

Talking with Children about Death

Health professionals agree that the effects of loss on children are severe, lasting into adulthood if unresolved. Thus, how we communicate with children about death is very important. It is important to understand that people seldom die in the home as they once did. Many times death is a subject that is evaded, ignored, and denied by society. It is often the role of the child's parents to discuss death. Many times these same parents wish to protect the child from the pain and heartache associated with death and loss. Such overprotection tends, however, to rob a child of the opportunity to develop coping skills for handling loss later in life. This kind of behavior only cycles itself and creates adults that wish to avoid discussion of death and loss. Adults are sometimes uncomfortable discussing death with children. A major factor may be the adults' discomfort in answering the child's questions. These questions are often about death, afterlife and mortality. It is fine to tell a child that you don't know the answer, instead of avoiding the subject.



- **Infants and toddlers-** The greatest fear of infants and toddlers is centered on separation. Before a child is old enough to have a concept of death, they understand “here” and “not here”. By age 2 they understand having and losing, holding and dropping, appearing and disappearing (peek-a-boo).
- **Preschool-** Children age 3-5 tend to view death as sleep or a temporary state that is reversible. Their minds may be filled with magical thinking or fantasy/fiction where the hero “wakes up” and death is not forever. This age group also thinks that their thoughts have power. In other words, if they “wish someone were dead” or “would go away and never come back”, they may have feelings of guilt that they caused the death.
- **School-Age-** Children age 5-9 gradually realize that death is final, universal, and personal. They may personify death as a ghost figure that carries off its victims.

How to Help a Child Understand Death:

- Teach with animals and plants. When a pet dies the child mourns and thus develops the ability to work through grief. **Do not replace the animal right away.** Replacing the animal right away discounts the importance of the pet that has died.
- **Be open to a child's questioning about death.** Don't change the subject. If you do not know the answer, say “I don't know”. Talk about death without fear or denial.
- **Give accurate information promptly.** If we respond honestly each time the topic of death comes up, the child's concept of death will grow.
- **Be honest.** Avoid cover up stories. Stories and dishonesty teach children that death is something to be ashamed of and needs to be kept a secret.

This information has been reviewed and recommended for use by the UAMS/CPED/Patient Education Advisory Committee.

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How to Help a Child Understand Death *continued*:

- Be sure what the child is asking. ***Answer only what they want to know.***
- Avoid judgmental statements. Don't tell them how they should or shouldn't feel. ***Allow them their own feelings.*** Accept them.
- ***Use "death" language.*** Avoid saying "he passed" and "we lost him". These terms are vague and confusing to some adults, not to mention children.
- ***Don't equate death with sleep or sickness.*** The child needs reassurance that death is not a long sleep. This will only make the child afraid of going to sleep.
- ***Explain*** the difference between a minor and terminal illness. A child will not understand when you only say that someone was sick so they died. They may fear the next time they get a cold they will die because they are sick.
- Do expose the child to the dying person. ***Death itself is not so bad as their fears.*** It is much easier to say goodbye in person.
- ***Reassure the child*** that he or she will be cared for and not abandoned.
- ***Allow the child the option of attending the funeral or other rituals.*** Viewing the body and seeing the casket left at the cemetery may answer questions the child may have about where the person went.
- ***Understand*** that humor may serve as a release of tension. Children under 12 tend to seek a distraction and resort to various defenses against grief.
- ***Don't blame God.*** Phrases like "God needed him," "He's with God," or "It was God's will" make the child fear that God threatens their life.
- ***Be aware of irrational guilt feelings.*** Children need to be told that they didn't cause the death and that they could not have prevented it.
- ***Give the child affection.***
- ***Don't make unnecessary changes in the family or the child's routine if possible.*** Maintaining routine reinforces feelings of security.
- Be open with your tears and feelings. ***Don't pretend that nothing happened.***
- Don't use the child as a "replacement". ***Avoid phrases like "You're the man of the house now."*** This is an unfair burden to the child and assigning them an impossible task.
- ***Encourage talking about the deceased.*** Remembering helps the child create memories that help the child accept death.
- ***Encourage the child to write a letter or draw a picture.*** This allows them to get in touch with their feelings and emotions in a "safe" manner.

Additional information: ■ Life and Loss - A Guide to Help Grieving Children; Goldman, Linda.
■ Helping People Through Grief; Kuenning, Delores.
■ www.centering.org

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UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS FOR MEDICAL SCIENCES
4301 West Markham Street - Little Rock, Arkansas 72205

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