

Talking to Children About Death

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"Are you going to die, Mommie?"
"Will Kitty be cold underground?"
"Could I die?"
"But Daddy, where did Grandpa go?"

Parents and other caregivers the world over sooner or later find themselves struggling to answer the questions of children who are confused, curious, or concerned about the subject of death. Across cultures and generations, adults have found this a difficult task for a variety of reasons. Some parents, in their natural urge to be protective, try to spare children from learning about the painful idea of death until it is absolutely necessary to do so. Others may simply feel that they do not know what to say or how to behave; they fear they may do more harm than good by exploring this sensitive subject. Still others may never have come to terms with their own experiences of grief and loss and therefore feel helpless in the face of a child's mourning or fears about death.

Although children vary widely in their capacities to fully understand the concept of death, even very young children are able to comprehend the notions of separation and loss. In fact, children are usually much more aware of what is going on around them than adults give them credit for being. They may also be able to sense subjects about which adults are uncomfortable and may choose not to ask questions or confide fears if they perceive that the subject is taboo. Parents may mistake a child's silence for disinterest.

Unfortunately, ignorance is not bliss when it comes to the subject of death and loss. If not addressed, the feelings and questions death provokes may frighten and confuse children unnecessarily and may linger and haunt an individual in some fashion through his or her adult life. As parents approach the subject with children, it is worth keeping in mind the words of the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson: "Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death."

In all areas of a child's growth and development, there is a gradual process of maturation that can vary widely from one individual to another. The ability to understand and cope with death not only depends on the overall physical, intellectual, social, and emotional maturity of a particular child but is further influenced by ethnic and religious considerations. Another important variable is the fact that the concept of death is, even for adults, open to many interpretations. With these



qualifications in mind, the stages in the development of the child's awareness and emotional capacity may be examined.

How children perceive death

Although it is generally agreed that infants and toddlers have little conception of death until about the age of three, experts in child development are becoming increasingly aware of the remarkable ability of infants, from birth, to respond to the environment. Specialists in infant studies believe that infants experiment with states of being and nonbeing in such games as "peekaboo" (the name derives from Old English words meaning "alive or dead") and that reactions to the appearance and disappearance of objects and people are the very young child's first encounter with the themes of separation and loss. The extent to which the infant's basic security needs are met, and the degree and intensity of separation anxiety experienced, can have a significant influence on the child's later ability to respond to the most intense form of separation, death.

Preschool children, through the age of five or so, have a cyclical view of life and death and typically think of death as a temporary state. This concept may be one reason for the popularity of cartoons in which the characters have a magical ability to come back to life regardless of what injury or calamity has befallen them. At the same time, children of this age are beginning to be fascinated with determining which things in their environment are actually alive and which are not. One four-year-old suddenly refused to eat a

favorite breakfast cereal after expressing the concern that it appeared to move in the bowl and make noise. According to his reasoning it might, therefore, be alive.

Preschool age is also a time when the child's thinking is very literal. Adults can unwittingly confuse children with the use of euphemisms. Thus, explanations such as "Grandfather has gone to rest . . . is sleeping in heaven . . . has gone away . . ." may serve only to reinforce the child's belief that the missing person will eventually awaken and return. This kind of explanation can also be fuel for frightening confusion around the ideas of sleeping and waking. The child may wonder, "If I go to sleep, will I be dead like Grandfather?" Half-understood concepts coupled with literal thinking may cause other kinds of confusion as well. One child stopped eating after being told that her grandmother had died of old age. Careful questioning revealed her logic: In order to die, you must grow old. In order to grow old, you must grow up. In order to grow up, you must eat. Her conclusion: If I don't eat, I won't die! Finally, there is the conviction among preschoolers that people die only by accident or intent and that death is not an inevitable occurrence. In very young children concern about death is usually an expression of concern about the possibility of separation or abandonment.

As children get older and enter the school years, they exhibit a growing awareness of the finality of death. Still, death remains an emotionally distant event, and children have difficulty accepting its inevitability or the possibility that it might actually happen to them, their siblings, or their parents. Frequently children of this age continue to imbue the dead with the needs of the living. When told about the tradition of burial, a six- or seven-year-old might, for instance, be worried about "dirt getting into Grandma's eyes" or be concerned that a deceased person or animal will be cold or hungry under the ground. Another belief common to this age group is that of death being associated with a concrete image such as the boogeyman (which is akin to the adult personification of death as the Grim Reaper). In the child's reasoning, if one sees or gets too close to such an image, one might die. Some children even offer this as an explanation for why old people die and young people do not: Children are fleet-footed enough to run away from death, but elderly people are not so spry and thus get caught. At the same time, school-age children display increased curiosity about the whys of death and about funerals and funeral rituals. Children may ask questions that seem macabre to adults. For instance, a six-year-old, when told that her grandmother was very sick and might die, reportedly asked, "Can we keep her bones?" Although it sounds insensitive, such a question may express not only the curiosity of this age but also a wish to hold on in a concrete fashion to a loved one.

