

# Helping Children Cope with Death Talking about Death

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by Geri Brooks, Ph.D.

The recurring theme in this section is honesty. Maybe you have great difficulty talking about death. If so, tell your child frankly, "I have a hard time talking about death because...but I really think it's important, so I'm going to try it with you." When you say something like this to a child it helps them get a perspective of the situation through your eyes. This helps open up the line of communication between you and your child. Hold or touch your child when telling them about the death. Remember, what you do is more important than what you say as long as you are honest.

Avoid using euphemisms or cliches. These are expressions used because most of us have a hard time saying the word dead. "We lost grandma last night." "We put Toto to sleep." "Mommy was a wonderful person and God wanted her with him." "Dad went on a long trip." Children can take these statements literally. Reactions to the above could be: looking for grandma, worry about going to sleep, not wanting to cooperate, and possible fear of the unknown. Explain death in simple and direct language. Use words like "dead," "died," "stopped working," and "wore out," that establish that the body is biologically dead.

In time when your child understands that the person is dead forever, you might talk about an afterlife (if this is what you believe). Making statements like, "He's gone to heaven and is going to live forever," when you are mourning a person's death gives a child a mixed message. How can daddy be lying in the casket, dead, and be up in heaven at the same time? Why is Mommy upset if daddy is alive forever? I'm not suggesting you not use these concepts but also be aware of your child's understanding of death. Ensure that the child understands the fact of death. Another thing to remember when talking to children is that God doesn't zap us because he wants us in heaven with Him. Death comes from within the person, the body wears out and dies. If the child is old enough you can explain the person is biologically

dead, buried in the cemetery, then talk about an afterlife, if you choose.

After you've gotten across the fact that the person is dead, answer questions the child may have, using words and concepts appropriate to your child's age.

The next step is to explain what's going to happen next. Tell your child, "Grandpa is going to be moved from the hospital to a funeral home until the day of the funeral." Outline the next few days, where you will be, and what you will be doing. This will help prevent undo anxiety on the part of the child. If you can't be with him or her, just knowing when you will be back will be comforting. Some children will require more explanation, depending on how they are affected by the death. Invite the child to participate in any rituals or ceremonies that occur. The communal expression of grief minimizes the sense of isolation that may accompany the death. How-

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ever, do not force a child to participate if they refuse.

Depending on the developmental stage of your child several questions usually come up at this time or several days later. "When is he/she coming back?" "Is grandpa cold, hungry, lonesome?" "How old are you?" "Why couldn't he get better?" "Did I do it?" As you listen to her questions you will find out more about how your child is perceiving the death and what she is feeling. It is impossible to have all the answers, but your honesty in helping your child with the death models for the child that death is a natural process of life. Honesty encourages children to share their feelings, fear and memories as part of their own healing process.

Children grieve differently from adults. Children may act out following a death of an important person in their lives. You can help them put words to the pain by validating their feelings and sharing your own. A child's shock or surprise about the death may cause him or her to deny the death at first. "She couldn't have died, she'll be back." This provides temporary relief for the child from grief. Respect this as the child's way of saying what he or she can't handle. Children may also withdraw from loved ones as a safeguard against them leaving too. Find ways to connect with your child by demonstrating that it is possible to survive uncomfortable feelings.

It's difficult watching your child grieve, but once you've broken down the wall and opened up communication with your child, you'll know what to expect, how he'll react, and how to help him. Consider the personality of your child and the closeness of the person who died. Children move in and out of grief throughout their developmental stages. A child that has lost a parent at age five will deal with it age appropriately at that stage, and at age ten may come back and deal with it again during that developmental stage. This process continues well into adulthood.



# Helping Children Cope with Death

## How Children Perceive Death

by Geri Brooks, Ph. D.

