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house

So you want to know more about...

Death and Loss

Helping Children Through Grief

When talking about grief, the death of a loved one is often the first “loss” that comes to mind. But children experience many kinds of loss: the death of a beloved pet, the loss of a friend or a teacher in a move, or even the perceived loss of a parent during a divorce.

Too much information about tough topics can overwhelm children; too little can be frightening. We must consider the child’s readiness to communicate, as well as our own feelings and beliefs when broaching the subject of loss.

Children make sense of their world by experiencing it. So the most appropriate time to discuss death is when it is part of their experience. Being honest validates their perceptions and encourages trust. But being honest doesn’t necessitate sharing everything with them. The following guidelines explain kids’ cognitive perceptions of death at each age.

0-2 year olds:

- No formal concept of death;
- Infants and toddlers may express irritability, anger, anxiety and withdrawal.
- Infants and toddlers need warmth and reassurance in the form of physical contact; having a consistent caregiver, and maintaining routines.
- May seem not to care.

3-5 year olds:

- Egocentrism can cause children to think they “cause” bad events.
- Children often think death is reversible.
- Children begin to conceptualize what it means to be dead, e.g., that people who die become angels.
- Children may regress, escape into play, or exhibit aggression.
- Children often attach to a substitute person.
- Children idealize the loved one.
- Children may show “inappropriate” reactions such as giggling, joking, etc. to distance themselves from the loss and their feelings about it.

- Children are confused by euphemisms: “We **lost** grandma today.” Adults should use real terms, repeat them, and clarify when necessary.

6-8 year olds:

- Children experience death in ways similar to 3-5 year olds, but have a more concrete understanding of what it means to be dead.
- Children want something to blame the death on, so they can feel that other deaths are preventable.
- Children are still very egocentric and may feel guilty about the loss.
- Children may emulate the dead person to keep them alive.
- Children begin to realize the social aspect of death — its consequences for the people left behind, and the fact that it can happen to others. They may be overly concerned about people’s health and well-being as a result.

9-12 year olds:

- School-age children may externalize fears of injury by focusing on the “gory” details of death.
- Children may want adults to initiate conversations, not wanting to upset parents or relatives by bringing up the loss or their needs.
- Children need help finding appropriate ways to show their feelings and adequate words to articulate their needs.

Further reading

- *Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss*, by Claudia Jewett Jarratt
- *Help Me Say Goodbye*, by Janis Silverman
- *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, by Judith Viorst
- *When Dinosaurs Die*, by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Tolon Brown.
- *When a Pet Dies*, Fred Rogers

Frequently Asked Questions

My father is ill and has less than a year to live, though he still looks okay to the kids. Should we tell them what's going to happen? Knowing in advance that someone will die, though painful, presents the opportunity for a different kind of closure than an unexpected death. Children often instinctively know when someone is gravely ill, and you don't want to deny their perception of reality. You don't want them to accidentally overhear this information, and you want them to understand what you are experiencing. Be sure to prepare them for changes in his appearance and demeanor.

Should kids go to funerals? Children who are old enough to recognize that someone important is gone can benefit from participating in funeral rites and memorials. Their participation depends on their interest, the family's wishes, and the availability of supportive adults to guide them through the process (and take them away if the child wishes) when their parents are also grieving. Preparation is important. Children need to know that there will be a casket and what it's for; if it will be open or closed, and why; they need to know that participants may be sad; they need to know what will happen: a sermon, speeches, incense, whatever. Some funeral homes have resources such as videos or picture books to help children understand what to expect. It's also important to let children participate to the degree that they wish to: if they only want to see the body and leave, that should be okay. Children have a good sense of what they can handle. If they don't want to participate, there are many other ways to say goodbye that will be less traumatic.

I feel overwhelmed with sadness. I don't want to upset my child. Most adults want to stay strong and "in control" for their children. But children are experiencing the same feelings and need adults to model appropriate ways to express them. Children who only see stoic reactions to death may get the impression that their feelings are unspeakable or unacceptable. Of course you don't want your child to fear that you are completely out of control and despondent. Having another less emotionally involved adult available for respite time with the child can help you all get what you need.

What should I say when my child asks me if I will die? Think about her understanding of death. If you say, "Yes, but not for a long time," be sure that her understanding of time makes this a comforting response. If you say, "No," children will remember and feel betrayed when they later realize that we all die. Experts recommend saying, "No, I don't expect to die for a long, long time," emphasizing the **no** and the **long, long time**. Saying, "Most people live until they are very old," or "I am looking forward to watching you grow up and raise your own family," can help children "put off" thinking about the separation until they are more ready to handle the thought.

I don't know what to call death when speaking to my child. Saying "put to sleep," about a pet or using the phrase "passing," or other euphemisms to describe people's deaths can create more fear than reassurance since children are so literal. Use the correct terms and explain other euphemisms they might hear.

Offering Support

Don't be afraid to mention a loss: the silence can be deafening and isolating. Families experiencing a loss often need help moving through daily routines but may not know what to ask for or how to ask. It's helpful when friends and relatives offer grieving families specific support:

- Preparing meals
- Running errands
- Giving children a fun date
- Giving parents a fun date
- Taking care of chores such as lawn mowing, snow shoveling, or laundry.
- Spending time with them so they can talk if they want to, or be "normal" if they prefer.

It's also a good idea to spread assistance out over several months. Once the initial shock and wave of well-wishes passes, families who have experienced loss still need and appreciate emotional and other types of support.