

Explaining death to our children

It is important to explain death to children

When children are very young, opportunities will arise at home or around the neighbourhood to help prepare children for a growing awareness of death through the loss of plants and animals from their world. For example, a plant dies or a bird is found dead in the garden. More significantly, a pet dies. These are ideal times to teach the very young child about the cycle of life and death and the natural event of death through ageing or death through an accident.



Why we die

The simplest explanation is that all living things on this earth die. It is part of the life cycle. Animals make a good comparison, particularly if the child has had a pet which has died or found a dead bird in the garden. It makes us sad when an animal dies and it's okay to feel sad.

It's the same with people. We are born as babies, we grow up into children and adults, then we grow old and die when our time for living is over. It is a normal part of life and it is all right to feel sad about someone dying.

It may help to explain that, although most people don't die until they are quite old, sometimes younger grown-ups and even children might have an accident or illness and die. Even though the doctors and nurses try their very best, they are unable to make them well again.

It is wise to simply and honestly answer children's questions as they ask them and not to go into long explanations. Don't be surprised if small children keep coming back and asking the same questions over and over again. Repetition is essential to help them understand.

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What to tell the children

One of the most difficult situations adults have to face is telling children that someone they love has died.

We worry that they won't understand or that they will be emotionally devastated. We automatically try to protect them from hurt.

In fact children handle death very well, often much better than adults do and, in reality, they may be more hurt, more frightened and more resentful if we exclude them from our pain or try to cover it up.

Children need to say goodbye to a loved one too. They also need to be included in the family's grief so they don't feel rejected and left out of a family occasion.

They must be told as soon as possible that a person they care about has died, preferably by a parent or someone who is very close to them. They need to be told the truth, not half truths or fairy stories which will only confuse them and may have adverse emotional effects later in life.

What dead means

Dead means that the life has gone and the body that is left can no longer do all the normal things like walking and talking, eating and sleeping, laughing and crying. The body can no longer think or feel, and in the case of someone who died after a painful illness, there is no more pain.

It is of little help to children to be told that grandma went to sleep and didn't wake up, grandpa went to hospital and died, God wanted grandma in heaven or God wanted grandpa because he was so good. These messages can cause much worry and upset for a child and they may not want to go to sleep, go to hospital, fear God, or not be good because they fear that such things will lead to a personal death.

From these responses, it can be stressed how important it is that we should feel comfortable in honestly saying grandma or grandpa is dead. The child above all else should be made to feel safe from personal harm and made to realise that death is not infectious, ie does not pass to him or her just because the deceased is known to him or her.

Children should be taught that it is natural for people to grow up and get older and as people get very old their bodies wear out and eventually stop. Death is not like sleeping where the body is made fresh and strong by resting, death is when the body stops being alive. Children should be reassured that their own bodies are still young and strong and have a long time to go before wearing out.

Explain what happens to the body

They should be told gently what to expect at the viewing and funeral and encouraged to attend so that they can say their goodbyes too. It may help to explain that the real person (or the soul) of the person they loved has left the body (or the 'house' in which it lived while it was here) and gone to the place that God has appointed for him or her.

All that is left is the body 'house' which no longer has any life and is cold to touch.

The difference between cremation and burial

Out of respect for the real person who was once alive, the body 'house' is gently placed in a coffin and either buried or cremated.

With burial the coffin is lowered into the ground and covered and the body 'house' gradually wears away until all that is left is bones in the ground.

With cremation the coffin is carefully burned in a special kiln until all that is left are small pieces of bones which are then placed in an urn. These can be placed in a Memorial Garden, kept by the family or disposed of according to the wishes of the deceased and their family.

Whatever questions the children ask, honesty and simplicity are the keys to helping them with their grief. It is a good idea to ask them if what you have told them answered their question/s or would they like to know any more. Reassure them that they can always come back later and ask more questions.

And if you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say so. Parents are human too and don't always have the answers.

Answering more questions

Children will ask many other questions about the death of animals and humans. Many of these questions will reveal underlying fears they may have about dying as a result of feeling sick or being bad. Other questions may focus on their observations of cemeteries and the visual displays of grief in real life or on television. No matter what the content of the question asked, a calm well presented discussion with the child about their question is the best approach.

Don't add to the mystery of death and make it more frightening by not wanting to reveal it to an inquiring mind. Even in this modern world adults find it hard to talk about death. If a child has been taught by a sensitive parent or friend about death as a natural process, then he or she will be better able to cope with the grief that comes to all of us one day when we face the loss of a loved one.

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Supporting teenagers

Teenagers may need someone outside of the family to talk to, so it is a good idea to let the school know someone close to them has died. It may also help to let a sports coach or other group leaders know of the death, if the teenagers are involved in different activities.

Appropriate literature, that is not especially given to them but just left lying around the house, can be valuable. Some films or videos will also help. Advice on these and any printed material can be sought from any qualified and experienced bereavement counsellor or educator. Above all, we must talk with teenagers and show them support.

Listed below are some resources that will further assist you.

Books for children

Why did Grandpa Die? A book about Death by B S Hazen (Western Publishing Co)

Something I've Never Felt Before – How Teenagers Cope With Grief by Doris Zagdanski (Hill of Content 1990)

Lifetimes – a beautiful way to explain death to children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

Books for adults

The Grieving Child: a parents guide by Helen Fitzgerald (Fireside 1992)

Healing A Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for families, friends and caregivers by Alan D Wolfelt PhD (Companion Press 2001)

The Grief of our Children by Dianne McKissock (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1998)

Website

www.grieflink.asn.au – a South Australian support service

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