

Talking With Children About Death



Many people are reluctant to talk about death, particularly with young children. Because death is an inescapable part of life, it is helpful to learn to talk about it, even with children so they can be helped to deal with it. First of all, let them know it is okay to talk about death and grief. Talking with children will help you discover what they do know and what they don't know, and you may find out any misconceptions, fears or worries they may have. By providing them with needed information, understanding and comfort it is possible to help them through the grief process. The following is a list of suggestions for talking with children about death and grief.

- Listen to and take cues from the children. Find out what they know. Do not assume they are afraid and do not assume they are aware of what has happened.
- Communication about death is easier when children feel they have permission to talk about it and believe we are sincerely interested in their views and questions. Encourage children to talk by listening attentively, listening to their views and honestly answering their questions.
- Pay attention to when children want to talk or have questions. Make sure that they know you are available if they want to ask questions.
- Remember every child is an individual. Communication with children about death and grief will depend on their age and their own experiences. For very young children, death is frequently viewed as being temporary. They may be more concerned about the separation from their loved one more than about death itself.
- It is not always easy to “hear” what children may be asking or what they really want to know. It might be necessary at times to respond to a question with a question in order to fully understand children's concern.
- Answer their questions directly. Very young children are only able to absorb limited amounts of information. Answer them honestly, simply, briefly, and repeatedly when necessary. Do not give them more information than they ask for or than they need.
- It is very common for children to feel guilty and angry after a close family member has died. These children need reassurance that they have been, and will continue to be, loved and cared for. It is helpful to them to receive love and support. Provide physical reassurance with lots of cuddling and touching.
- Some children will need to mourn on and off until they reach adolescence. They need support and understanding through their grief process and permission to show their feelings freely and openly.
- Make sure the children understand your answers and the meanings you intend. Use words and phrases that don't confuse children or make their world more frightening.
- Acknowledge children's fears and take them and their fears seriously, even though the fears may seem exaggerated by adult standards. Don't try to talk them out of what they are thinking or feeling, and provide them with lots of reassurance.
- Talk calmly to children and keep your own emotions in check. Adult despair can interfere with a child's ability to recover.
- If you are feeling so upset you don't want to talk about the death, provide the children with an honest explanation. You may want or need to take a “time out” and ask another person to help.

Some additional pointers to keep in mind when talking with children about death and grief:



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- Children's reactions will vary...some will want to talk about their feelings, some will withdraw and still others will become angry and possibly act out in some way.

SO...

Stay connected and able to observe the children. Don't "push" or insist they interact with you at certain times. Continue to check with them about how they are doing with their thinking and feeling. Share with them the range of feelings you may be experiencing as you deal with this death – by doing so, you are giving them words to use to describe their own experiences. Children's reactions will vary over time. They may seem withdrawn, but two hours later be eager and to talk with you.

SO...

Keep open the possibilities for the children to connect with you. Be responsive to their attempts to talk.

- For some children, a sit down, face-to-face conversation is too intense. It can be frightening and overwhelming for them.

SO...

Do something else, such as walk, drive, or do some other physical type of activity with them that will allow you to have an "oblique" conversation with them. Being side-by-side rather than face-to-face can reduce the intensity of the conversation that allows some children to feel a greater sense of control and to have more confidence in talking about very strong and often confusing thoughts and feelings.

- For many children, having something to do allows them to regain a sense of control over what they may be experiencing as an "out of control" world. They may be experiencing many strong and intense feelings. Expressing such intense thoughts can be overwhelming.

SO...

Suggest an activity in which the child can engage, particularly one that involves contact with another person. Make a piece of artwork, write a poem, make an audio or videotape, bake something, etc. that can produce something tangible.

- It is quite common for great distress to cause children to regress to earlier ways of coping. Don't be surprised if they do regress and act as they did much earlier in their development. They may be clingier, more fearful, more tearful, more discouraged, etc.

SO...

Increase the amount of comfort you offer them. Check on them.

- Affirm to children how pleased you are to have them in your life and how special they are. You cannot send these messages too often! Even if you have had challenging times with the children, acknowledge that you have had those difficult times, and then affirm your feelings toward them and how much they mean to you.

SO...

Make it absolutely clear...at rock bottom..."You are important to me."

- Realize that for some children, there is a "delayed reaction" to a death. Children cope very differently with stressful situations. Some deal with it immediately and directly, while others will try to deny it and/or shut it down.

SO...

Keep a close eye on how the children are doing over the weeks and months following the death. Openly ask them, from time to time, to talk with you about how they are dealing with the death and their grief.

