

## Death and Loss

At some point your child will be faced with a loss or death and they will need help understanding what happened, why it happened and their feelings about it. How much they understand, how it affects them, and how you talk about it depends greatly on their age and level of emotional development. While a school age child (usually after age 7-9) may understand that death is permanent, a younger child may not understand that death is not reversible. Also, younger, preschool age children are egocentric and have 'magical thinking,' and may believe that they caused the death because they were mad or had bad thoughts about the person who died.

For all children, after a loss, it is important to be honest and direct and provide age appropriate explanations of what happened. Avoid using **euphemisms** when explaining death, such as the person went on a 'journey' or is 'going to be asleep forever.' Younger children may take these explanations literally and be afraid to go on a trip or journey or go to sleep themselves because they will associate those things with dying.

Also avoid saying things like 'grandpa went to the hospital,' or 'got sick' or 'had an accident' and then 'died'. The next time someone else or the child himself gets sick or has to go to the hospital, he may believe that he will die, since he may associate these events with someone else's death. It is better to say that it was a 'severe accident' or that the person was 'very sick' and regular medicines wouldn't work,' so that your child understands that people don't normally die after all accidents, or after getting sick, or going to the hospital.

While it is important to answer questions directly and honestly, you do not need to include details that may frighten your child. School age children can usually understand **biological functioning**, and so you can say things like 'he was so sick that his body stopped working,' or 'his heart stopped working,' or 'he had a severe case of pneumonia that caused his lungs to stop working.' Even younger children should be told that the deceased person's body doesn't work anymore because they might not understand this on their own, and they may worry that he can't breathe after being buried or that he will be cold, etc.

Some difficult questions that may come up and which you should be prepared to answer include: 'will I die?' or 'will mommy or daddy die?' Again, it is important to be direct and honest. You can tell him/her that people normally don't die until they are very old and reassure him/her that while everyone does die, you will all live a long time. It becomes more difficult if the person that died was young, such as a sibling or friend.

When explaining death, take your cues from your child as to what he wants to or is ready to hear. If you aren't sure, then give a simple explanation and ask him/her if he/she has any questions. Or ask him/her a follow up question later to see if he/she is ready to hear more.

A ritual, such as a **funeral** or memorial service can be helpful when a loved one dies. Most children, even preschool age children, can handle going to a funeral (although they should never be forced to go). If it seems too overwhelming for your child, or if he/she doesn't want to go, then you create your own ritual or memorial service later. If you do intend to take your child to the funeral, be sure to prepare

him/her in advance for what is going to happen and be ready to answer any questions that he/she may have during the service.

Other things that you can do to help your child after the death of a loved one include reminiscing about the person by telling stories, or looking at his pictures or videos. Discussing your religious beliefs can also be helpful. Most importantly, let your child know that it is okay to have the feelings that he/she is having, whether it is sadness, guilt about times that he/she was bad to the person who died, fear of dying or losing other family members, anger or denial. Do not minimize these feelings or tell him/her that they will go away, instead let him/her know that these feelings are normal, and encourage him/her to talk about it more.

For many children, their first experience with loss and bereavement involves a **pet** that has died. It is important to not minimize the loss because it is a pet. Your child may have been very attached to the pet and may take the loss very hard. Talk with your child about the loss and see how it is affecting him/her. While it is important to not minimize the loss, it is also important to not overreact. You should also be honest about the pet's death. It may be easier to say that the pet ran away, but you will lose out on an opportunity to teach your child about the important topic and you run the risk of losing your child's trust if he/she ever finds out the truth. And don't be in a rush to replace the pet with a new one. Give your child some time to mourn first.

Although many adults are uncomfortable talking about death, you should look for opportunities when you can bring up the subject with your child, such as the death of someone in the neighborhood or on the news, or someone else that your child isn't closely attached to. If you have already talked about the subject of loss and death, it may make it less stressful (or at least won't add to the stress) if someone close to him dies, so you won't find yourself dealing with the loss yourself and wondering how you will talk to your child about it.

It is important to remember that while dealing with death is a long process and that children usually go through the same stages as adults, it is not always a continual process. For example, a child may be sad and grieving and then later in the day, he may be happy and playing. Also, children may act out and develop discipline problems, withdraw, or regress in their behaviors after the death of a loved one. At times like these, it is best to be empathetic and let him/her know that you feel sad too and sometimes it makes you get angry or lose your patience. Encourage him/her to talk about his/her feelings and what's bothering him/her.

If your child is having an especially hard time with a loss or if it is leading to problems in his/her functioning at school or at home, then you may want to seek help from your Pediatrician or a child psychologist.

