



Helping
CHILDREN
Understand Death



"Young children don't know that sadness isn't forever. It's frightening for them to feel that their sadness may overwhelm them and never go away. That "the very same people who are sad sometimes are the very same people who are glad sometimes" is something all parents need to help their children come to understand."

Dealing With Death

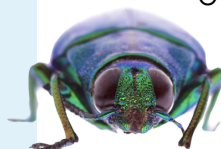
Most young children know something about death. They may have seen a dead bird or bug or had a pet who died. Also, they may have seen people on television die. Still, their notion of death is very limited and simplistic, and they probably have many misunderstandings. It's precisely because children don't understand what death is about that they need help from loving adults in talking about it.


HELPFUL HINTS FROM FRED ROGERS

Children Are Curious

Children naturally know best what they can see or touch. Their earliest idea of death is that whatever is dead doesn't move. They can't comprehend much beyond that. They're curious about death, and they might ask questions like, "If we sat Grandma up in the casket, what would happen?"

Many of children's concerns focus on body functions that are important to them -- "Can a dead person or animal get hungry...feel cold in the ground?" Children don't mean to be rude or hurt anybody's feelings with what they ask or say. They're just wondering about a lot of different things at the time of a death. Asking the same question again and again, gives a child another chance to test our answers and gradually come to their own understanding.





Of course the finality of death is the hardest thing to comprehend, particularly for young children. After all, their friends "play dead," then get up and run around again, and dead cartoon characters pop up alive again. A child whose mother had died asked, "Is Mommy coming back for my birthday?" It takes a long time for children to realize that death is permanent.

Children may also be curious to see what "dead" looks like. Some parents are concerned that seeing an open casket will traumatize their child. With caring preparation, a child seeing a dead body can be less frightening than the fantasies that many children have about it. Children may even want to touch the body to see "what dead feels like."

Words Can Be Confusing

Even though children respond more to the tone of our voice than to any particular words we use, it's important to be careful about our explanations. Children tend to take what we say literally. Someone once told a child that death was like "going to sleep." That child had a great difficulty going to bed and getting to sleep because she was afraid she might not ever wake up. If children hear that someone has "lost" a father or a daughter, imagine what they might think! Or hearing that grandpa went on a "long, long journey," a child might want to know, "If he came back from his vacation last year, when will he come back this time?"

Despite our best intentions, many of our words can be frightening or confusing to children. "If heaven is up in the sky," some children have wondered, "why are we burying Aunt Suzie in the ground?" Or, "If I go up in an airplane, can I see my baby sister who's in heaven?" When unknowing adults say, "Your daddy is in heaven watching over you," they usually mean to be reassuring, but to a child, those words may raise the image of a spy who sees and knows everything that the child thinks and does. It's

often more helpful to answer a child's questions with, "No one knows for sure, but I believe..." Saying "I wonder about that, too," is a special way of keeping the communication between parent and child open.

Each Child Reacts Differently

When a loved one has died, some children may cry a lot, while others may not. Some find it easy to talk openly, and others hold their thoughts and feelings inside for a long time. One child might find comfort in music, while another might turn to story books. Some may even act as though nothing had happened and go about their everyday business of playing as usual. It takes time for children to understand what death means, and even when they understand, they may not feel ready to acknowledge their painful feelings. Of course, it's important to honor that. Each one in the family has his or her own way of expressing grief at his or her own pace.

Expressing Feelings

When children are four and five, their aggressive urges are often very strong. If a child happens to be angry with a parent, and that parent happens to die, that child could have a terrible struggle wondering how much of his or her anger is responsible for the parent's death. Children need to hear that no matter how much we love someone, there are times when we get angry with that person and just because we have angry thoughts doesn't mean that we make somebody die. It's most important for children to realize that thoughts and wishes don't make things happen, whether they're good or bad things. Children may also be angry, too, because a person they love has died and left them. It can help to say to a child something like, "It can make a person really angry to have someone go away and not come back. Most people feel awful when someone they love dies." Just identifying a feeling and hearing that there's nothing wrong with it can be a big help to a child and can make it easier to talk more about it—then or later.

When children are going through stressful times, they often regress to a time that was safer. They also tend to lose abilities they've already achieved, like toilet training, talking clearly, and sleeping through the night. They may even become clingy, whiny, and overly dependent... demanding attention in whatever way they can get it.

One of the most appropriate and necessary ways that children grieve is through their play. Some parents are uncomfortable when their children "play" about death right after a family member has died. Those parents may feel that it shows that the child is insensitive. But just the opposite is true. Children who play about death are usually feeling so sensitive about it that they're using the best means they have to try to come to terms with what it means and how they feel about it.

