

Understanding Children's Reactions to Death, Dying and Grief

a Guide for Parents and Caregivers



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"Grieving is as natural as
crying when you are hurt,
sleeping when you are tired,
eating when you are hungry,
or sneezing when your nose itches;
it is nature's way of healing a broken heart."

- *Doug Manning*

INTRODUCTION

If you are concerned about discussing death with your children, you're not alone. Many of us hesitate to talk about death, particularly with youngsters. But death is an inescapable fact of life. We must deal with it, and so must our children; if we are to help them, we must let them know it's okay to talk about it.

By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know and if they have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can then help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talking does not solve all problems, but without discussion we are even more limited in our ability to help.

What we say about death to our children, or when we say it, will depend on their ages and experiences. It will also depend on our own experiences, beliefs, feelings, and the situations we find ourselves in, for each situation we face is somewhat different. Some discussions about death may be stimulated by a news report or a television program and take place in a relatively unemotional atmosphere; other talks may result from a family crisis and be charged with emotions.

This pamphlet cannot possibly deal with every situation. However, it does provide some general information which may be helpful; information which may be adapted to meet individual needs.

Children's Awareness of Death

Long before we realize it, children become aware of death. They see dead birds, insects, and animals lying by the road. They may see death at least once a day on television. They hear about it in fairy tales and act it out in their play. Death is a part of life, and children, at some level, are aware of it.

If we permit children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information, prepare them for a crisis, and help them when they are upset. We can encourage their communication by showing interest in and respect for what they have to say. We can also make it easier for them to talk to us if we are open, honest, and comfortable with our own feelings — often easier said than done.

Perhaps we can make it easier for ourselves and our children if we take a closer look at some of the problems that might make communication difficult.



Communication Barriers

Many of us are inclined not to talk about things that upset us. We try to put a lid on our feelings and hope that saying nothing will be for the best. But not talking about something doesn't mean we aren't communicating. Children are great observers. They read messages on our faces and in the way we walk or hold our hands. We express ourselves by what we do, by what we say, and by what we do not say.

When we avoid talking about something that is obviously upsetting, children often hesitate to bring up the subject or ask questions about it. To a child, avoidance can be a message: "If Mommy and Daddy can't talk about it, it really must be bad, so I better not talk about it either." In effect, instead of protecting our children by avoiding talk, we sometimes cause them more worry and also keep them from telling us how they feel.

On the other hand, it isn't wise to confront children with information that they may not yet understand or want to know. As with any sensitive subject, we must seek a delicate balance that encourages children to communicate; a balance that lies somewhere between avoidance and confrontation; a balance that isn't easy to achieve.

Perhaps most difficult of all, communicating with children about death and dying involves examining our own feelings and beliefs so that we can talk to them as naturally as possible when the opportunities arise.

When Communicating with Children Remember to:

- Try to be sensitive to their desire to communicate when they're ready.
- Try not to put up barriers that may inhibit their attempts to communicate.
- Offer them honest explanations when we are obviously upset.
- Listen to and accept their feelings.
- Not put off their questions by telling them they are too young.
- Try to find brief and simple answers that are appropriate to their questions; answers that they can understand and that do not overwhelm them with too many words.



Developmental Stages

Studies show that children go through a series of stages in their understanding of death. For example, preschool children usually see death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal. Watching cartoon characters on television miraculously rise whole again after having been crushed or blown apart tends to reinforce this notion.

Between the ages of five and nine, most children are beginning to realize that death is final and that all living things die, but still, they do not see death as personal. They harbor the idea that somehow they can escape through their own ingenuity and efforts. During this stage, children also tend to personify death. They may associate death with a skeleton or the angel of death, and some children have nightmares about them.

From ages nine or ten through adolescence, children begin to comprehend fully that death is irreversible, that all living things die, and that they, too, will die someday. Some begin to work on developing philosophical views of life and death. Teenagers, especially, often become intrigued with seeking the meaning of life. Some youngsters react to their fear of death by taking unnecessary chances with their lives. In confronting death, they are trying to overcome their fears by confirming their "control" over mortality.