## **In Summary**

- Communication about death, as with all communication, is easier when a child feels that he/she has our permission to talk about the subject and believes we are sincerely interested in his/her views and questions. Encourage him/her to communicate by listening attentively, respecting his/her views, and answering his/her questions honestly.
- Every child is an individual. Communication about death depends on his/her age and his/her own experiences. If he/she is very young, he/she may view death as temporary, and he/she may be more concerned about separation from his/her loved ones than about death itself.
- It is not always easy to “hear” what a child is really asking. Sometimes it may be necessary to respond to a question with a question in order to fully understand the child’s concern.
- A very young child can absorb only limited amounts of information. Answers need to be brief, simple, and repeated when necessary.
- A child often feels guilty and angry when he/she loses a close family member. He/she needs reassurance that he/she has been, and will continue to be, loved and cared for.
- A child may need to mourn a deeply felt loss on and off until he/she is in his/her adolescence. He/she needs support and understanding through this grief process and permission to show his/her feelings openly and freely.
- Whether a child should visit the dying or attend a funeral depends on his/her age and ability to understand the situation, his/her relationship with the dying or dead person, and, most important, whether he/she wishes it. A child should never be coerced or made to feel guilty if he/she prefers not to be involved. If he/she is permitted to visit a dying person or attend a funeral, he/she should be prepared in advance for what she will hear and see.

## **Needs of A Grieving Child**

- Information that is clear and understandable at their development level.
- To be reassured that their basic needs will be met.
- To be involved in planning for the funeral and anniversary.
- To be reassured when grieving by adults is intense.
- Help with exploring fantasies about death, afterlife, and related issues.
- To be able to have and express their own thoughts and behaviors, especially when different from significant adults.
- To maintain age appropriate activities and interests.
- To receive help with “magical thinking”.
- To say good-bye to the deceased.
- To memorialize the deceased.

## **Before the Death**

- Help with anticipatory grief

- To be given information about the physical, emotional, and mental condition of the terminally ill person and given a choice of visiting or remaining away.
- To be allowed to care for the dying person.
- To participate in meaningful ways of saying goodbye.
- To have schedules and boundaries as close to normal as possible.
- To receive affection and be listened to.

### **Signals for Attention From a Grieving Child**

- Marked change in school performance
- Poor grades despite trying very hard.
- A lot of worry or anxiety manifested by refusing to go to school, go to sleep, or take part in age appropriate activities.
- Not talking about the person or the death. Physically avoiding mention of the deceased.
- Frequent angry outbursts or anger expressed in destructive ways.
- Hyperactive activities, fidgeting, constant movement beyond regular playing.
- Persistent anxiety or phobias.
- Accident proneness, possible self-punishment or a call for attention.
- Persistent nightmares or sleeping disorders.
- Stealing, promiscuity, vandalism, illegal behavior.
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than six months) and violations of the rights of others.
- Opposition to authority figures.
- Frequent unexplainable temper tantrums.
- Social withdrawal.
- Alcohol or other drug abuse.
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities.
- Many complaints of physical ailments.
- Persistent depression accompanied by poor appetite, sleep difficulties, and thoughts of death.
- Long term absence of emotion.
- Frequent panic attacks.
- Persistent symptoms of the deceased.

### **Characteristics of Age Groups (to be used only as a general guide)**

Infants – 2 Years Old:

- Will sense a loss.
- Will pick up on grief of a parent or caretaker.
- May change eating, sleeping, toilet habits.

2 – 6 Years Old:

- Family is center of child's world.
- Confident family will care for his/her needs.
- Plays grown-ups, imitates adults.
- Functions on a day-to-day basis.
- No understanding of time or death.
- Cannot imagine life without mom or dad.
- Picks up on nonverbal communication.
- Thinks dead people continue to do things (eat, drink, go to the bathroom), but only in the sky.
- Thinks if you walk on the grave the person feels it.
- Magical thinking.
- You wish it, it happens (bring the dead back or wishing someone was dead).
- Death brings confusion, guilt (magically thought someone dead)
- Tendency to connect things which are not related.

#### 6 – 9 Years Old:

- Personifies death: A person, monster who takes you away.
- Sometimes a violent thing.
- Still has magical thinking, yet begins to see death as final, but outside the realm of the child's realistic mind.
- Fails to accept that death will happen to them – or to anyone (although begins to suspect that it will).
- Fears that death is something contagious.
- Confusion of wording (soul/sole, dead body, live soul).
- Develops an interest in the causes of death (violence, old age, sickness).

#### 9 – 12 Years Old:

- May see death as punishment for poor behavior.
- Develops morality – strong sense of good and bad behavior.
- Still some magical thinking.
- Needs reassurance that wishes do not kill.
- Begins an interest in biological factors of death.
- Theorizes: People die to make room for new people.
- Asks more about "what happened".
- Concerns about ritual, burying.
- Questions relationship changes caused by death, life changes.
- Worries about who provides and cares for them.
- May regress to an earlier age.
- Interested in spiritual aspects of death.

#### Teenagers:

- Views death as inevitable, universal, irreversible.
- Cognitive skills developed.
- Thinks like an adult.
- Questions meaning of life if it ends in death.
- Sees aging process leading to death.
- See self as invincible – it will not happen to me.
- Sees death as a natural enemy.
- Need for adult guidance (grief process, coping skills)
- Needs someone to listen; talk with.
- May feel guilt, anger, even some responsibility for death that occurred.
- Not sure how to handle own emotions (public and private).