A child's understanding of death changes as she or he matures. To better understand a child's response to death and dying, it is important to know how children perceive death at different developmental stages of childhood. While the best way to know how children are feeling is to ask them, there are certain stages—described in the panel to the right—that children generally go through that may serve as a guide for parents who are uncertain about how to approach children on the subject of loss and death.

Children's culture, religious beliefs and practices in the home, and what they hear and see in other surroundings also have an important impact on their understanding of death. An important question to ask yourself is, "What experiences has my child already encountered with any kind of loss?" These experiences could include the absence of a teacher, friend, sibling or parent. The unavailability of a parent due to alcoholism, drugs, imprisonment, divorce, or emotional problems is another kind of loss.

Also consider what the child has been told about this death or illness. Did the child know the person was sick or was it kept a secret? Did the child witness the person getting sicker?

Even very young children sense when something is wrong and adults are upset. When we tell our children that nothing is wrong it only confuses and isolates them. Our goal is to listen to and talk with children, keeping in mind their individual level of development and the other forces that have affected their understanding of how to cope with death and dying.

### Remember...

None of the stages below are set in stone. Children and teens can move back and forth among them. I have observed a residue of magical thinking at age fourteen. Further, with HIV/AIDS the complexity of issues (multiple loss, stigma, isolation and secrecy) can seriously interfere with social and emotional functioning.

### AGE 0-2

If the young infant or child cannot see something, it does not exist. However, research has indicated that infants and toddlers are not too young to grieve and have an emotional response to loss of significant people in their lives.

### AGE 2-5

Concepts of time are not yet fully developed. In the preschooler's mind, death is a temporary, reversible journey from which there is a return. In order for a child to understand the finality of death, the child first must understand that he or she is a separate person from the parents—and that without them he or she can still exist.

### AGE 5-9

Magical thinking plays a big part in the child's life and thoughts about death. Children begin to understand that pets and people die and do not wake up. Yet, some children may believe that if they wish hard enough they can bring the dead person back to life. Sometimes children will believe that they are magical people who can overcome all the disturbing events in their lives.

At this age, connecting events that don't belong together is common. For example, the child becomes angry and wishes mother would die; mother has a car accident and dies. The child's magical thinking convinces the child that mother's death was a result of the child's own thoughts or actions. Magical thinking can interfere with a child's grief process if the child feels responsible for causing a death. Magical thinking can continue into preadolescence.

Death may become personified as monsters or ghosts. Many children at this age think death is contagious. Some even think that if they play with a child whose parent has died they can "catch" death.

### AGE 9-12

As children grow into the nine-to-twelve age group, they begin to develop an acute sense of morality and of right and wrong. It is at this stage that children may think of death as a punishment. Remnants of magical thinking are present, although children now are beginning to recognize the universality and permanence of death. They can conceptualize that all body functions stop. At this age children become curious and inquisitive about birth, death, sex differences and the biological aspects of death. This is a time that children are experimenting with ideas and theories. They may think that death is a way of making room for others to be born, be able to conceive of an afterlife, or ask questions about the relationship. They begin thinking about death's occurrence in observable concrete terms. They may ask, "What are the reasons people die?" (War, disease, poison, floods, car accidents, murders, etc.) "What's going to happen to us if Mommy dies?" "How will the family change?"

### AGE 13 AND UP

Adolescents understand mortality and death as a natural process. They often have a difficult time with death because they are self-absorbed and trying to shape their own lives. The denial of their own death is very strong. They find it more comfortable to talk about death with their peers than with adults. Being available to understand the emotions that surface and those that are hidden during a teen's grief is very important. Teens will be very concerned with how they will fit into "their" world. Teens are likely to feel the impact of HIV/AIDS even more acutely than their younger siblings.



