

by Ava L. Siegler, Ph.D.

What Your Child Can (and Can't) Understand About Death

FEW TOPICS ARE AS DIFFICULT to talk about with our kids as death because few subjects raise such deep anxieties and discomfort, forcing us to face up to our own mortality. We want to explain the facts of death to our children in a calm, meaningful manner, but it can seem almost impossible to do so without projecting our own fears of the unknown onto them. The key factor in addressing this sensitive topic is knowing what your child is capable of understanding as he grows.

WHEN HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY

"Our neighbor Allison, 40, was killed in a car crash last month on the way to visit her parents. We were all devastated. One day she was asking us to water her plants; the next day she was dead and buried in another part of the country. We told our 3-year-old daughter that Allison died, but she kept waking up at night and asking what happened to her. What should we do?"

Children younger than 4 may not yet be able to comprehend the idea of permanence. So when things go away, they expect them to come back. That's why a 3-year-old will keep asking about the person she's lost; she not only wants but expects her to be found.

But even if your child is too young to grasp the finality of death, she's not too young to react to the separation she's suffered. After the death of someone to whom they were attached, it's natural for chil-

dren this age to display a wide range of behavioral disturbances—disruptions in sleep patterns, eating difficulties, or behavioral regressions.

If your child shows any of these signs, she has not yet been able to absorb or assimilate the loss, and needs your help. This is often particularly true in the case of a fatal accident, where no preparation has been possible and no rituals mark the event. A sudden death is shocking for all of us, but particularly for children, who have a limited capacity to comprehend anything abstract, and have a hard time accepting what they haven't seen with their very own eyes.

To help your child understand death, try to call upon any memories she may have about the loss of a pet dog or cat, a bird, or even a fish or insect. These first brushes with death are important preparatory experiences, and can be used to help your child grasp the meaning of a more profound loss. Say, "Remember

when your goldfish died and he could no longer breathe or eat or swim, and we were all sad? Well, Allison was in a terrible accident and she died, too. We can't see her or speak to her anymore because she's not alive like we are; she's dead. But we can still think about her and keep her in our memories. Maybe you would like a photo of Allison to help you remember her."

A young child does not feel grief in the same way as an adult, nor can she sustain mourning for long periods of time like you can. So don't be surprised if she perks up quite quickly after a significant loss, and even attaches herself cheerfully to another neighbor. She's not being heartless; she's only displaying her developmental limitations. Children at this age are usually only able to express their feelings in short or intermittent bursts of sadness.

The grief of older children (ages 6 to 12) will more closely resemble adults'. They show



Dr. Ava L. Siegler is director of the Institute for Child, Adolescent, and Family Studies in Manhattan and author of the forthcoming book *What Should I Tell the Kids? A Parent's Guide to Real Problems in the Real World*.

their sad feelings directly at the time, and are capable of sustained mourning. But older children may also show an intense *delayed* reaction. Often a child will appear to be relatively untouched by the death, only to break down days, or even weeks, later when some ordinary moment (going to the candy store that her neighbor used to take her to, or seeing a sweater like she used to wear) intensely evokes the separation for the child.

Many parents are tempted to protect their children against the death of someone who is not a close member of the family. They might tell their kids, "Allison's gone away," or, "She'll be living in another city and we can't see her."

This is not a good idea for several reasons. First, lies (even protective ones) have a way of backfiring. When your child learns the truth (as kids inevitably do), she will feel betrayed. Second, it distorts your child's feelings about the person who died because she feels hurt and abandoned (Continued on page 36)

("Why didn't Allison tell me she was going away, or say goodbye?"). And last, children should be permitted to experience the deaths of neighbors and acquaintances to help prepare them to cope with more profound losses they will inevitably have to absorb later on.

FACING THE FINALITY

"My wife's father died after a long illness and the funeral is tomorrow. The children were very close to their grandpa and have known that he was very sick for a long time. But we don't know if we should take them with us to the funeral and the burial, or leave them home. We think our 8-year-old daughter can handle it, but isn't our 5-year-old son too young to have to face all of this?"

Despite the fact that a funeral and its rites are upsetting, try not to exclude even a young child from joining the family. Children need to know that everyone is born and everyone dies. Funerals and their attendant rituals help confirm the finality of death for all of us and link it with the continuity of life. Yes, it's sad for children to see adults cry, and it's troubling to discuss burial or cremation, but it's also important for them to understand the normality of death.

Children also need to know that a funeral is a way of saying goodbye to a person we've lost. It helps us to understand and feel how important the person has been in our lives. When a child is permitted to mourn with his family, he gains an opportunity to learn both empathy and sympathy.

