Helping children to understand death at any age

Coping with the death of a friend or loved one is always difficult. However, understanding and coping with death can be even harder for children. Here are some tips to consider when helping a child through the loss of a friend or loved one.



Honesty is the best policy

Although your natural instinct as a parent is to protect your child from difficult and emotional situations or experiences, it's best to tell your child about a death as quickly, directly and truthfully as possible.

Share your own feelings of loss. This will show your child that it's OK to talk about the situation and show his or her own feelings. Don't be worried if you don't have perfect answers to questions such as, *"What happens when we die?"* Your religion might provide some guidance, but if not, admit you aren't sure. You can reassure the child that you are sure the person who has died will live on in our memories.

It's also important to use the correct words (death, funeral, etc.) rather than trying to put this into childlike language. For example, if you say that the person is *"sleeping,"* this might actually confuse the child who might later become concerned that if he or she falls asleep, they won't wake up. This also applies to explanations about how the person died.

Children of different ages

Children at different stages of development have a different understanding or perception of death, and will express their grief according to these stages. Other factors that can influence how a child reacts to or understands death include:

- Your child's relationship to the deceased
- Your family's methods of communicating with one another
- Opportunities for the child to share his or her feelings
- The openness and honesty of how the death has been explained

Be prepared for a lot of questions and try to really listen. Even though you might think your answers are straightforward, children can draw conclusions you may not have considered.

Infants. While not able to understand death, infants do feel a sense of loss and separation, especially if the deceased was a primary caregiver or a key figure in their lives. Their grief may be demonstrated by their being sluggish, less responsive, less active, having problems sleeping and possibly weight loss.

Children between two and three years old. Children of this age often confuse death with sleep. They may show signs of anxiety, especially around bedtime. They can also stop talking and appear to be in distress. They don't fully separate death from life and may ask questions such as, *"How does the deceased eat, breathe or play?"* Children at this age engage in magical thinking and may believe their thoughts can cause another person to become sick or die. They may also have trouble eating, sleeping and may regress in terms of toilet habits.

Six- to nine-year-olds. These children are often curious about death and may ask questions about what happens to the body after death. Often the child will think of the deceased as a spirit separate from the person who was alive. Children of this age group usually think of death as something that only happens to old people. They may express their grief by becoming afraid of school, having trouble learning, becoming aggressive or withdrawn, or becoming concerned about their own or their parent's health. They often feel angry with the deceased for abandoning them.

Nine- to 12-year-olds. Children in this age group usually understand that death is something unavoidable and something that happens to everyone. They may be able to express their feelings more directly, but will also express their grief in behavioural ways, such as lack of concentration at school, becoming more aggressive or withdrawn, and possibly showing concern with their body and health.

Helping children cope with their emotions

Each child should be told the truth using as much detail as he or she can understand. Questions need to be answered honestly and directly, and parents should check afterward to ensure the child understands the answers.

Here are some guidelines to follow:

- Do use proper words such as *"died," "cancer,"* and *"death."*
- Don't substitute words such as *"passed away," "he or she is sleeping,"* or *"we lost him or her."*
- Do acknowledge your own sadness. Children can cope with honest expressions of emotions, such as crying.
- Do offer a child realistic reassurances about their own security or health, since children often worry that they will also die or that their parent will leave them as well.
- Don't force a child to attend funerals or graveside services, but do encourage, invite and include them in these plans. Be sure to explain to them what they will see and hear. Prepared children are better able to cope with all aspects of the funeral and mourning rituals.
- Don't be surprised or disappointed if, after telling a child about a death, he or she appears indifferent and goes about their daily routine. This is one way a child protects him or herself from feeling overwhelmed. The child will likely return to the topic at unexpected times.
- Do reassure your child that having bad thoughts about the deceased prior to their death did not cause them to die.

When to express concern

While expressing grief is expected and normal, there are signs that may suggest a child needs the help of a professional. Contact the child's physician if he or she:

- Is in a state of depression for an extended period and loses interest in daily activities and events
- Is unable to sleep, experiences a loss of appetite or has a prolonged fear of being alone
- Acts much younger for an extended period of time
- Excessively imitates the dead person and/or repeatedly states wanting to join the deceased
- Withdraws from friends and/or siblings
- Refuses to attend school or social events, and academic performance drops
- Shows any signs of, or makes statements about, wanting to commit suicide

While coping with death can be an extremely difficult time for anyone, the situation can be even more traumatic for children. Be honest with your child about the situation, and help them to understand what has happened and why. If you remain concerned about your child's ability to cope with the situation, consider contacting a physician or child psychologist for additional guidance.