

Explaining Death (and Traumatic Loss) to Children

Children experience similar feelings to adults following the death of a significant person in their lives. These include shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness and fear. However, they often express their feelings differently from adults. Children will often see-saw in and out of grief and demonstrate a range of emotions following a death which may include excitement, anger and sadness. Children are not born with an automatic understanding of death, i.e. that it is universal, irreversible and has a cause. Adults need to help them understand these concepts and this is best done by giving the child clear, honest (age-appropriate) information on a frequent basis. At times, children can appear very accepting of a bereavement while, later, they may become very distressed. This can be confusing for adults and it is important that children are given the opportunity to display their feelings of grief in their own time.

Developmental Stage

Children's understanding of death will depend largely upon their developmental stage. The following guide is based on chronological ages and is a guide only, remembering that each child is unique.

0-2 Years

- Children experience feelings of pain and loss. They will protest loudly and may search repeatedly for the deceased. They need a consistent routine, cuddles and hugs and they need to be told repeatedly that the person will not be returning. It is important that special memories and photographs are kept for the children as they grow older.

2-5 Years

- Children at this stage think 'literally' so use of language is extremely important. Statements such as, "gone for a long sleep" and "we've lost him/her" can often cause confusion. They still do not understand the irreversibility of death and need to be told repeatedly that the dead cannot come back. At this age, children may believe that their actions can impact on the world around them and that, in some ways, they may have caused the death. They need to be told that people die for a variety of reasons, but not because of anything we say. Children at this age will often act out through play what is happening around them. They need their questions answered openly, honestly and simply. It is also important to maintain consistent routine.

5-8 Years

- Children can usually understand that death is irreversible and universal. They will ask frequent questions about death and may become preoccupied with thoughts of death. They may sometimes feel responsible for the surviving members and they need to be allowed to be children, not overwhelmed with adult responsibilities. It helps if the child can explore feelings of guilt and responsibility and that their questions are answered openly and honestly. It is important that they get support at school, as often children who are bereaved feel different. They often experience bullying at school because of this. They may have temper tantrums, sleep disturbance, nightmares, and also may act younger than their age.

8-12 Years

- At this stage children usually understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Communication can become difficult and grief can be expressed in terms of physical aches and pains or challenging behaviour. They need the opportunity to talk to a trusted adult. They need reassurance about changes in lifestyle e.g. the money situation and whether they can remain in their house. Also they need support at school in dealing with peer groups and they may be more vulnerable to bullying.

13-18 Years

- Teenagers are particularly vulnerable as at this stage they try to solve problems themselves and find it difficult to seek help and support from adults. They

understand the concept of death, but do not have the emotional maturity to deal with it. It is normal for adolescents to have difficulty talking to their parents, but they need the opportunity to talk to trusted adults or peers. School can provide security and routine, however, it can also be a place where they feel isolated, different and have difficulties with school work. They may feel overwhelmed by exams and coursework. Adolescents need choice with regard to the funeral and subsequent life changes. At the same time they should not be burdened with adult responsibilities, e.g. "Be strong for your mother" or "You're the man of the house now."

General Advice

Things to Do

- Be honest and tell the truth about what's happened right away. This helps to explain why adults may seem upset. Being open (and emotional) can help children learn how to mourn and process their feelings.
- Be prepared for a variety of emotional responses. However this is explained, the child / young person will feel upset, and may even be angry about the loss. Try and make sure the child's emotions are accepted (whatever they feel). They need time to process the emotional trauma and shock, just like adults do.
- Make sure you use the words dead or died. Research shows that using realistic words to describe death helps the grieving process.
- Share information in doses. Gauge what your child can handle by giving information in small bits at a time. You'll know what more to do based on the questions your child asks.
- Be comfortable saying, "I don't know." Having all the answers is never easy, especially during a time of such heartache. It's helpful to tell your child that you may not know about certain things, like, "How did grandpa die?" "What happens to Aunt Rita at the funeral home," "What made Spike run into the street, Mommy?" or other unanswerable questions.
- Cry. Cry together. Cry often. It's healthy and healing.
- Allow your child to participate in rituals. Where possible, involve the child in picking clothing for the person who has died, photos for the memorial etc This can help them gain a sense of control over the loss.
- Let your child grieve in his or her own way. Allow your child to be silent about the death. It's also natural for a child to feel lonely and isolate themselves at this time too. It's also common for children to seem unaffected by the loss. There is no right way to grieve.
- Prepare your child for what they will see in the funeral home or service. Tell children what they will see, who will be there, how people may be feeling and what they will be doing. For young children, be specific in your descriptions of what the surroundings will look like.
- Prepare your child for the future without your loved one. Talk about how it will feel to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and special moments without your loved one. Ask your child to help plan how to move through the next calendar event. This is usually best done after the child has processed the initial shock.
- Prepare to talk about thoughts and feelings often. It is likely that you'll have to tend to the subject of death for days, weeks and months to come. Check in and be available for ongoing discussions since mourning is a process.
- Remember to take care of yourself. Children learn what they see, so be a role model for self-care at this critical time.
- Young children need to be told repeatedly that when someone dies they can never come back. It is important to explain that the dead person doesn't eat, sleep, or feel any pain.
- Children benefit from having the cause of the death explained to them. This should be done simply and in a language that the child understands. There is a risk that if children are not given a clear explanation, they may blame themselves. If the circumstances

surrounding the death were traumatic, avoid sharing all of the details, but make the explanation clear enough so the child can understand (e.g. avoid details about method, but explain who was involved).

- It is important that a child understands that everyone dies at some time, but most people don't die until they are older. Following a death, children, can become very anxious and often have difficulty separating from family members. It helps them to regain confidence in the world if they can understand the concepts of death.
- Children need to hear that nothing we think or say can cause death, often children blame themselves when someone special dies. It is important to emphasise to them that it was not their fault.
- When explaining death to a child it may be helpful to link it to any previous experiences they have had of death, such as the death of a pet or a plant. It is important that the child has the opportunity to talk often about the death in order to facilitate their understanding that it is irreversible, universal and has a cause, as often cartoons and computer games portray death as a temporary state.

Things to Avoid:

- Don't hide your grief from your child. Seeing you grieve during and long after your loved ones death will let child know that it's normal and healthy to cry and feel sad after significant loss.
- Don't be afraid to share memories. Sometimes parents feel afraid to talk about the person who has died, thinking it will cause pain to others. Research shows that the pain of re-living memories or sharing stories actually aids in healing.
- Don't avoid connecting with your child because you feel helpless or uncomfortable, or don't know what to say. Sometimes a knowing look can be a powerful connection. Even a touch or a hug can offer great comfort.
- Don't change the subject when your child comes into the room. Doing so places a mark of taboo on the subject of death. Instead, adjust your wording and level of information when a child is present.
- Don't change your daily routine. Children need consistency. Try as much as possible to keep your usual daily routines at home and at work. Also, try to ensure that your child continues to take part in their usual activities like attending school and social events.
- Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter or having fun. Laughter is a great healing tool. Being about to laugh about memories or moments with your loved one signals just how important their presence was in your life.
- Don't put a time limit on your child's bereavement, or your own. Everyone grieves in their own way. Recognize that a *new normal* will have to occur - and that time is needed to readjust to a significant death.