

# ***HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH***



Death is often a very difficult subject for parents to discuss with their children. It is natural for parents to want to protect their children from the pain and sadness that is associated with the topic of death. Many parents don't want to bring up such an unhappy subject with their children unless they absolutely have to. Unfortunately, a time will come when children must face the loss of a loved one. It is at this time that parents must provide caring, support, and answers to the many questions their children will have.

Many parents simply don't know how to explain death to their children.

Finding the right words and the right answers to all of the questions children have about death is not an easy task for any parent.

Instead of waiting until a tragedy occurs to talk about death, it is a good idea for parents to discuss death with their children before it hits close to home. Parents can use examples in nature like falling leaves, a funeral procession, or a dead bird to bring up and discuss the subject of death. Such discussions will help children get used to the idea that death happens before a tragedy occurs.

## **When a Death Occurs**

### **Discussing Death with Children**

**\*Warn children of grave illnesses.** If a family member or close friend is seriously ill, parents should discuss it with their children before death occurs. Then, if a death does occur, children will be prepared and the event will not be a complete surprise. Also, when there is a serious illness in the family, children can often sense that something unusual is taking place. The atmosphere of sadness in the home can be very frightening for children. It is, therefore, very important for parents to explain to their children

what is going on and why they are sad and acting differently.

**\*Talk to children soon after a death occurs.** It may be tempting to put off telling children about the death of a loved one simply to save them from sadness, but children must go through the grieving process just as adults must. The sooner children are informed the sooner they can begin to deal with the loss. Speaking with children quickly also ensures that parents will be the ones discussing the death with their children, instead of someone else.

**\*Define "dead" in clear and simple terms.** Parents should explain to their children what dead means. They should make sure their children know that the dead person won't be able to do any of the things he or she once did, like walk, talk, or breathe.

**\*Avoid casual explanations.** Telling children that someone died because he was sick may lead them to believe that they themselves will also die when they are sick. It is very important, too, that parents not equate death with going to sleep. Telling children that "Grandma went to sleep and will not wake up" or something similar will likely cause children to be afraid to go to sleep

for fear that they will never wake up. Adults understand expressions like "passed away" and "gone to heaven," but these are very confusing expressions for children. For the most part, religious explanations are very confusing to children. DO use words like "dead," "stopped working," and "wore out." These are simple words that help establish the fact that the body is biologically dead.

**\*Fit the explanation to the children.** Parents should consider their children's level of development and what they already know about death before talking to their children about death. Parents should put their explanations into words that their children can understand and they should keep it simple. Parents should tell their children the facts and let them know they're available to answer any questions. Children's understanding about death depends on their level of development:

**>Two to six year olds.** Children between the ages of two and six usually do not understand the finality of death. To them, death is something temporary or reversible. Many children this age may **appear** unaffected by

the death of a loved one. This may be because they actually believe that the deceased person will return. Some children in this age range may take responsibility for death. They may believe that they did something to cause the death. It's important for parents to ask questions to determine feelings of responsibility and then to provide reassurance.

**>Six to nine year olds.** Around the age of six most children **begin** to understand that death is a final thing; though this understanding is not complete. For example, children this age may see death as something that only happens to old people or to other people. Children may not be able to accept the fact that death happens to everyone.

**>Nine to twelve year olds.** Some children in this age group may still take responsibility for the death of someone else. Understanding is increasing, and children in this age range can probably handle most of the information given to an adult. Parents should remember, though, that children under stress will often regress.

Therefore, some children may **not** be able to handle all of the details.

**>Teens.** By the time children reach the teenage years, they probably understand death and its finality as well as an adult. They usually realize the finality and irreversibility of death. Even though they have this understanding, they still need lots of support from parents and loved ones.

**\*Be honest.** Even children as young as three can sense when something is going on in their household. They can also sense when someone is not telling them the whole truth. If children have been given an inadequate explanation and sense a cover up, they'll figure that they're dealing with something scary and unknown. They may even create a wild fantasy about what is happening that is much worse than the facts. Attempts by parents to avoid telling their children about a death usually backfire.

**\*Encourage questions.** Parents should let their children know that they will try to answer any questions that their children may have and will answer them honestly. Parents should also let their children know

that they're available to answer any questions that might come up later.

### Supporting Children

**\*Include the children.** When someone close to the family dies, each member of the family is affected. Often, children are left out of the support network of relatives, neighbors, and friends. It is not a good idea to send children away to stay with a neighbor or friend at such a sad time. It is at such a time that children need the comfort and stability of their families and familiar surroundings. Parents should allow their children to grieve with the family and those who care about them instead of sending them away to grieve alone.