To help your children bear the experience, prepare them beforehand for what they will see and hear. A child may wish to write a goodbye letter or

poem to Grandpa to help mark the ending of his life, or to place something small in the coffin or at the grave site (a flower, a stone). Keep your children physically close to you throughout the ceremony so you can comfort them and explain things as it proceeds.

If the coffin will be open, tell them that even though Grandpa is dead, people come to say goodbye to him one last time. Ask your child if he wants to see his grandpa's body—and permit him to say no. Never force a child to view the body of someone who has died or to kiss or touch him. This can be very frightening for children.

Answer all of your child's questions about the funeral as honestly as you can. Children are naturally curious, and all of the rites that attend death are

strange and compelling. Many parents become especially anxious when they have to face the questions that children ask about the body after death. Remember that children use their own bodies as the frame of reference for their questions, so when they ask, "Won't Grandpa be cold in the ground?" or "Will it hurt when they bury Uncle George?" or "Why doesn't Aunt Margie open her eyes?" they are really reflecting their own concerns about how they would feel if they were cold, hurt, or unable to open their eyes. It's very important for parents to emphasize to their children that when people are dead they don't feel anything.

Some families will turn to their religious beliefs to comfort them against death. They

may tell them that "Mommy's in heaven" or "Grandma's with the angels now." But families who aren't religious can also speak to their children about the spirit of the person who has died. You might say something like, "Grandpa's body has died, but his spirit lives on in us and in everything we

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JUST ASK CHILD...

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HOW TO RESPOND When Your Child Asks About Death

QUESTION

TYPICAL ANSWER

BETTER ANSWER

"What does it feel like to be dead?"

"Dying is just like being asleep." Linking death with sleep can cause your child to develop fears about falling asleep.

"People who die don't feel at all. They can't breathe, talk, think, or feel anything. They're not alive."

"Will I die, too?"

"Don't worry; children don't die." While this may be reassuring in the short run, it's not true, and your child will soon learn otherwise. Then you will have betrayed his trust.

"Everyone is born and everyone dies—but you don't usually die unless you're very, very old or there's a terrible accident."

"When will Grandpa come back?"

"He's gone far away and we can't see him." This avoids confronting the facts of death and also alters your child's feelings about his grandfather. How could someone he loves just suddenly go away and abandon him!

"Grandpa can't come back to see us anymore because he's dead. We will all miss him very much, but when we think about him he stays alive in our memories."

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THE PARENT-CHILD CONNECTION

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learned from him. We keep Grandpa's spirit alive whenever we think about him and remember what he meant to us."

LIVING WITH LOSS

"A child in our 7-year-old son's class at school died recently. We took him to the funeral and a memorial service held at his school. But since the boy's death, our son has become very worried about germs, and he doesn't want to play with his friends or go to their houses. What can we do to help him?"

Of all the deaths we mourn, perhaps none is as heartrending as the death of a child. At least when someone elderly dies we have the comfort of a life lived through to its end. But the termination of a child's

life is unnatural and terrifying for all of us. This makes it the hardest death of all for parents to accept, for children to face, and for all of us to talk about.

For the child, the death of a peer carries an especially frightening message—"this could happen to me." Your child can not help but feel that a classmate's death is "too close for comfort." His fears about himself, the vulnerability of his body, and the unexpected dangers in his world are likely to be stimulated in the wake of this threatening loss.

There are three things that are important for you to do when your child shows an anxious reaction to death. First, link his fears with his friend's death to help him gain control over his anxieties. You might

say, "I've noticed that you've become really scared since Johnny died. I think maybe his death really frightened you and that's why you're so worried about germs. You think you could get sick or die, too."

Then reassure him that he can't "catch" what his friend died of. For example, say, "Leukemia is a blood disease. You can't catch it from germs or from anybody else." Or explain that the child's friend "had a heart problem from the time he was a tiny baby. Your heart is completely healthy."

Lastly, let him know how unusual it is for a child to die: "Most children don't get serious illnesses or aren't involved in terrible accidents. Most children eventually grow up to become fathers and grandfathers

and even great-grandfathers."

While death is an ordinary event, it has a profound effect on all of us. Parents understandably wish to protect their children from this painful experience, but that means *preparing* him to assimilate the experience, not *avoiding* it. What we don't know *can* hurt us. Kids are less afraid of what is known (and explained) to them than the unknown because this way they are not left alone to "imagine the worst."

Remember, you can help your child face the facts of death by acknowledging his developmental limitations, responding to his curiosity, and encouraging him to develop the emotional capacities that will help him accept death as an inevitable part of life. ■