Children Also Mourn

Mourning is the recognition of a deeply felt loss and a process we all must go through before we are able to go on living fully and normally again. Mourning heals. By being open with our sorrow and tears, we show our children that it is all right to feel sad and to cry. The expression of grief should never be equated with weakness. Our sons as well as our daughters should be allowed to shed their tears and express their feelings if, and when, they need to.

A child may show little immediate grief, and we may think he or she is unaffected by the loss. Some mental health experts believe that children are not mature enough to work through a deeply felt loss until they are adolescents. Because of this, they say, children are apt to express their sadness on and off over a long period of time and often at unexpected moments. Other family members may find it painful to have old wounds probed again and again, but children need patience, understanding, and support to complete their "grief work."



Talking to Children About Death

Communicating with preschoolers or young school-age children about any subject can be challenging. They need brief and simple explanations. Long lectures or complicated responses to their questions will probably bore or confuse them and should be avoided. Using concrete and familiar examples may help. For instance, Dr. Earl A. Grollman suggests in his book, "Explaining Death to Children", that death may be made more comprehensible by explaining it in terms of the absence of familiar life functions; when people die, they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel any more; when dogs die, they do not bark or run anymore; dead flowers do not grow or bloom any more.

A child may ask questions immediately or may respond with thoughtful silence and come back at a later time to ask more questions. Each question deserves a simple and relevant answer. Checking to see if a child has understood what has been said is critical; youngsters sometimes confuse what they hear. Also, children learn through repetition, and they may need to hear the same question answered over and over again. As time passes and children have new experiences, they will need further clarification and sharing of ideas and feelings.

It may take time for a child to understand fully the ramifications of death and its emotional implications. A child who knows that Uncle Ed has died may still ask why Aunt Susan is crying. The child needs an answer. "Aunt Susan is crying because she is sad that Uncle Ed has died. She misses him very much. We all feel sad when someone we care about dies."

There are also times when we have difficulty "hearing" what children are asking us. A question that may seem shockingly insensitive to an adult may be a child's request for reassurance. For instance, a question such as, "When will you die?" needs to be heard with the realization that the young child perceives death

as temporary. While the finality of death is not fully understood, a child may realize that death means separation, and separation from parents and the loss of care involved are frightening. Being cared for is a realistic and practical concern, and a child needs to be reassured. Possibly the best way to answer such a question is by asking a clarifying question in return: "Are you worried that I won't be here to take care of you?" If that is the case, the reassuring and appropriate answer would be something like, "I don't expect to die for a long time. I expect to be here to take care of you as long as you need me, but if Mommy and Daddy did die, there are lots of people to take care of you. There's Aunt Ellen and Uncle John or Grandma."

Other problems can arise from children's misconceptions about death. Dr. R. Fulton, in Grollman's "Explaining Death to Children", points out that some children confuse death with sleep, particularly if they hear adults refer to death with one of the many euphemisms for sleep: "eternal rest" or "rest in peace." As a result of the confusion, a child may become afraid of going to bed or of taking naps. Grandma went "to sleep" and hasn't gotten up yet. Maybe I won't wake up either.

Similarly, if children are told that someone who died "went away," brief separations may begin to worry them. Grandpa "went away" and hasn't come back yet. Maybe Mommy won't come back from shopping or from work. Therefore, it is important to avoid such words as "sleep," "rest," or "went away" when talking to a child about death.

Telling children that sickness was the cause of a death can also create problems, if the truth is not tempered with reassurance. Preschoolers cannot differentiate between temporary and fatal illness, and minor ailments may begin to cause them unnecessary concern. When talking to a child about someone who has died as a result of an illness, it might be helpful to explain that only a very serious illness may cause death, and that although we all get sick sometimes, we usually get better again.

Another generalization we often make unthinkingly is relating death to old age. Statements such as, "Only old people die" or, "Aunt Hannah died because she was old," can lead to distrust when a child eventually learns that young people die, too. It might be better to say something like, "Aunt Hannah lived a long time before she died. Most people live a long time, but some don't. I expect you and I will."

If you are concerned about discussing death with your children, you're not alone. Many of us hesitate to talk about death, particularly with youngsters. But death is an inescapable fact of life. We must deal with it and so must our children; if we are to help them, we must let them know it's okay to talk about it.