**\*Try not to alter the daily routine.** Parents should try to keep life going in as normal a way as possible. They should try to maintain rules, and consistent mealtimes and bedtimes. Disruption of daily routines can be very upsetting to children, and it is thus best for parents to try to maintain some normalcy in the household at this difficult time. The more stable daily life remains for children, the easier things will be for them.

**\*Allow children to grieve in their own way.** Mourning is the most natural response to death, and children need to mourn just as adults do. Parents should not attempt to prevent their children from feeling sad over the loss of a loved one. Instead, they should be reassuring and supporting towards their children. Sometimes children's reactions to death don't meet their parents' expectations. Some won't cry or show sorrow. Others will ask what seem to be inappropriate questions. No two children grieve in the same way. Parents should, therefore, not expect their children to grieve in a certain way. It is not a good idea to insist that children display sorrow, or, on the other hand, that they act brave and dry their tears. Instead parents should encourage their children to express their feelings, whatever they are.

**\*Don't hide your own grief.** Parents who are sad and grieving because of a death should not hide these feelings from their children. Instead, they should let their children know why they are sad, and they should reassure their children that they are not the cause of the sadness. Parents should not, on the other hand, turn to their children for emotional support. Children must be allowed to grieve without feeling

responsible for supporting grieving parents.

**\*Reassure.** When children confront death for the first time, they may be concerned about their own death. It is very important at such a time for parents to stress to their children that though no one knows for sure when they will die, they will probably not die for a very, very long time. Children may at this time also be afraid of the death of their parents. Reassurance must be realistic, for parents also don't know for sure when they will die. Parents can let their children know that though no one knows for sure when they will die, they expect to be around for a long, long time.

## **Funerals**

### **Attending the Funeral**

Parents must decide whether or not their children should attend the funeral. There are several factors to consider when making such a decision. Things to consider are the age of the children, what the service will include, how emotional the service will be, and the children's relationship to the person who died. Many experts believe that children above the age of seven should decide for themselves whether or not to attend a funeral. The parents, then,

should respect this decision. With children younger than this, parents must use their judgment, taking into account how much their children know about death and how well they knew the deceased.

If the deceased was in the immediate family, it is probably a good idea to allow children to attend the funeral. Such a ritual will provide children with the opportunity to express grief and to say good-bye to the deceased. It will also allow them to see other people grieve over the loss of someone they care about.

Parents should consider how emotional the funeral will be before allowing their children to attend. It may be terrifying for children to witness extreme hysteria from the mourners, especially if they are family members.

### **If Children Attend**

**\*Explain the rituals.** If children do decide to attend the funeral, parents should explain just what will happen at the funeral home, church or synagogue, the cemetery, and at home. They should explain how people will act and what the children will see and hear. Parents who expect to cry and express sadness

themselves should tell their children of this, too.

**\*Designate a caretaker.** If parents cannot remain with their children at a funeral, a close relative or friend should be assigned the specific responsibility of sitting with and caring for them. This caretaker should be prepared to leave with the children if they find the service overwhelming. Very young children will probably not be able to sit still for an entire funeral service and should be allowed to go for a walk or to the bathroom with the caretaker.

### If Not Attending

**\*Arrange for a caretaker.** Parents should arrange for someone their children know and trust to baby-sit while they are attending the funeral. One suggestion is to hire a familiar baby-sitter. Another possibility is to allow the children to attend school or nursery school.

**\*Spend time with your children afterward.** Parents should try to spend at least a few minutes cuddling and talking with their children after the funeral. At this sad time, children will need to know that their parents care about them.

### **Common Reactions to Grief**

The stress that grief causes often results in behavior changes in children. Some common reactions to grief are:

**\*Negative behavior.** It is not unusual for grieving children to become angry and to strike out at adults and friends. Many children have difficulty expressing their feelings when someone close to them dies, and they often resort to this kind of behavior.

**\*Increased activity.** Many children become restless and overactive in response to grief.

**\*Dependency.** Many children become clingy and over-dependent on the adults around them as a way to cope with their sadness and grief.

**\*Regression.** It is not uncommon for grieving children to return to behaviors previously given up. For example, children who have mastered toilet training may begin to wet during the night again. Or, children who have given up thumb-sucking may pick up the habit again.

Children's reactions to grief are often misinterpreted by their parents. It is, therefore, very important for parents to become sensitive to the grief of their

children. By doing so, parents will then be able to provide the support, comfort, information, and understanding that children need when faced with the death of a friend or loved one.



*Center for Effective Parenting*  
*Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580*  
*NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

**[www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)**