-mouth, and posting flyers. Participants were six children (4 males aged 4, 5, 5, and 6 years; 2 females both aged 12 years) and eight parents, all mothers.

Intuitive Inquiry (Anderson, 2000, 2004, 2011a, 2011b; Braud & Anderson, 1998, 2011) and Thematic Content Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied throughout a three-part procedure: (a) parent interview; (b) child interview (optional); and (c) creative expression artwork component with the child (optional). Each participant was interviewed once; each interview lasted from 20 to 60 minutes. In addition to seeking answers to my research questions, I provided a forum for participants to express themselves with the potential for healing and integration of their experiences.

Several themes emerged from parent interviews. Mothers were open, supportive, protective, and comforted with their children’s experiences. They believed their children’s descriptions of their ADCs and believed in validating and listening openly to them. Mothers had
some type of spirituality/spiritual worldview that enabled them to make meaning of the ADCs, including in one case a maternal lineage of ADCs dating back to grandmother; believing in the metaphysical; and themselves having had ADC experiences, including somatic responses, and sharing their stories openly. Mothers were protective of their children and willing to intervene between the spirit and child. They desired education and support from their communities.

Themes that emerged from child interviews included various feelings: comforted by the presence, being paralyzed by fear when observing the spiritual being, and sadness from seeing their loved one that had passed suddenly. Themes about the experience itself included ADCs occurring any time during the day or night, as well as in dreams; a reciprocal interaction between the child and non-material being; material objects observed moving between the child and spirit; seeing lights and symbols representing the spiritual being, and physical sensations in presence of a spirit. Themes about the aftermath of the experience included children typically not feeling supported by peers or in a school setting and all children feeling safe to disclose their experiences in their homes with their mothers.

As a result of my presence as the interviewer, results indicated finding purpose and meaning with the experiences. These interactions appeared to co-create further understanding of death, validity of experiences, and potential for a life mission. The need was identified for further education for parents who have children experiencing ADC as well as for the community.

An opportunity for growth exists for professionals working in the field and provides an expanded frame of reference for guiding clients as opposed to misdiagnosing and/or pathologizing. Distinguishing between an imaginary friend and an ADC, as well as a mental health diagnosis such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, are important in how therapists and spiritual directors move forward with treatment planning. Public education around this topic was an aspect that the parents requested to bring further awareness, as well as providing professionals with resources and support. Suggestions for how to work with clients are included, and the great need for additional resources, education, and public awareness for adults and children is discussed. This research brought the participants’ vulnerability around their ADCs into a more public awareness and brought increased understanding about what they are actually going through and desire from their communities.
References


