



## **Helping Children Deal With Death**

**B**illy wants Grampa to play with him. The boy does not understand death and its final, irrevocable claim on the old man who once rolled Parcheesi dice with such gusto. "His body stopped working," Billy's mother explains.

"Maybe the hospital will fix Grampa so he can play with me tomorrow," Billy says.

"Sweetheart," his mother says, pausing to measure her words carefully. "Grampa is dead. He won't ever be able to play with you again. Remember Freddie, your goldfish? Well, that's like what happened with Grampa. He won't come back either."

"Mommy, are you crying because you're sad?"

"Yes, honey, Mommy's very sad. I loved Grampa, and I miss him very much."

"I'm sad, too."

"Come over here and sit close to me. We'll be sad together."



The 3-year-old boy went to the White House and peered up at the secretary of the President of the United States, the woman who had worked for his father.

"When is my daddy coming back?" asked the boy, whose parents had given him the rather grand name of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr.



**I**t can be heartbreaking. But letting children talk about death when they show an interest is important. Take time to listen—for their sake and yours. Treat their feelings and questions patiently and sensitively; give simple, direct, honest answers; share your feelings; show them respect. Children can teach us about death. They can show us unique

and valuable ways of perceiving, responding to, and dealing with death.

### **SEEING DEATH AS PART OF LIFE**

Even very young children are aware of death, although often only vaguely. They hear of a neighbor's dog killed by a car; they notice that the



elderly man with the cane no longer sits on his front porch; they find a dead bird beneath an old oak; they see the colorful flowers die when the sky turns cold and gray; and they watch television. Sometimes they even lose a parent or a sibling, tragedies that are sure to bring death home, both literally and figuratively.

It is a mistake to shield children from death. It is a part of life, and children naturally are curious about it. They deserve to explore and learn about death's mystery with adults who love and care for them. When you do not allow children to talk about death or acknowledge their feelings of loss, you effectively short-circuit the normal, healthy grieving process. You also create confusion.

When we try to insulate a child, we send a message: *You can't handle death.* We also imply that the child is not important enough for inclusion in family crises. Stop to consider whether you're trying to protect the child—or protect yourself. Often when we choose not to talk about death, we are attempting to shield ourselves. Your ability to help a child deal with loss hinges on how well you yourself have come to terms with it. Keep in mind: Most children are quite capable of dealing with death.

### BEING AWARE OF DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES

Infants—generally children under a year old—seem to have very little awareness of death. They are, however, susceptible to feelings of loss and separation. An infant will, for example, become upset when a parent leaves the room. A baby might even show the same signs of stress as an adult who is trying to deal with the death of a loved one: crankiness, eating disorders, altered sleep patterns, intestinal disturbances.

Toddlers (children from 1 to 3 years old) generally view death as temporary—a game of disappearance and reappearance. Children between the ages of 3 and 6 might believe their thoughts, feelings or actions can *cause* death. Troubling feelings of responsibility and guilt can arise.

Children between the ages of 6 and 10 develop a more mature understanding of death and begin to

see it as both inevitable and irreversible.

But remember: Each child is unique. Many factors influence a youngster's understanding of death and his or her response to loss.

### DECIDING WHAT TO SAY

When death occurs, give an honest, simple explanation: *Something very sad has happened. When Robert went out to Bushy's doghouse to feed her this morning, Bushy was dead. That means her body stopped working and can't be fixed.* A child might react with sadness, disbelief, anger,

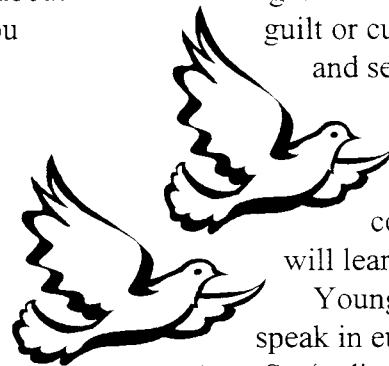
guilt or curiosity. He might want to go out and see Bushy or touch the body. He might notice the dog doesn't breathe or move. If allowed to explore to the extent he feels comfortable, he almost certainly will learn for himself what *dead* means.

Young children think literally. *Don't* speak in euphemisms. If Aunt Susie died, say Aunt Susie died. *Don't* say she left; a child might wonder when she's coming back or why she went away without saying good-bye. *Don't* say you lost her; a 4-year-old might ask why nobody's out looking for her. *Don't* say she went to sleep and never woke up; a young child might become frightened of going to bed at night. *Do* use correct, albeit simple, medical terms. *Aunt Susie died of cancer.*

Provide simple, truthful answers to a child's questions, keeping them as brief as possible; allow the child to guide you with his or her questions. Try to pick up on unspoken questions, as well: *Are you afraid Daddy might die too?*

If you don't know the answer to a child's question, just say so. Children don't need you to have all the answers. They need your honesty; they need you. It's okay to be quiet awhile in the midst of your discussion. Learn to be comfortable with silence, to communicate with a hug or a held hand. Use silent time to think about what, if anything, needs to be said next. Let your child do the same.

Remember that young children have a short attention span. Their interest in a topic might come and go. Generally, children can tolerate



overwhelming sadness only briefly. They might alternate moments of introspection and grief with times of play. For young children, this ebb-and-flow pattern of mourning is normal. Let a child's mood and questions guide you in helping him or her deal with loss.

