

Helping Children Deal with Death

Talking to children about death and dying teaches them about life and living. Anyone who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Caring adults can provide a safe, comforting and loving environment where the pain of grief can be shared.

How Children's Perceptions of Death Develop

A child's understanding of death depends on his/her developmental level. The following guideline offers a very broad overview of how a child's perception of death develops:

0-2 yr.

Loss is realized as an absence. Children of this age will sense the anxiety and sadness of those around them. They need familiar routines and extra physical contact.

3-5 yr.

Children view death as temporary and reversible. They ask the same questions over and over to attempt to gain understanding. They need patience and honest answers.

6-9 yr

Children begin to understand that death is final. They are very curious and interested in biological reasons for dying. They tend to personify death as a monster, bogeyman, or ghost. They need open discussion and reassurance.

10 yr +

Children begin to understand adult concepts of death as final, universal, irreversible and having a cause.

Adolescents - like to philosophize about life and death and search for meaning in death.

Explaining Death to Children

Use simple, correct language like "dead, died, death". Avoid euphemisms like "passed away, lost, gone forever". Children tend to take what is said very literally. People die because their bodies stop working.

Answer questions honestly - you are not expected to have all the answers.

Make use of "teachable moments" to talk about life and death eg. a run-over squirrel, the death of a pet, the changing seasons.

Reassure children that they are loved and will be cared for. Affection and security are two great needs of a grieving child.

Share your grief. Encourage questions and the expression of feelings in a loving, non-judgmental atmosphere. Share tears - crying validates children's feelings. Share hugs.

Children grieve in small doses. It is not uncommon for them to be very sad one minute and completely distracted in play the next. Outward signs of grief tend to come and go.

Invite children to participate in the funeral arrangements. Explain what will happen at the visitation, funeral, burial and allow children to make their own decisions about participation. When children are included in funeral arrangements, they feel respected, gain inner strength and a sense of self that will help them face difficult situations in the future.



Encourage memory work. Children can create a "Memory Book" of the person who has died, write or draw a picture and bury it at the grave site, or light a candle to honour the memory of a special person who has died.

Notify the school and inform them of the death in the family.

Try to keep as much routine in the household as possible.

With understanding and support, adults can help children at this vulnerable time and guide them in their grief journeys.



Good Grief Workshops for Children and Adolescents are offered twice a year in April and November. These free one-day workshops provide a safe, non-judgmental environment where grieving children and teens (aged 4-17 years) can tell their stories, share thoughts and feelings and honor the memories of special people in their lives who have died. A concurrent Parent Discussion Group gives parents/guardians the opportunity to discuss the topic of children and adolescent grief.

For more information, please call
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