

Skeletons in October: Scary Death Symbols or an Opportunity to Teach Bone Anatomy to Young Children?



by *Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FT*

October is the time of year when skeletons come out of hiding to play a prominent role in the celebration of two holidays—Halloween or All Hallows' Eve and El Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead.

As a physician and parent, I enjoy participating in my daughters' classrooms. I realized when my girls were young that Halloween and El Dia de los Muertos are opportune times to introduce bone anatomy to children. As a thanatologist, I also realized that using skeletons in this way could at the same time teach children to be less afraid of skeletons as traditional symbols of death.

Views of Skeletons: For those who celebrate Halloween, skeletons are usually seen as symbols of death and objects to fear. For those in the Hispanic culture, skeletons are viewed as symbols of death, but are not objects of fear. Instead, skeletons are looked upon as a part of life, given as gifts and used as toys. Some may view them even as friends with which to celebrate the lives of those who have died. In the medical field, the skeleton is simply a way to learn bone anatomy. These last two perspectives were the ones that I wanted to share with the students in my daughters' classes.

Teaching with Skeletons: In the fall of 2006, I ordered a large skeleton floor puzzle for my daughters from Learning Resources, an educational resources supplier. As I watched them play with the puzzle, I realized that the puzzle could accomplish both of the aims I just described. I decided to juxtapose teaching skeletal anatomy with the time of the year when skeletons are used in American and Hispanic traditions to symbolize death. I developed several teaching programs for young children ranging in ages from 3 to 9 years using a variety of items and models. Different skeletons were incorporated into the program including puzzles, large plastic models, songs, handouts and a variety of fun items – stickers, pencils, pens, coloring pages and stretchy plastic skeletons.

Over the course of three years the skeletons programs have been presented to seven different classes with more than 120 preschool-aged and elementary school-aged children in classes ranging from preschool to third grade.

There are several desirable outcomes when using skeletons to teach children:

1. To develop other, more realistic views of skeletons and skulls.
2. To learn some basic bone anatomy.
3. To desensitize children to the skeletons used as symbols of death and objects to fear at Halloween and Dia de los Muertos.

Measuring Outcomes - More Indirect than Direct: Measuring direct outcomes for these teaching activities was difficult because these programs were done in the role of a volunteer physician-parent, not a researcher. The indirect outcomes of this teaching activity were much more easily observed in the excited responses of the children. Whatever method was used, in each of the classes where the skeleton activity was presented the children were fascinated. They wanted to interact with the skeleton, sing the songs, learn the names of the bones and ask questions. No one

ran away screaming in fear because we were using a skeleton. With the younger children (preschool through first grade) the large skeleton floor model was used. Once assembled, the skeleton is the height of an average first grader, so the children all wanted to take a turn and size themselves up by comparing their height to that of the skeleton puzzle. The older children (second and third graders) wanted to explore the anatomy model, touch the bones and ask questions about the skeleton and the skull. I worked with the third grade teacher to match the bones taught to their curriculum and the handouts she had for testing purposes.

If this activity had been a formal research project, measuring students' correct responses on a bone anatomy quiz would have been one way to measure the direct outcomes of using skeletons to teach children bone anatomy. Due to the nature of the teaching activity, it is more difficult to measure the direct outcome of whether children may have become more comfortable with, or have been desensitized to, skeletons as death images. I opted to teach the students a more realistic view of skeletons, using the techniques adopted by children's dentists in making the office visit a pleasant experience. Dentists advise parents to not set their children up to be fearful by asking them "Are you going to be brave for the dentist?" Asking a child this type of question may plant the seed of fear in the child's mind. I did not see a need to assess the students beforehand ("Are you afraid of skeletons?") when they may have never thought to be fearful. I focused on using the skeleton as a normal tool to teach anatomy.

Skeletons as Play Toys: The greatest amount of enthusiasm came from the addition of fun skeleton giveaways. I found a variety in our local stores and special ordered some from online sources. Overall, the biggest hit was the plastic, stretchy skeletons. Continuing the tradition of the Day of the Dead where skeletons are given as toys, these giveaways served as fun tangible skeletons that the children could take home. There was also the hope that the children would be excited by the skeleton program and would share what they had learned about skeleton anatomy with their parents.

Recommendations: Based on my experiences teaching over three years with children from preschool through 3rd grade, I found that skeletons used around Halloween and Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) were an effective, interactive and engaging way to get younger children thinking about skeletons in a more normal manner, as part of their own anatomy and to desensitize them to skeletons as symbols of death and depictions to fear. I invite other thanatologists as well to think about creative ways in which to bring your particular expertise into a primary classroom. Sharing your knowledge, and seeing children get excited about – and more comfortable with – death-related topics brings rich rewards.

About the Author

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