

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS: TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

INTRODUCTION

Children often are the forgotten mourners. Parents, relatives, and/or friends frequently try to protect children by shielding them from sadness, chaos, and confusion or by removing them from the mourning environment. This often confuses and frightens children. No amount of secrecy can protect children from the knowledge that something serious is happening within their family. This pamphlet contains guidelines to help family and friends understand the grieving process in children. Children experience all the feelings adults do, but express their feelings according to age and development level.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How should I break the news about a death to my child?

- The adult closest to the child should tell him/her.
- If possible have other supportive family members or adults in the room or close by.
- Find a quiet place and allow plenty of time for talking
- Encourage him/her to ask questions.
- Be honest and factual about the illness or accident, even if you can't be sure the child will completely understand.
- Reassure your child: death was not his/her fault. Death is not punishment for bad behavior or a rejection of the child.
- Your honesty and emotional availability help to build trust for the child.
- Do not use euphemisms such as "gone to sleep" or "gone on a long trip".
- When there is a connection between death and sleep or traveling, a child may think, "If I go to sleep (or on a trip), or if mommy or daddy go to sleep, then death may occur."
- Reassure the child of your love and support both verbally and with physical affection.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, admit you don't.

EMPHASIZE TO YOUR CHILD THAT S/HE IS SAFE AND LOVED.

Should my child attend the funeral?

- Your child can benefit from feeling connected to family during this scary time.
- Any age child can and should be encouraged to attend services.
- A child over the age of seven understands death as permanent. The funeral can provide an opportunity to say "good-bye" to a loved one. Your child can begin to accept the reality of the death.
- Discuss with him/her what to expect at the service and explain its purpose.
- Have a trusted adult with your child at all times to answer questions and provide comfort.
- Never pressure your child to attend a funeral or other service, no matter what his/her age.
- A child does not have the same fears about an open casket that adults do. Let your child decide whether s/he wants to approach the casket.
- Your child may also "play funeral" or act out other scenes from the event. This is a good way for them to gain understanding of such an important event.

EXPLAIN STEP-BY-STEP WHAT WILL HAPPEN AND WHY. THE EXPLANATION WILL TAKE A GREAT DEAL OF FEAR OUT OF THE FUNERAL.

How long does a child grieve?

- This will vary in intensity depending on his/her age, level of development, and relationship to the individual who has died.
- A child should be allowed to express his/her grief openly and in his/her own way. There is no one right way for a child to grieve.
- The first year is the most difficult. Important dates such as birthdays, holidays, the anniversary of the death, and vacation often remind the child of the death.
- As the child grows up and reaches new stages in his/her life, the loss will be re-experienced. It is helpful to encourage the child to speak with a family member, friend, or counselor.
- A child doesn't "get over" a loss, s/he re-understands it at each new stage of life.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT THE EXACT LENGTH OF TIME A CHILD WILL GRIEVE.

Will it be harmful if I talk about the person who has died in front of my child?

- Your child, like an adult, needs relief from his/her painful emotions.
- Expressing feelings through crying, laughing, or sharing memories will help him/her with the grieving process.
- Share your concerns and feelings; if adults withdraw, the child experiences a double loss.
- Have good emotional support for yourself so you are sharing emotions with your child and not leaning on him/her.
- Keep treasured mementos around as reminders of the person your child loves and misses.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO TALK FREELY ABOUT THE PERSON WHO HAS DIED... BOTH GOOD AND BAD MEMORIES.

Should I seek professional help for my child?

- Almost any reaction to a profound loss can be considered normal.
- It is difficult to distinguish a normal grief reaction from one that is not.
- If your child continues to deny the reality of the death, if physical distress persists, if any emotion (anger, indifference, depression) is prolonged or fixed, or if sleep and eating patterns remain disturbed, then there is cause for concern.
- Be alert if your child expresses a desire to die, has school or legal trouble, or in the case of a young child has continual behavior problems.
- If your child is in school, inform the teacher and ask to be informed of any changes in behavior.

IF YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL OR PHYSICAL BEHAVIOR, SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP.

RESPONSES TO DEATH

Birth to Two Years

CHILD RESPONSE

A child who is pre-verbal:

- does experience loss;
- "senses" the changed atmosphere in the house;
- expresses emotions physically by fussing, crying, withdrawal, clinging; or
- feels his/her sense of security is threatened.

PARENT RESPONSE

- Provide extra comfort in a physical way. Examples are rocking, being close, and holding your child.
- Leave a light on at night.
- Make sure your child has a favorite blanket or toy available to hold.