Religion and Death

Religion is a prime source of strength and reassurance to many people when they are dealing with death. But if religion has not played an important role in a family's life before death, a child may be confused or frightened by the sudden introduction of religious explanations or references. Children tend to hear words literally, and religious explanations that may comfort an adult may unsettle a child. For example, the explanation, "Baby brother is with God now," or "It is God's will," could be frightening rather than reassuring to the young child, who may worry that God might decide to come and get him/her as well.

Also, mixed messages are confusing, deepening apprehensions and misunderstandings children may have about death. A statement such as "Jimmy is happy now that he is in Heaven with the angels," when coupled with obvious and intense grief, can leave them not knowing either to trust what they see or what they hear. They may wonder why everyone is so unhappy if Jimmy is happy. They need to hear something about the sadness we feel about losing Jimmy as we knew and experienced him, in addition to our expressions of religious faith.

Regardless of how strong or comforting religious beliefs may be, death means the loss of a living being, the absence of a physical presence. It is a time of sadness and mourning. It is important to help children accept the realities of death, the loss and the grief. Attempts to protect children deny them opportunities to share their feelings and receive needed support. Sharing feelings helps.

Sharing religious beliefs also helps if done with sensitivity to how children are perceiving and understanding what is happening and what is being said. It is important to check with them to find out how they are hearing and seeing events around them.



Children's Reactions to a Death

Studies have shown that when children experience the death of a close relative, such as a brother, sister, or parent, they often feel guilty. While most of us experience some guilt when we lose a loved one, young children in particular have difficulty understanding cause-and-effect relationships. They think that in some way they caused the death; maybe their angry thoughts caused the person to die. Or they may view the death as a punishment. "Mommy died and left me because I was bad." Children maybe helped to cope with guilt by reassuring them that they have always been loved and still are. It also may help to explain the circumstances of the death. The notion that death is a form of punishment should be avoided.

The death of a close relative may arouse feelings of anger in both adults and children. We may feel angry with the person who died for causing us so much pain and sorrow, or for leaving us alone to cope with life. We may feel angry at the doctors and nurses who could not save our loved one, and we may feel angry at ourselves for being unable to prevent the death.

Children are more apt to express their angry feelings openly, especially when they've lost someone on whom they depended for love and care. It is difficult enough to hear anger directed toward the dead and even more so when it is expressed in what appears to be selfish concerns. But anger is part of grief, and we can help children by accepting their feelings and by not scolding them if they express anger or fear. Children need to be reassured that they will be cared for.

Some children turn their anger inward and become depressed, withdrawn, or develop physical symptoms. If this behavior persists over several months, professional help maybe needed.

Adolescents and Grief

Adolescents already struggle with balancing emotions in their journey to develop their independence from their nuclear family. Death can compound this process. Adolescents are old enough to understand death but are not fully able to integrate thoughts or feel any certainty in how life will continue. They may not need the same level of attention as younger children, but often run the risk of feeling isolated in their grief. Although they usually tend to gravitate to "peer groups" for social support, they will avoid peer circles if they feel they will be treated differently or "singled out" due to their loss.

Returning to school following a death also presents challenges. Adolescents often dread reactions from peers and teachers, as well as the exposure to insensitive remarks. Maintaining grades and extracurricular activities can also lead to increased stress. Life is no longer predictable. They grasp for ways to sustain life as they knew it. Care should be taken to avoid "overload" and develop a pace that's comfortable.

Adolescents may also experiment with drugs and alcohol to escape intense feelings, calm nerves on edge, or block feelings and memories for a brief time. Their activities should be monitored, as well as who they spend their time with. Proper nutrition, exercise, and rest are vital.

The expression of feelings is essential to the healing process. Feelings can include sadness, guilt, anger, fear, loneliness, confusion, and anxiety. Expression of these feelings is not limited to verbalization. Outlets can be found through journaling, art, dance, music, etc. Avoid isolation from needed attachments and encourage contact with old friends, as well as participation in opportunities to make new friends. Support groups are also available through the community-at-large through groups

sponsored by schools, churches, youth centers, hospitals, or mental health organizations.

Effective coping due to loss should include participation in the effort to develop a “new normal” in life. It is a process that includes adopting new roles and assuming new responsibilities to strive for balance on an internal level, as well as within the family.