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## Resolving Grief

### Technique Ideas for All Ages

Your child may have some anger, guilt, and/or fears to deal with. You can help your child deal with these feelings in constructive ways:

- Letters to loved ones are useful tools to work through held-in thoughts, feelings and unfinished business. Memory books have proven to be useful tools. Inside memory books children can list memories that they want to always have. Children can describe ways the relationship was a special part of their lives and share it with others.
- Working with play dough or clay is a versatile medium for children. Children can mold family, friends, or animals and create dialogues between themselves and others. Clay has a very calming effect on children, and they can gain a feeling of mastery by working with it. Through pounding, ripping, smoothing or poking clay, feelings are generated and can be expressed in a safe way.
- Art can promote open discussion and enhance the sharing of feelings. You might ask your child to sit down and draw with you how he/she might like things to be. Or ask the child to draw a picture about how he/she is doing. You might want to have your child

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write a story to go with the picture.

- Music and drama can also be used as a resource to explore feelings. Different instruments and musical sounds create different feelings that can be projected into body movements. Drama and imagination with props, costumes and puppets can help children express unresolved feelings. Puppet shows can be created that enable the child in role playing. Imaginary dialogues between the child and the person who has died can also freely take place. Creative play of this nature can help the child with unresolved grief.
- Having a mad session by doing a mad dance around the room, pounding on a pillow, asking, "Is there anything that made you mad today?"

In order to deal with their emotions, children often need to interact with other people or to project their feelings onto other things (art, dolls, toys, etc.). Realize that grief is an ongoing process with no easy answers. Trust your instincts and initiate discussions with your child about the death. By realizing that your child can talk about his or her own experience with death you acknowledge their pain of separation and their unique grieving process.

## Kevin

*One by One, Day by Day  
I see my loved ones fade away.  
I'll scream my anger and my pain  
As I see the needles in his vein  
It's too soon for him to die  
but the doctors all have tried.  
I try not to pin a blame  
but no one knows  
my blackened pain.  
It pushes on my organs  
and fuels my fight  
as the disease does to him  
in the night.  
I've seen him addicted  
from what they've prescribed.  
Ever since I was young  
I've seen his fight  
which is now a struggle  
to get through the night  
When I'm at home we try to play  
But after five minutes  
he's done for the day  
He'll come in and out of sleep,  
I'll talk to mom  
but she'll start to weep.  
She's already made his final plans,  
his ashes will be spread  
across the lands.  
I want to pick him up  
and take him to the sea  
And show him the things  
he'll never get to see.*

—by Joshua Frank Pickens  
(Kevin Cooper's brother, April '94)

## Selected Resources

### Guides for Helping Children Cope with Grief and Death:

How Do We Tell The Children?, by Dan Schaefer & Christine Lyons/1993. Newmarket Press, 18 East 48th Street, New York, NY 10017.

The Grieving Child—A Parent's Guide, by Helen Fitzgerald/1992. Simon & Schuster, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

### Culturally Sensitive Readings for African American Children

Daddy is a Monster...Sometimes, by John Steptoe. J.P. Lippincott, New York.

To Hell with Dying, by Alice Walker. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York.

### When a Parent Dies:

Learning to Say Good-by: When a Child's Parent Dies, by Eda Le Shan/1988. Avon Books, Dept. FP, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019.

How it Feels When a Parent Dies, by Jill Kremetz/1993. Alfred A. Knopf, Publisher, New York.

### Professional Resources:

Children's Conceptions of Death, by Richard Lonetto. Springer Publishing, 536 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Windows to Our Children—A Gestalt Approach to Children and Adolescents, by Violet Oaklander. Max Sound, POB 9217, Seattle, WA 98109. (206) 283-7614.

### Faith, Hope & the Human Spirit

The Spiritual Life of Children, by Robert Coles.

### Helping Children Cope with Illness

When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness—Children Can Learn to Cope with Loss and Change, by Marge Heegaard/1991. Woodland Press, 99 Woodland Circle, Minneapolis, MN 55424.

When a Parent is Very Sick, by Eda LeShan. Rainbow Connection, 477 Hannah Branch Road, Burnsville, NC 28714. (704) 675-5909.