Two Years to Six Years

CHILD RESPONSE

A child in this age group:

- has difficulty understanding that death is final;
- has concrete thinking...s/he tends to take explanations literally and word-for-word;
- thinks in “magical” terms (what’s real and what s/he thinks is real are confused);
- experiences a sense of insecurity and loss of nurturing that may cause a return to “babyish” behaviors --- may affect the progress already made in toilet training, feeding, and getting dressed.
- worries about the possibility of his/her own or another family member/s death;
- worries about how long the “new” family will be there for him/her if placed in a “new” family environment;
- “plays funeral” or other events surrounding the death...this is his/her way to understand such an important event in life;
- physical problems may include the following: stomach ailments, headaches, sleeping & eating problems, or disinterest. The opposite may also occur, that is, hyperactivity or difficulty concentrating on any task;
- emotional problems may include expressing a wide range of feelings --- from indifference (playing outside the funeral home), to fear (striking out verbally or physically), to guilt and self-blame (withdrawal from family and friends or hurting oneself), or to sadness and understanding.

PARENT RESPONSE

- You can help your child by repeatedly reassuring him/her that s/he is safe and loved.
- You need to explain death in concrete terms, since this is how your child thinks.
- It is important that you make a clear statement that the deceased will not return.
- “Babyish” behaviors are only temporary, but the more you scold your child for these behaviors, the longer it will take him/her to return to the previous state of independence.
- The guilt your child feels comes from his/her thinking that his/her bad thoughts caused bad things to happen to the deceased.
- Your child may have an illogical belief that s/he is the cause of everything.
- Your child needs special reassurance and explanations to counteract these beliefs.
- Your child lives in the present and may ask the same questions over and over as if s/he has forgotten your answer of just a moment before.
- It is helpful to have a book geared to your child’s age group to read with him/her in this situation. You will tire of it, but s/he won’t!
- Take care of yourself by allowing family and friends to help with cooking, cleaning, telephoning, etc. so you may have more time with your child.

Six to Twelve Years

CHILD RESPONSE

A child between the ages of six and twelve:

- grows enormously, both mentally and physically, and comes to understand the permanence of death.

- initially is shocked and overwhelmed by the loss and either protests it, “I don’t believe you”, or appears indifferent, “I’m fine. I don’t want to talk about it.” This is a way of self-protection;
- may show grief after the shock wears off with physical changes in eating and sleeping patterns, stomach or headaches, nervousness, skin rashes, tightness in throat and chest, or loss of muscular strength;
- may return to the behaviors of a younger age, such as over-dependence on you, taking on a sick role to avoid leaving home, or having problems with friends;
- may take on parenting roles with brother, sister, or adults, becoming the “man” or “woman” of the house;
- have nightmares or think s/he sees or hears the deceased as part of the panic or fear your child feels;
- may become excessively “good” from fear that if s/he is bad, someone s/he loves may die;
- may “play hospital” or act out other memories of the loss as a way of understanding it;
- may have more advanced language skills than what s/he is really able to understand; remember when talking with your child you may think s/he understands more than s/he really does;
- may develop a magical plan to protect the family from further pain (becoming a superhero or winning the lottery);
- may draw, write, or talk about this fantasy when s/he is alone or before bedtime to calm fears; or
- may have more pronounced mood swings as s/he grows closer to adolescence and may depend more on friends than family for emotional support.

PARENT RESPONSE

- Your child needs to trust that s/he is safe and loved by you and your family.
- It is important to talk to your child about his/her fears and reassure him/her of your support and love. This will help your child regain a sense of independence.
- If you lean on your child for emotional support or hover over him/her because of your own fear of another loss, you will either make your child fearful and dependent or push him/her into an adult role. When this happens, your child’s emotional needs are not met.
- It is important for you to seek emotional support of your own fears and needs so you can support your child.
- Physical symptoms that persist for more than 30 days in your child should be checked by a physician.
- You can help calm your child by developing ways to protect him/herself, such as learning to dial “911” for help, having your child help install a new door lock, or buying a night light, etc.
- Be patient; your child needs to play and talk about this important event many times before s/he comes to accept it. If this is too painful for you as the primary adult in your child’s life, find another trusted adult such as a teacher, counselor, coach, or neighbor for your child.

