



Helping Children Understand Death

The death of a family member, friend or pet is a very difficult time in the life of a child and his/her parents. Grief is a very painful process for everyone, but grieving should be encouraged. How a child grieves or reacts to death will depend on age, previous experience and preparedness for the event. Children will mourn differently from adults, but they do mourn.

Our attitudes about death are formed at an early age and we need to help children understand this stage of life early too. Just as parents explain how life begins to their children, they must also be able to discuss its end. Here are some suggestions for helping children understand death.



1. Make the most of opportunities to introduce the concept of death to a young child. For example, finding a dead bird in the park or the death of a goldfish are good times to begin such discussions. If the child expresses sadness, encourage him/her to mourn and, if appropriate, consider helping the child to bury the animal.
2. Touring a neighbourhood funeral home and/or cemetery is an option that will give your child factual information about what happens to the body after death and about the funeral process. Funeral directors are often experienced in answering children's questions and often parents find such a tour informative and interesting as well.
3. When someone dies, be open and honest with your child. Don't try to protect the child from experiencing pain and grief. Keeping secrets from her/him is very difficult for the child, when s/he knows something is definitely wrong. Talking about it brings acceptance for both the adult and the child. Be prepared to repeat explanations and reassurances from time to time. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so.
4. Avoid euphemisms in explaining death such as "gone on a trip," "lost" or "sleeping." Children take such terms literally and may become fearful of sleeping or going on trips. It is best to use the terms dead or died. Explain what these mean in a physical sense to the young child. For example, "Grandpa's heart is not beating anymore, he can't breathe."
5. Tell children what happens in your religious, social and family traditions when someone dies. If you have religious beliefs that explain life after death or what death means, this can be very helpful. However, avoid blaming God with explanations such as "God loved Mommy so much that He wanted her to be with Him." This will likely result in resentful feelings towards God who took the child's Mommy away.
6. Be alert to hidden fears. If grandma died in the hospital, the child may think he/she will die if hospitalized. Explain the circumstances of the death such as a serious illness, old age, a car accident, etc. Also children need information and reassurance on what would happen and who would care for them if their parents died.
7. Expect children to play-act death situations. This is natural and quite helpful for them, particularly after a death experience.
8. Children's storybooks about death can help both before and after a death experience. Ask your librarian to recommend age-appropriate ones. Be sure to read the book first to see if it is suitable for your child and for the situation.

Children's Books about Death and Dying

The Dead Bird Margaret Wise Brown

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf Leo Buscaglia

Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs Tomie de Paola

My Grandpa Died Today Joan Fassler

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney Judith Viorst

Love You Forever Robert Munsch