Finally, in these years of intensified curiosity, imag-

ination, and fantasy, wishes and feelings seem very powerful to children. They may believe that wishes can kill, and thus they assume personal responsibility for the death of a person or pet about whom they may have entertained an unkind thought or feeling.

Beginning at about age ten and continuing into adolescence, children begin to view death as final, inevitable, and universal. As this awareness gradually evolves over time, children and teenagers may experience periods of heightened sadness, a sense of the unfairness of death, and an increased concern about their own vulnerability. For parents it is vital to see these gradual stages of awareness from infancy through adolescence as specific to the individual child and closely related to the child's overall development—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive.

Some practical questions and answers

The task of parenting is learned strictly by means of on-the-job training. The only "education" one receives is the experience of having been a child and having watched and learned from the example of one's own parents. Moreover, no other subject so deeply touches each of us as death. It is not surprising that parents often find this to be a difficult area. However, parents not only can learn from but can adapt and improve upon their own childhood experiences with this touchy subject as they listen to their children and face death with them.

There are no definitive right or wrong answers in trying to help a child understand death or go through the grieving process. What a parent says, or when he or she says it, is not as important as how he or she says it. It is necessary to listen carefully to the child's questions and concerns and answer them as honestly and supportively as the moment and the child's level of understanding allow. Like the child's own gradual growth, this aspect of learning is an ongoing process with continuing opportunities over time to reassure fears and clarify facts, feelings, and beliefs. What seems to be a "missed opportunity" usually can be remedied later, when a similar situation arises. Parents will find that children often repeat questions as previously known information is brought to bear on new experiences.

What is the right time for discussing death with children? Parents and other caregivers can take advantage of a variety of natural, everyday situations. As the leaves fall when summer changes to winter, when a plant or animal dies, when there is news about the death of a person in the community—all of these occasions provide opportunities for conversation about how things grow, change, and separate. Seeing real or enacted deaths on television may engender questions that should not be avoided but dealt with honestly. This is not to say that children should be overloaded with detailed information at every turn. Rather, every-

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Like adults, children need the chance to express their feelings of loss and grief. Emotional support from an adult is vital for the young child who decides to attend a funeral or pay a visit to the cemetery.

day situations can provide informal opportunities for adults to listen, clarify, and reassure.

How can a parent overcome uncomfortable feelings about discussing death with children? Death is a difficult subject to discuss, and any parent who has taken the time to question his or her own discomfort has already come a long way toward coping with the problem. No one knows all the answers about death. It is all right for a parent to admit that he or she does not and to share with children the feelings and discomfort everyone experiences when confronted with something that is out of his or her control. Fortunately, children do not need "all the answers." More important to them is a sense of continuity and support from adults around them. They need to know that it is appropriate to ask questions and to share feelings of loneliness, fear, guilt, and even anger.

When parents themselves are grieving, it may be even more difficult for them to find the time and emotional resources necessary to deal sensitively with a child. It is important to remember not to shut the child out. This may also be a time when other caring adults can be enlisted to help the child and provide emotional support.

What should parents say if a child asks, "Will you die?" Parents should answer such questions truthfully, presenting their own deaths as something that will happen in the natural course of events rather than as frightening or an imminent possibility. Adults should listen carefully to find out what is behind this question. It may have been prompted by simple curiosity, but it may also have been provoked by a specific event. The child may be seeking reassurance about fears of abandonment or "bad thoughts" he or she may have had in anger. Adults may find that they need to reiterate that wishes do not kill and that, although everyone will die someday, parents expect to be with their children until they have grown up—a long time from now.

If a parent is critically ill, the child should, nonetheless, be given a truthful answer. The child will need to know and understand as fully as possible what is happening. And for young children, perhaps more important is the question of what will happen to them if a person who is important to their welfare dies.

How should parents help children deal with the loss of a pet? Pets can be important and meaningful companions and, for some children, the death of a special pet can be as painful as the loss of a human friend. Children can be helped by participating in the burial or other dignified disposal of the animal's body and by rituals designed to say good-bye to the pet. Many children will devise such services themselves. Other aids in the grieving process might include reminiscing about fun times shared with the pet, making drawings of the pet, or reading storybooks about children who have lost their pets.