Thirteen to Twenty-One

ADOLESCENT RESPONSE

A child in this age group:

- experiences hormonal changes that begin influencing thoughts and behavior causing a wide range of emotional responses;
- begins looking outside the family for new insights and social groups, while wanting to maintain the security that the family has always offered;
- emotions of grief (confusion, anger, and fearfulness) are heightened;
- wants to be both ignored and comforted, left alone and reassured;
- may take over as parents and assume adult responsibilities; others will leave home as soon as possible or find a way to get asked to leave because of difficult behavior;

- may become depressed, withdrawn, suspicious and guarded in his/her relationships with others, or judgmental about his/her behavior and that of others;
- may take added risks;
- may present warning signs indicated by a drastic change in personality or the use of drugs and alcohol;
- may have problems eating and sleeping.

PARENT RESPONSE

- Adults may find adolescence the most difficult age to help through the grief process.
- Warning signs for parents are a drastic change in personality or the use of drugs and alcohol after a death.
- Suicide is a very real threat for adolescents; it is now the leading cause of death in the 15 to 24 age group.
- Many grief symptoms and suicide signs are similar; you can and should calmly approach adolescents with your concerns about this.
- At first s/he may reject the idea but will be glad that you noticed and that suicide is a subject that is okay to talk about.
- You may want to talk with mental health professionals, EAP counselors, doctors, teachers, coaches, etc. about concerns you have. This will not only be helpful to you but will help other caring adults in your adolescent's life know what s/he is going through.
- Keep the lines of communication open by scheduling activities together.
- Set limits, but make your home a welcoming place for your child and his/her friends.
- Be as honest as possible about how you are feeling. Parents can help adolescents heal from grief by sharing their own grief process.

- many thanks to the Victim Assistance Unit of the Denver Police Department.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Before you select a book for your child to read or for you to read to them, it is advisable to read or browse through the book yourself first. Take note of how you yourself respond as you read the book. Think about what your child is like as a person. This will help you decide whether you feel your child will understand the book and whether its message is appropriate to the situation.

Pre-School to Age 7-8

Aaron, Jane. *When I'm Sad*. Picture book on feeling sad, plus a guide for parents.
Bartoli, Jennifer. *Nanna*. Death of a grandmother.
Brown, Mark Tolon. *When Dinosaurs Die*. Direct, honest Q & A about death.
Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*. A classic.
Kantorowitz, Mildred. *When Violet Died*. Funeral preparations and ceremony for a bird.
Stein, Sarah. *About Dying*. Discusses plant, animal, and human death as well as how people react.
Varley, Susan. *Badger's Parting Gifts*. Forest animals comfort each other after losing a beloved friend.
Viorst, Judith. *The 10th Good Thing About Barney*. A little girl grieves for her cat.

Ages 7 – 11

Anderson, Janet. *The Key Into Winter*. African-American girl learns to face loss and death. Semi-magical.
Bernstein, Joanne and Gullo, Stephen. *When People Die*. Life, death, and loss are explored. Answers many questions children have about death
Brooks, Jerome. *Uncle Mike's Boy*. Accidental death of a boy's sister and how his uncle helps him.
Bruchac, Joseph and Morin, Paul. *Fox Song*. American Indian girl grieves for her grandmother.
Gregory, Valiska. *Through the Mickle Woods*. Fairy-tale illustration of grieving and support.
Krementz, J. *How it Feels When a Parent Dies: Children's Essays*. Written by children ages 7 – 16.

Ages 12 and up

Gadam, J. *The Summer After the Funeral*. The death of a parent.
Agee, James. *A Death in the Family*. Pulitzer Prize winning novel about a 6-year-old boy and his family's response to death.
Craven, Margaret. *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. A young missionary with only 3 years to live attempts to understand the meaning of life and death

For Adults

To help you understand a child's reactions and your own, and what you can do to help.

Dougy Center Staff. *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*. Practical hints from a grief center based on experience with thousands of grieving kids and teens.
Grollman, Earl. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. First part of the book is for children pre-school and older. Second part is for parents.
Jackson, Edgar. *Telling a Child About Death*
Jewett, Claudia. *Helping Children Cope With Separation and Loss*.
Leshan, Eda. *Learning to Say Goodbye, When a Parent Dies*.
Levy, Naomi. *To Begin Again*. The journey through disaster and loss toward comfort and healing.
Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. *Children On Death and Dying*.
Mellonie, Bryan. *Lifetimes: the Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*.
Schiff, Harriet Sarnoff. *Living Through Mourning*.
Silverman, Janis. *Help Me Say Goodbye*. Activities to do with children.