



Talking About Death

Age Appropriate Information for Children

Jennifer Feinberg, LCSW

Bereavement Coordinator, Supporting Children & Families

When a loved one **has a very serious disease**, a common concern for families is how to explain illness and death to children. Understandably, talking to children about death is often complicated by the fact that adults have trouble sorting out their own feelings. We can help you create an age-appropriate approach to talking and being present with your grieving children.

We recognize that you know your children better than anyone else. You are the expert. Here are a few general points and suggestions to keep in mind as you guide your children in a way that seems right for them and for your family:

- Give honest, short and truthful explanations to children so they feel safe and trusting.
- Use the 'D' words such as death, dying, disease. Name the disease for them. **Avoid** phrases such as passed away, sleeping, taking a long trip/journey, ill or sick. These phrases can confuse children and cause misconceptions.
- Provide your child with information that is at your child's level of understanding.
- Tell your child what to expect. Explain the events that are occurring, why you are crying, etc... **If circumstances permit**, allow them to be involved in direct contact with loved one if they choose.
- Encourage expression of emotions including crying, hugging, or holding. It can be helpful to acknowledge that it is alright to feel different emotions at different times.
- Children can also write letters or draw pictures to express their thoughts and feelings.

- Share your feelings, but don't overwhelm your child by using your child as a confidant or you only source of support.
- You are a role model for your child. They will learn how to grieve by watching you.
- Let your child ask questions and answer them truthfully. If you can't answer some, it's alright to let them know you will find out more information and then discuss with them.
- Children tend to grieve in cycles. They may be happy one minute and then crying hysterically the next. Children can show grief in many different ways.
- Communicate with your child's school as they can be a wonderful resource.
- Talk to teens in an honest and straightforward manner and ask them if they would like to know when new information is learned.
- Include teens if they want to help and lend support. Discuss opportunities and ways for them to help, but do not require their assistance.
- Approach teens privately, not around peers or siblings.
- Allow for continued extracurricular activities and interests as much as possible.
- Encourage teens to use multiple modes of expressing feelings: journaling, sketching, **letter writing** and painting, etc.
- Encourage teens to talk with supportive, trusted peers and other supportive adults.

Memorial Services and Funerals

Kid-Friendly Definitions

Casket: A special box that a dead body goes in before it is buried. A casket can have a pillow and soft cushion for the body to lay on. Only people who die go in caskets.

Cemetery: A special park that people are buried in after they die. This is not a park that you play in but it is a special place to think about and remember a person who has died.

Cremation: When a deceased person's body is placed in a very warm room so that it turns the body into ash. These ashes are collected and are often placed in a special container called an urn.

Death: When the body stops working. The person cannot feel, think, talk or do anything anymore. When something dies, it cannot come back to life.

Hospice: A type of care for people who are dying. When someone is in hospice, the doctors know that they can't make them better anymore, so they work to keep the person comfortable until they die.



continued on page 3

Should I Include My Child in Funeral Services?

It is a common misconception that children should not attend funerals or memorial services. It can be helpful for children to experience the end of life rituals alongside the adults in the family. Sometimes there may be some cultural or religious reasons why children may not attend and this would need to be explained for their understanding.

Give your child the choice—

Allow your child to make an informed decision about whether they want to attend and even participate in the rituals of your culture. Describe what happens at a wake, shiva, memorial service, funeral, and burial. Give as many specifics as your child seems interested in hearing.

If your child chooses to attend—

Preparation is the key to help kids memorialize a loved one. Prepare your child for what they may expect to see and hear before, during, and after the ceremony. They can help with the planning (flowers, music, poem) and also include a special gift/memento (toy, letter, drawing, photograph) to place in the casket. If the body will be viewed, let children know in advance. Prepare them for how the deceased will look and feel. Explain that people may give extra hugs and choose to touch the deceased person if there is an open casket. If body will be cremated, explain what that is and that there are plans for the ashes. Make sure the child knows the person is dead and does not feel any pain or anything at all. Some people may be crying, sharing funny stories, or be very quiet. It's all acceptable and they should feel free to express their own feelings as they choose. Consider making arrangements with another family member or friend to be available to your child in case they need breaks from the activities.

If your child chooses not to attend—

You may want to explore the reasons why. This allows you to correct any misconceptions or add additional information they are seeking. Children need accurate, honest information so they don't create their own scenarios. We can anticipate that over time, as children reach new developmental milestones, they typically will revisit the meaning of the loss of their loved one and how their death has impacted them. Never force a child to go. There are other ways to say goodbye.



*** Note: Physical distancing guidelines may not allow large gatherings to occur at this time. Consider alternatives such as live-streaming the service or inviting the children to plan a simple service at home.**

continued on page 4

Understanding Death

Age-Appropriate Information



Birth – 2 year-olds: do not understand death, but recognize change in family dynamics. Common reactions may include crankiness, crying or clinging.

2 – 5 year-olds: think of death as temporary. Their emotions towards death change frequently, and they have magical thinking powers to fantasize the return or healing of another. Common reactions may include: bedwetting, baby talk, regressive behaviors, or separation anxiety.

Book- ***Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children***

By: Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen

Website- Sesame Street

www.pbs.org/parents/whenfamiliesgrieve

6 – 8 year-olds: begin to understand the irreversibility of death. They may believe in superstitions and/or worry that other people may die. They may develop a strong fantasy life in an effort to make everything the way it was at another time. Common reactions may include: anxiety, crying, headaches, denial of death, separation fears.

Book- ***I Miss You—A First Look At Death***

By: Pat Thomas

Website- www.kidsaid.com

9 – 12 year-olds: Truly understand the finality and irreversibility of death. They may consider how death affects their lifestyle and may fear their own mortality. They may seek information as to the details of illness/death and need explicit explanations. New development of fears and phobias are common. Common reactions may include: anxiety, physical pains, feelings of guilt, day dreaming, school problems.

Book- ***What On Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies***

By: Trevor Romain

Teens- 13 – 15 year-olds: Teens at this age have likely been seeking some more independence. They may feel torn or ambivalent about going to family or peers for support. They understand death but the ability to cope varies by personal experience and development. Teens of this age can be empathic and also engage in abstract thinking. They may be aware of various stressors within the family and be apprehensive to ask questions or share their feelings to avoid “burdening” the family. They may also begin questioning afterlife.

Teens- 16 – 19 year-olds: Teens at this age are entering a time of transition and becoming more independent. They likely are thinking about their future and what it might look like. Peers continue to play a major role in their lives and they typically develop a network of friends with whom they spend a great deal of time. Teens may cope by spending a considerable amount of time away from the house and using denial in order to avoid losing control. Teens may begin to challenge family beliefs especially those pertaining to religion and spirituality.

Books- ***Teenagers Face to Face with Bereavement***

By: Karen Gravelle

Websites- www.hellogrief.org

The logo for NorthShore University Health System features a stylized blue wave icon to the left of the text "NorthShore" in a large, bold, blue font. Below "NorthShore" is the text "University Health System" in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font.

Home and Hospice Services

Jennifer Feinberg, LCSW
Bereavement Support Services
4901 Searle Parkway, Suite 160
Skokie, Illinois 60076-8006
(847) 982-4351
jfeinberg@northshore.org