Parents' Needs and Feelings

When someone we care about dies, we adults may feel so empty that we haven't much desire to think about anything except what has happened to us. It's only natural to feel we haven't much to give anyone else, and yet, at a time like this, our children need us more than ever.

It can be hard to know just what children do need at such times, but very often the same things that help us will help them, too— simple things, like hugging, talking, and having quiet times together. Inviting and including our children in our own traditional family ways of coping with grief is one of the best things we can do for our children and for ourselves. It's easy to forget that children can be having some of the same feelings we're having— sadness, loneliness, even anger and guilt. Knowing that those feelings are natural and normal for all of us can make it easier to share them with each other.

Responding to Children's Questions

Your child may hear of someone's death in another family and suddenly realize that people do die. Sooner or later, most children ask, "Will you die, Mommy... Daddy?" With honesty and confidence, we can say something like "I hope to be alive for a long, long, long, long time. And no matter what, there will always be someone to take care of you."

Death is a mystery. When children ask questions about death, nobody has all the answers. Even if you have said something that you later regret later, let your child know that you thought of a better way to talk about it. If you can accept your humanness, your child can, too.

There will probably be many times throughout their lives that children will feel that the world has turned upside-down. Knowing that real love and good memories never die can nourish everyone in the family in every time of need.

A child who is old enough to love, is old enough to grieve.





Talking about Death:

- 1) It helps to use examples with words that children can understand, like "the dead fish can't move or eat or swim -- ever again."
- 2) Burying the dead goldfish in the yard gives you a chance to say when bodies are dead they are often buried in the ground. If we have prepared our children for death before an important human being in their life dies, they may be better able to cope when that time comes.
- 3) Share your memories of your experiences and feelings when you were a child and a loved pet or person died. That gives your child an important way of knowing that feelings are natural and normal.
- 4) It's frightening for children to think that the sadness they feel when someone they love dies may overwhelm them and never go away. There can be real comfort in hearing that "the very same people who are sad sometimes -- are the very same people who are glad sometimes" and that it's true for all of us. It also gives them permission to laugh and have fun if that's what they feel. Enjoying something isn't a betrayal of the loved one's memory. It's a way to honor the loved one by appreciating life.
- 5) While it may seem that, for the moment, you've put your child's questions about death to rest, something may trigger the same or different questions later on. As with most challenging things in life, you'll have many opportunities to help your children work and re-work what death means to them.
- 6) You may want to encourage your child to make a photo album or a story book with memories of the person who died. It's one way to keep the memories alive in us and to keep the relationship alive in our hearts and minds. Grieving isn't about forgetting. It's about coming to accept the death little by little and finding ways to enrich our own family by continuing to remember our relationship with the person who has died.
- 7) It can help to spend some quiet time with your child doing something together that you both enjoy, like reading a book or taking a walk. Adults and children who are grieving need extra comfort and attention, and those moments of being together can nourish both you and your child. If it means temporarily changing some of the routines, you'll sense the best time to help your child gradually get back to "normal."
- 8) When a mother, father, sibling or any other very close relative or friend dies, that can be one of the most difficult tragedies for any family to face. If you feel that you or your child needs professional help in living through such a tough time, look for a grieving counselor or support group. There are grieving centers that offer important support for families with young children.

The Funeral:

- Even very young children can benefit from participating in at least some of the rituals that attend death, so long as we prepare them for what to expect and can listen to their questions. Feeling excluded is much harder for children than feeling sad.
- Before going to the funeral, let your child know that there may be people crying. Mention, too, that there may also be people chattering away and even telling humorous stories. Help your child know that each person deals with death and funerals in his or her own way.
- If you take your child to the funeral home, you might want to have an adult friend (with whom your child is comfortable) stay close at hand. That friend can help if your child needs to take a break, go to the bathroom, or gets upset by the crying, crowds, or commotion.
- If your child really doesn't want to go to the actual funeral, or if your own needs are so overwhelming that you don't feel that you can take your child along, there are other ways he or she can be included in this important time of grieving. You might arrange for a special "family only" time with you at the funeral home or cemetery, or suggest that your child help after the funeral by greeting guests or helping to serve whatever refreshments there might be.
- If your child is willing, just having him or her on your lap during the funeral service can give you comfort, too. Having children nearby at a time like this reminds us that life goes on and on and on.



For more information on our Grief Services, please visit our website at www.brockiedonovan.com or call (204) 727-0694