Keep in mind, too, that children under the age of 5 or 6 understand only tenuously the concept of time. Words like *forever* have little meaning. They cannot grasp the permanence of death. To them, it may seem to be a reversible condition, like the flu.

And remember: It's okay to cry. Your expression of emotions can provide an example of healthy grieving, showing a child that it's all right to feel sad or angry or confused and to let it show. Allow children to express a full range of emotions, respecting each and every one without judging any of them. As the death specialist Dr. Alan Wolfelt puts it: "If handled with warmth and understanding, a child's early experience with the death of someone loved can be an opportunity to learn about life and living as well as death and dying."

### RECOGNIZING COMMON CONCERNS

Be aware that, following the death of a friend or family member, young children might worry that:

- they somehow caused the death
- a parent or guardian may die too
- they, themselves, might die

As needed, comfort a child with a loving touch and reassuring words: *Nothing you said, did, or thought caused your pet to die.*

*Your brother died because of the car wreck; you didn't have anything to do with it.*

*Mommy and Daddy are young and healthy. We should live for a long, long time.*

*There will always be someone to take care of you.*

*Yes, one day you will die, too, but that shouldn't happen for a very, very long time.*

When a parent or sibling dies, children require an extra measure of comfort, repeated reassurance, and plenty of time to come to terms with the loss.

### FACILITATING THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Children coming to terms with death usually go through three stages:

- **Shock**, as characterized by disbelief, protest, denial, curiosity, numbness.
- **Suffering and disorientation**, as characterized by sadness, guilt, hurt, anger, fear, withdrawal, despair, depression, and physical problems such as pants-wetting, loss of appetite and insomnia. *(It's hard to watch children struggle with intense feelings of grief. But allowing them to acknowledge and experience their pain leads to a healthy resolution of the grieving process.)*
- **Readjustment**, as characterized by an acceptance of the loss and a return to the routine: playing, going to school, doing chores around the house. Troubling thoughts and emotions gradually are released; comforting memories are retained. But keep in mind that some sadness and a sense of loss will abide and occasionally resurface.

Grieving children commonly move back and forth through these stages until the process is complete. The duration of any one stage, as well as of the overall grieving process, varies among children based on their age and relationship to the deceased.

**Should a young child go to the funeral home or attend the burial service?** Yes—but only if the child chooses to go. And only if he or she is sufficiently prepared. Explain beforehand what the funeral home looks like, who will be there, how Grampa's body will be dressed and that it will be lying in a box called a casket. The child should be accompanied by a loving adult who can answer questions and provide a sense of security. Keep the visit short.

Invite the child to draw a picture, write a note or bring a small, special toy for leaving in the casket (or with the cremation ashes) as a special gift. Prepare the child for prayer services, grave-site rites, and the expression of sorrow by others. Participating in these rituals is one of the best ways of learning about death and grief. It also underscores the child's social capability and self-worth and fosters a unique sense of family and community—of the support system available to us all in times of need.

Encourage children to remember the loved one who has died. Look at pictures, gifts, and other mementos of time spent with the dead person. Talk to the child about that person.

### **HEEDING NATURE'S LESSONS**

Don't feel alone and overwhelmed teaching your child about death. Lessons on death and dying surround us season after season. A tiny flower—growing, then blooming, then dying—can become a classroom full of lessons on the cycle of life. A dead insect becomes a wonderful teacher. The death of the family canary or guinea pig provides a great opportunity for teaching children about death, loss, grief, and society's rituals of burial and mourning.

### **DISCUSSING THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF DEATH**

Most adults, when faced with the death of a close friend or family member, find comfort in religious beliefs and practices. And it is natural to want children to find some similar measure of solace. But it is important to be careful when discussing spiritual issues with children. Don't say God took Uncle Joe. Such statements breed resentment. After a Kentucky coal miner died on the job, his 3-year-old daughter announced she didn't want God in her house anymore because God took her daddy away.

Avoid abstract, theological explanations too. It's hard enough for an adult to understand how an accidental death could be "God's will." Such a statement is almost certain to confuse and anger a young child.

Share your spiritual convictions, but only in bite-sized pieces. Speak from your heart. But remember: Your goal is to comfort a child, not to unburden yourself at his or her expense.

### **KNOWING WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP**

If a child faced with the death of a friend or family member acts as though nothing has happened; becomes physically or verbally aggressive over a sustained period; behaves differently; continues to withdraw socially; or exhibits other questionable behavior, seek help

from a qualified professional. Check with a family therapist certified by the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, with a hospice bereavement counselor, or with your local Comprehensive Care Center.

You too should reach for a helping hand if you are having trouble coping with the loss of someone who was close to you. Seeking help is a sign of intelligence and strength. It's never too late to work through grief.

### **STORYTELLING**

Australian psychologist Doris Brett thinks parents and caregivers should tell or read stories, either fictional or real, about young children who have dealt successfully with loss. You don't need to be the world's best storyteller; all you need is to be prepared and willing to give it a whirl. Storytelling is an enjoyable, creative, emotionally safe way of introducing youngsters to death.

Read to children. But first, review the book to make sure you are comfortable with it. After reading, allow time to answer questions, share feelings and clear up misconceptions. Most libraries and book stores offer a variety of children's books on death, loss, and the grieving/mourning process. Just ask. 📖

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