

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

By Helen Danielson & Kim Bushaw*

LIVING WITH DEATH

- Death is a reality that children, like all of us, can learn to live with.
- Even before the death of a close family member occurs, parents can begin to introduce the idea of death as a part of everyday life. The nightly news, a trip past the cemetery, or a dead plant or bird may spark conversation about death.
- Start early, be honest and encourage children to talk about their feelings regarding death.
- Periodic conversations about death are important since understanding death is a gradual process. Children will take in the information as they are ready and increase their understanding as they develop.
- Children feel the loss of loved ones just as intensely as adults do, although this grief is often expressed in different ways: through play, art or even acting out.
- Children will cope with grief according to the stressors created by their relationship to the person (or animal) that has died.

AGES AND STAGES

Newborn to 3 Years – Even the youngest children sense when their family routine is disrupted and those around them experience emotional upset. However, infants and toddlers have little understanding of death.

Child's Reaction:

- Changes in sleeping, eating and mood.

How to Help:

- Keep routines and physical setting as familiar as possible.
- Provide constant nurturing. If parent is too distraught, seek a caring adult substitute.

Ages 3 – 6 Years – Typically, a child will not understand that death is permanent. The child may think of it as temporary or magically reversible, or may even appear to be unaffected. Fears that dead people may be cold or hungry in the grave are common. They will ask concrete questions, e.g., Does grandpa have socks on? or Can I call him on the phone?

Child's Reaction:

- May have frightening dreams, repeat questions about death, revert to earlier behaviors.
 - Children may play out the events surrounding the death. Children this age will take words literally. Since children have limited experiences, they make sense of the world by connecting events that don't relate. For example: Aunt Sally died from a headache. Daddy says he has a headache. Maybe he will die, too.
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How to Help:

- Look into the child's eyes and touch the child gently when discussing a death.
- Shorten time away from the child. Be sure he knows where you are and how to reach you.
- Avoid words such as *sleeping, resting, loss, passed away, taking a long trip*.
- Talk about what it means to be dead in concrete terms such as *someone doesn't breathe, eat, go to the bathroom or grow*.
- Repeat simple, honest explanations as often as the child asks.
- Reassure the child of his own safety and your plan for continued presence. Share that most people die when they are older.
- Allow expressions of feelings such as drawing pictures, reading and telling stories about death or the loved one, or reenacting the funeral service.

Ages 6 – 9 Years – A child this age may view death as something that comes and takes people away or can be caught like a cold. Some children may still think the dead person will return. Guilt may make a child feel responsible for the death through her own wishful thinking (*I wish he would die!*), harsh words (*You'll be the death of me yet.*) or not doing something (*I didn't help Grandpa mow the lawn. Now he died.*). Fears related to death may arise.

Child's Reaction:

- The child may feel distressed, confused and sad or show no signs at all. Fear of abandonment by other family members is common.
- Often these children are obsessed with the causes of death, as well as the physical processes to the body after death.

How to Help:

- Be a good listener. Correct any confusing ideas the child may have.
- Provide play opportunities and routine.
- Reassure the child the death was not her fault.
- Provide opportunities to open discussion with a quiet child by reading stories related to death.
- A child who chooses not to talk about the death may be comfortable writing or drawing her thoughts in a journal.
- Reassure that God was not surprised by the death, but had prepared a place and was with them.

Ages 9 – 12 Years – Preteens have a better understanding on the permanence of death. Some children in this age range may appear to be unaffected by death on the surface. They may see death as a punishment for bad deeds.

Child's Reaction:

- Anger directed at a variety of people: self, parents, others, the person who died, siblings.
 - Guilt and grief stem from the anger as do feelings of responsibility.
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How to Help:

- Assure him that the person didn't die because he was "bad."
- Talk about the ways in which things are different and how they are the same.
- Reassure the child he did not cause the death.

Teens – Teens have an adult-like understanding of the finality of death and realization that everyone will die. They may inappropriately assume responsibility for adult concerns, such as family and financial well-being. Teens may assume the roles of the deceased person or deny feelings and express anger which creates added pain.

Teen's Reaction:

- May feel confused, responsible, helpless, angry, sad, lonely, afraid or guilty.

How to Help:

- Talk to the teen without criticizing or judging.
- Express your own feelings about the death.
- Guard against letting the teen assume adult responsibilities and reassure him of his roles.
- Reassure the teen that he did not cause the death.
- Continue to support and listen to the teen's feelings although he may appear to be handling it.
- Allow time for solitude and reflection. Be available to talk on the teen's time frame.

SHOULD YOUNG CHILDREN GO TO THE FUNERAL HOME?

Yes, if they are prepared for what they will see, who will be there, how people may be feeling and what they will be doing. For young children, be specific in your descriptions of what the surroundings will look like. For example, describe the casket and clothes and that the body will be lying still, not able to breathe or talk. Answer questions and encourage the child to go with you. Bring along someone to care for the child if you are distraught.

Going to the Funeral Home:

- Provides structure for early grieving.
- Helps bring a sense of closure.
- Provides a place to vent emotions and receive support from family and friends.
- Includes the child so she doesn't feel angry or left out.

SHOULD YOUNG CHILDREN ATTEND THE FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE?

Yes, funerals and memorial services provide needed rituals. But children of any age should not be forced to participate. Other rituals that may be helpful include remembering the loved one's birthday and reviewing photos and keepsakes to be reminded of the loved one.

Although Children of Varying Ages have Differences, there are Common Threads:

- Share information at the child's level of understanding. Find out what the child understands. Don't assume what is known.
- Talk about and accept feelings.
- Share rituals.
- Be available for ongoing discussions since mourning is a process. Admit that you do not have all the answers.
- Share information in doses the child can handle, small bits at a time. Let the child know it is OK to be angry, OK to be mad.
- Allow the child or teen to be silent about this issue.

* Danielson, H. and Bushaw, K. Talking to children about death. FS-441 (Revised). North Dakota State University. NDSU Extension Service. April 1995.