Facilitating the Healing Process:

- Honest communication
- Social support
- Patience
- Being heard and listened to
- Validation of feelings
- Permission to smile
- The opportunity to say goodbye
- Follow-up activities (get togethers/rituals)
- Keepsakes/articles to keep as remembrances
- Commemorative activities
- Emotional support
- Preparation for comments/questions outside of family
- Making peace with death
- Relying on a belief system

Attending the Funeral

Funerals serve a valuable function. Every society has some form of ceremony to help the living acknowledge, accept and cope with the loss of a loved one. Whether or not a particular child should be included depends on the child and the situation. If the child is old enough to understand and wants to participate, being included may help him or her accept the reality of the death while in the supportive company of family and friends.

If a child is to attend a funeral, he or she should be prepared for what will be heard and seen before, during, and after the services. He or she should be aware that on such a sad occasion people will be expressing their grief in various ways and that some will be crying. If possible, someone who is calm and can give serious consideration and answers to questions the child may ask should accompany him or her. If the child prefers not to attend the funeral, he or she must not be coerced or made to feel guilty.



Explaining Cremation

When a deceased family member or friend will be cremated or already has been cremated, your child may want to know what cremation is. In answering your child's questions about cremation, keep in mind the guidelines that have already been outlined. Keep your explanation of what cremation involves simple and easy to understand.

In explaining cremation to your child, avoid words that may have a frightening connotation such as "fire" and "burn." Instead, in a straight-forward manner, tell your child that the deceased body, enclosed in a casket or container, is taken to a place call a crematory where it goes through a special process that reduces it to small particles resembling fine gray or white sand. Be sure to point out that a dead body feels no pain.

Let your child know that these cremated remains are placed in a container called an urn and returned to the family. Some families choose to keep the ashes, some prefer burial, and others choose to scatter the ashes or have other types of memorials. If cremation has already taken place and the container picked up, you may want to show it to the child. Because children are curious, your child may want to look at the contents. If your child makes such a request, look at them yourself first so that you can describe what they look like. Share this with your child. Then let the child decide whether to proceed further.

If possible, arrange for a time when you and your child can be with the body before the cremation is carried out. If handled correctly, this time can be a positive experience for the child. It can provide an opportunity for the child to say "goodbye" and accept the reality of death. However, the viewing of the body should not be forced. Use your best judgment on whether or not this should be done.

Remembrance

It is always good for everyone to remember their loved one who has died. It is helpful to leave a photo album out for the child to look at the pictures whenever they like.

Help children hold on to happy memories of the person who died. Say "Do you remember?" or, "That was how he wanted it," or, "This was her favorite food". A child will know that it is good to remember and talk about the deceased.



When To Get Help

Please seek help if your child exhibits any of the following:

- Marked change in school performance
- Poor grades despite trying very hard
- A lot of worry or anxiety manifested by refusing to go to school, go to sleep, or take part in age appropriate activities
- Not talking about the person or the death
- Frequent angry outbursts or anger expressed in destructive ways
- Hyperactive activities, fidgeting, constant movement beyond regular playing
- Persistent anxiety, phobias, or panic attacks
- Accident proneness, possibly self-punishment or a call for attention
- Persistent nightmares or sleeping disorders
- Stealing, promiscuity, vandalism, illegal behavior
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than six months) and violations of the rights of others
- Opposition to authority figures
- Frequent unexplainable temper tantrums
- Social withdrawal
- Alcohol or other drug abuse
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Many complaints of physical ailments
- Persistent depression accompanied by poor appetite, sleep difficulties, and thoughts of death
- Long-term absence of emotion

Where To Get Help

Children's Support Services of Covenant Care provides comprehensive services for pediatric and adolescent patients, bereaved children and youth of Covenant Care families, and the community at large. Services are offered through individual and group sessions, which include directive and non-directive play and using varied modalities such as art, music, sand tray, puppetry, games, and stories. Educational workshops and seminars, as well as literature and resource materials are available throughout the year.

Our services also provide professional consultations with other community agencies. These include schools, mental health facilities, daycare centers, local faith communities, hospitals, and other healthcare facilities. Children's Support Services of Covenant Care uses trained and compassionate staff to meet the unique needs of children and youth.



