

Children and grief

Explaining death to children

There is no single 'right' way to tell children about death. Adults should be guided by their own styles, their religious beliefs and culture and what they feel comfortable discussing.

Why is it necessary to explain death to young children?

- Children today are all too aware of the reality of death, usually more than adults realise.
- Avoiding the topic of death does not make it go away.
- By offering children silence and secrecy adults deny children the opportunity to go through the grieving process with the support of other family members.

How should I discuss death with a child—what should I say?

- It is important to communicate with the child in a loving and natural way.
- Use words that the child will understand based on the child's age and abilities—"age appropriate honesty".
- Children are naturally curious and will have many questions—let their questions guide you.
- What do they want to know? What do they understand?
- It is important to allow children to talk about their fears so that they can be brought into the open and dealt with.
- Include children in the grieving process so as to ensure that they do not suffer in silence and that an environment is created in which they can learn healthy ways of coping.

What do they want to know? What do they understand?

- Answer these questions as simply and clearly as you can.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't have all the answers.
- Try to avoid using phrases such as 'passed away'; 'left us'; 'gone on a long journey'; 'is asleep' as this may be confusing and create hope that the loved one will return.

How can I bring up the subject of death?

- Talking about change and growth that occurs each day is a good way to introduce the discussion of death—new leaves replace the old ones that die

- It is important to point out that while separation is sad and painful, it is an essential part of life and nature.

How will children respond?

- When death occurs it is important to tell children immediately.
- If possible, they should be told by a parent or someone close to them.
- Children may experience shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and social withdrawal.
- Some children may experience a change in attitude or behaviour.
- While some display indifference others become clingy and dependent.
- Other common behaviour patterns are panic, tiredness, hyperactivity and even regressive behaviours.

How can I support children who are struggling with death?

- Be quiet and learn to listen to children.
- Observe their body language and hear the tone and timbre of their voices.
- Allow them to talk about death—how they feel, what they think, what they know and what they want to know.
- Let them know you are trying to understand what they are trying to say.
- Hear their questions and try to understand what it is that the child is actually asking.
- It is far healthier for adults and children to seek understanding rather than for adults to protect the child by providing answers that are not true or that avoid the issue.
- Take time and provide opportunities for ongoing discussion and questions.
- Move slowly, step-by-step—listening and responding to a child's concerns and questions.

Do children really grieve?

- Yes. Grief is an expression of love and it is an appropriate emotion for people of all ages.

What are some of children's emotional reactions to death?

- Denial
- Sadness
- Panic
- Guilt
- Depression
- Anger
- Fear
- Feeling that they are to blame and did something to cause it
- Anxiety
- Confusion

How do children react to the death of a grandparent?

- This may be the first time a child is confronted with death and their reaction will depend on the closeness of the relationship.

Should children attend the funeral?

- As soon as children are able to comprehend what a funeral service is about they should be given the choice.
- For their choice to be meaningful children need information and alternatives. Explain what they are likely to do and see.

... And the cemetery?

- Don't assume that the burial will be too traumatic for a child.
- Explain the procedure and consult the child about their wishes and needs.

What else can we do to help children?

- Avoid making any abrupt, final decisions immediately following the death of a loved one.
- Children need to retain roots in the same neighbourhood with long-time playmates.
- Don't attempt to eradicate the memory of a loved one.
- Give children pictures and tangible reminders to help them remember the person.
- Children need reassurance and acknowledgement of their feelings.
- Always remember children are never too old or too young to be told that they are loved.
- Children need routine and consistency. Healthy and appropriate limit setting can help the child to feel safe and secure.
- Children need boundaries and limits in order to feel safe and minimise any feelings of chaos or things feeling out of control.
- Children need love and reassurance.

What can adults do to help themselves?

- By dealing with your own grief, you will learn to accept death. Acceptance will help you and the children start to build a bridge to span that chasm with the things of life that still count—memory, family, friendship, love.
- Most important—for adults and children—is the knowledge that life continues despite pain.
- Healing begins when you remember the life more than the death.

You may always be bereaved, but you need not be in constant grief. Recovery and growth are possible.