
Relationships

Breaking Bad News To a Child

IS there an ideal way for a child to learn that a parent is dying? During one scene in the Academy Award-winning film "Terms of Endearment" the dying mother summons two young sons to her hospital bedside and tells them she will never be coming home. Some people wondered if this was the best way to deal with the situation, particularly for the younger child.

Dr. John Sargent, a child psychiatrist and pediatrician at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, said he felt that "the thing that was missing from the film was any knowledge of the two boys' understanding of their mother's illness prior to that meeting."

"I would expect that that moment was one in a whole series increasing their awareness and understanding of their mother's illness," he said.

His thinking echoes that of other professionals and represents a giant step away from the days when children, particularly the young ones, were whisked off to a neighbor or to Aunt Rose's house for a few days when a death in the family was imminent. Now it is believed that not knowing what is happening and feeling shut out are what really hurts.



A youngster will come through the loss of a parent and grow up "whole," according to Gwen Schwartz-Borden, a social worker who heads the bereavement center of the Family Service Association of Nassau County in Hempstead, L.I., if "he knows everything there is to know about how the parent died; there is a constant parenting figure in the child's life, and there had been a good prior relationship."

"Children see death as abandonment," she continued. "They have to know what happened, and if they don't, the fantasy may persist that the person is alive someplace and will return. People have to be clear that the person is not just sleeping and has not just gone away. Adults have feelings of denial about death and this is often what they transmit to children, not that it's a natural part of life."

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The husband of a client, she said, was killed in an accident when their child was 7 months old. "As soon as she could, she told the child in simple language what had happened," Mrs. Schwartz-Borden said. "And eventually he was able to say, 'My daddy was in an accident and he was hurt so bad the doctors couldn't help him and he died.' It was important for that child that he had a father and could talk about him with his peers."

Dr. Sargent warns, however, that especially for a child under 5, "it doesn't make sense to sit him down a few months in advance and say that his mother is going to die, because he won't understand it." After age 7, he said, youngsters have "a better sense of things being concrete." And, he added, "if a child asks, the child needs an answer consistent with the facts." But he stresses consistency, so that "grandmother isn't saying that the mother will get better, after the father has said she won't."

In addition, children should be involved in the mourning process, the professionals say.

Mrs. Schwartz-Borden is not averse to children spending "some quiet time" with the dead person, in company with another family member. She and other specialists recommend that children participate in wakes and funerals. And later on, it is comforting for a child (if hard on an adult) to bring out the family album and show how a parent looked and the good and loving times they had shared.



But what child has not, in a moment of anger and frustration with a parent, said — or thought — "I wish you were dead." Guilt about that or some remembered misbehavior can complicate an older child's grieving, and young children 3 to 6 may even feel that they have in some way caused the death. Repeated adult reassurance is essential, Dr. Sargent said. "What the child needs around that time," he added, "is attention, support and affection — and an opportunity to go on about their business to some extent."

Jaime Gans and her six children lost their father to lung cancer three years ago. "The oldest knew how sick his father was," she said. "I think with the rest I sort of parceled it out. But I let them all know this was going to be his last Christmas."

The children attended the wake and funeral and handled their grief in various ways, she said. The 6-year-old daughter had trouble accepting her father's disappearance. "She got angry and wouldn't believe it," Mrs. Gans said. "And when she did, she got hysterical. I thought I'd prepared her. I realize now you really can't."

Later, as she put it, "None of us knew who we were." Mrs. Gans had to deal with a 16-year-old who said, "He would let me do this and you won't" and an oldest son who pointed out, "I'm not your husband." She got involved in the bereavement counseling program at St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center. "It took time for everything to settle down and all of us to find a new place," she said. "But we were very fortunate. The tenets of our faith were a help."

Olive Evans