Camp Connect

Camp Connect is a bereavement camp offered to bereaved children in the community, as well as children in our hospice families. Camp Monarch offers a safe environment for children to learn coping skills and to share their feelings with other children who have also experienced a loss. In addition to therapeutic groups, campers have the opportunity to participate in confidence-building activities, and to express their grief through art and music.

Resources

American Childhood Cancer Organization

P.O. Box 498
Kensington, MD 20895
855-858-2226
www.acco.org

The Centering Corporation

7230 Maple Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68134
866-218-0101
www.centering.org

The Compassionate Friends

PO Box 3696
Oakbrook, IL 60522
877-969-0010
www.compassionatefriends.org

The Dougy Center

PO Box 86852
Portland, Oregon 97286
866-775-5683
www.dougy.org

The Hospice Foundation of America

1710 Rhode Island Avenue NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
800-854-3402
www.hospicefoundation.org

Hospice Net

401 Bowling Avenue, Suite 51
Nashville, TN 37205
info@hospicenet.org
www.hospicenet.org

National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization

1731 King Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
703-837-1500
www.nhpco.org

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Dougy Center, "35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child." Portland: Dougy Center, 1999

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Malchiodi, Cathy A, "Understanding Children's Drawings." New York: Gilford Press, 1998

Rathkey, Julia Wilcox, "What Children Need When They Grieve." New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004

Wolf, Anna. W.M, "Helping Your Child to Understand Death." New York: Child Study Press, 1973



Recommended Reading

Notes:

Books for Adults:

"Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals." Grollman, Earl A. Beacon Press 1996

"Children's Conceptions of Death." Lonetto, R.
New York: Springer 1980

"Grieving: How to go on Living When Someone You Love Dies."
Rando, Therese A. Massachusetts: Lexington Books 1988

"Healing A Child's Grieving Heart." Wolfelt, Alan.
Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press 2001

"On Children and Death." Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth.
New York: MacMillan 1983

"What Children Need When They Grieve." Rathkey, J.W.
New York: Three Rivers Press 2004



COVENANT CARE CORPORATE OFFICE

5041 N. I2th Avenue
Pensacola, FL 32504
Tel: 850-433-2155

BRANCH OFFICES

Brewton

1023 Douglas Avenue, Ste. 204
Brewton, AL 36426
Tel: 251-867-6993

Crestview

4100 S. Ferdon Boulevard, Ste. B5
Crestview, FL 32536
Tel: 850-682-3628

Daphne

1040 Stanton Road, Ste. D
Daphne, AL 36526
Tel: 251-626-5255

Dothan

104 Rock Bridge Road
Dothan, AL 36303
Tel: 334-794-7847

Fort Walton Beach

220 Eglin Parkway NE
Fort Walton Beach, FL 32547
Tel: 850-729-1800

Marianna

4215 Kelson Avenue, Ste. E
Marianna, FL 32446
Tel: 850-482-8520

Milton

6479 Caroline Street, Ste. B
Milton, FL 32570
Tel: 850-202-5930

Mobile

3201 Dauphin Street, Ste. D
Mobile, AL 36606
Tel: 251-478-8671

Panama City

107 W. 19th Street
Panama City, FL 32405
Tel: 850-785-3040

Pensacola

2001 N. Palafox Street
Pensacola, FL 32501
Tel: 850-202-0840

Tallahassee

1921 Capital Circle NE
Tallahassee, FL 32308
Tel: 850-575-4998
Tel: 850-202-0920

INPATIENT FACILITIES

Covenant Hospice Inpatient and Palliative Care Center at West Florida Hospital

8383 N. Davis Highway, 3 North
Pensacola, FL 32514
Tel: 850-202-0920

Joyce Goldenberg Hospice - Inpatient Residence

10075 Hillview Road
Pensacola, FL 32514
Tel: 850-484-3529

Covenant Hospice Inpatient and Palliative Care Center at Bay Medical Center - Sacred Heart Health System

615 N. Bonita Avenue, 3rd Floor
South Panama City, FL 32401
Tel: 850-785-5550

COMMUNITY SUPPORT CENTERS

Eufaula, AL

224 E. Broad Street
Eufaula, AL 36027
Tel: 334-232-4137

Perry, FL

1306-AJefferson Street
Perry, FL 32348
Tel: 850-584-9886

TOLL FREE NUMBER

1-855-CARE-365



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