Parents should allow the child to mourn before replacing a beloved pet, and the child should be included in the decision to acquire a new pet and in the actual selection process. It is important to respect not only the child's need to grieve but also the specialness of the lost animal to the child. As with human friends, such bonds are not lightly broken.

Should children attend a funeral or wake or visit a dying relative in the hospital? Naturally, the answers to these questions vary with the age of the child and should be influenced by the youngster's own feelings about the event. The most striking thing about a retrospective questioning of children and adolescents regarding their experience of having lost a parent is that the children who had been either protectively excluded from mourning rituals or forced to attend against their will were equally angry and sad about their experiences. In one such case, in order to spare the child's feelings, the parents of a nine-year-old concealed the death of his beloved grandfather from the boy until the entire event was over. The child was grief-stricken and angry and expressed his outrage and sense of helplessness by refusing to go to school. The conflict was eventually resolved with the help of a professional therapist.

Children may express their feelings differently, but they have the same grieving needs as adults. The events that help to satisfy these needs—the chance to say good-bye, the sense of family togetherness, continuity, and shared grief—can be vital. Therefore, if the child is comfortable with the prospect and wants to attend a funeral or wake, he or she should be allowed to do so.

Before being asked to make the decision, however, the child should be given an idea of what to expect at a hospital, funeral home, or cemetery. More detailed information can be provided just prior to the event, and some provision should be made for the possibility that the child may be overwhelmed by the actual situation. Should the child decide not to attend any formal services, a visit to the cemetery later might be a suitable alternative. Moreover, a child's questions may continue to arise long after the event itself.

How can a parent help a dying child? Young children who are critically ill are generally more afraid of abandonment than death and need to be reassured and supported. Older children are more aware of their condition and its possible outcome. Parents should answer questions truthfully and hopefully. Simple but honest explanations of treatments, reassurances and continued love and support, and permission to talk about feelings, the future, and physical pain are very important.

Obviously, this is the most difficult task a parent can have. Professionals who work with dying children often report that the child is better able to cope with his impending death than any of the adults around him are. Even though a parent's own grieving process has begun—and it might be less painful for the adult to avoid confronting the subject—it is important that the lines of communication between parent and child be kept open. Enlisting the aid of other caring adults to help share the physical and emotional burdens is also in the best interests of both parent and child.

This is also a time of great risk for siblings. They may feel guilty, abandoned, or ignored or fear that they, too, will die. They may attempt to impose upon themselves the role of "perfect child," who incorporates only the best qualities of themselves and their dying sibling. Parents may unwittingly deify the dying child or overprotect the well child.

Should a dying child be pampered or indulged? It is in the child's best interests that parents refrain from treating him or her in a way dramatically different from before the illness. Expensive gifts, abandonment of routine discipline, and other grand gestures on the part of parents are geared more toward alleviating parental guilt and helplessness than toward necessarily comforting the child. Further upsets in relationships and

routines that are comfortable and familiar will serve only to raise additional anxiety about what is happening. It is more helpful to respond to the child's request for concrete comforts such as favorite foods and toys or visits from friends and relatives. What matters most is simply *being there* for the child and listening carefully to his or her expressed concerns.

When is it advisable to seek professional help? Should the grieving process go awry for a child, help is available. In some instances, despite all of the care an adult has taken, a child (or adult) can experience severe problems around a particularly stressful loss. Underlying emotional disturbances may be manifested as sleeping or eating problems, difficulty in school, behavior regression, withdrawal, or inappropriate aggressiveness. If such behavior problems appear and continue over time, or seem to grow worse, intervention by a professional counselor is recommended to help the child—or possibly the whole family—through a period of difficulty. This intervention may be in the form of individual counseling, family therapy, or a combination of both.

The major focus of the treatment process is to encourage the expression of confusing and uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Depending on the age of the child, the therapeutic techniques may include various kinds of projective play—drawing; use of puppets, dolls, and dollhouses; and storytelling—designed to encourage the expression of concerns the youngster might find hard to express directly. While observing and asking questions about the child's play activities, the therapist attempts to create a noncritical, non-threatening environment. The inclusion of other family members may be important to emphasize the shared nature of the grieving process as well as the need for the continuity of family care and support.

The experience of death and the concept of death are hard for most people, regardless of age. But the uncertainty adults may feel need not prevent them from dealing lovingly and honestly with children in helping them to understand the world around them. As Fred Rogers, educator and children's television personality, says, "What is mentionable is manageable."

FOR ADDITIONAL READING:

Gordon, Audrey, and Klass, Dennis. *They Need to Know: How to Teach Children About Death*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1979.

Grollman, Earl A. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

Stein, Sara. *About Dying*. New York: Walker and Co., 1974.

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