

Learning to Live Through Loss: Helping Children Understand Death



It's hard for all of us, to think about death, let alone talk about it.....and the idea of discussing death with your children, impossible. We hesitate to talk about death period. Most children are emotionally strong and want to know about death. The truth helps them understand what is real, and what is imaginary. Children need to be able to feel pain, mourn, and grow. Death is an inescapable fact of life. We all must deal with it at some point in our life. We must let children know it is okay to talk about death. Talk does not solve all problems, but we can help children by giving them needed information, comfort, and understanding.

Of course, what we say, or when we talk depends on the age and experiences of our children. But by talking with them we can discover what they know, and don't know---what are their fears, worries, and misconceptions.

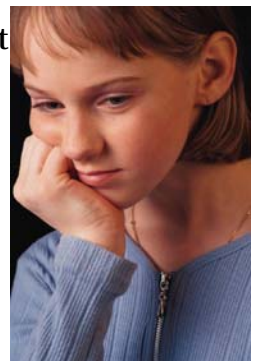
Hopefully this information will help you understand how children view death, and how you can talk with your child about death.

How Preschool Children See Death

- The very young understand facts the best. Specific, concrete terms. Keep it simple.
- They may see death as reversible (like in a cartoon).
- They may not realize that death will happen to everyone and everything. Ask over and over "Do doggies die?"
- Repetition of questions about death. They need to know that the facts have not changed.
- May feel that their thoughts or feelings have power over others. They may believe that they are responsible for the death by being angry at the person before they died.

How Grade School Children See Death

- This age child knows that death is permanent. They may be very curious about the physical details.
- These children need physical, tangible ways to experience and aggressive grief. Rituals such as visitations, funerals, and memorial services are very important.
- At this age, children accept their parent's religious beliefs. A belief in life after death generally comforts children.



Telling A Child That Someone Has Died

- Avoid: misleading terms “He’s asleep.”
“All wounds heal in time”
“Everything will be all right.”
Say, “This must feel confusing (frightening).”
- Be quiet and wait. Don’t feel like you have to talk all the time.
- Simply be with the child. Allow the child to ask questions, answer as clearly and factually as possible. They may need to hear the same answer over and over again. Be brief. Be patient. *If you don’t know an answer, say so.*
- Because of misconceptions of death, you may need to stress:
Doctors could not prevent the death.
How much the person loved the child.
The person was not angry at the child.
The person will never come back.
The child will be loved. Someone will take care of the child.
Feelings are all right: sadness, anger, and crying are ok.
There is nothing wrong with playing and having fun.

One Way to Explain Death to Children

(from *Children and Death*, by Danai Papadatou and Costas Papadatos.)

“When someone dies, that means their body is no longer working. The heart stops beating, they no longer need to eat or sleep, and they no longer feel any pain. They don’t need their body any longer. That means we will never see them again as we could before.”

Should Children Attend the Memorial Service?

Children need rituals. Participating in the funeral or memorial service helps make the death seem more real and begins the healing that comes from mourning. Children may feel angry or left out if they are not allowed to participate. Of course, no child should be forced to participate if he or she does not want to.



