

Learning to Live Through Loss: Helping Children Understand Death¹

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Perhaps a child you know is facing the death of a loved one. Adults often fear that children are too fragile to face the reality of death. Actually, most children are emotionally strong and want to know about death. The truth helps them understand what is real, and what is imaginary. Just like adults, children need to be able to feel pain, mourn, and grow. This fact sheet will help you understand how children view death and how you can help a child cope with the death of a loved one. To learn more about the process of mourning, read *Learning To Live Through Loss* (FCS 2267), available from your Extension office.

How Preschool Children Perceive Death

- Very young children understand facts best. They think in specific, concrete terms. When death is explained as “sleep” or a “long trip,” they may expect the deceased to wake up or return.
- Very young children see death as reversible, as it is often shown in cartoons. They may ask, “When will Bobby come back?” You may need to explain again and again, “Bobby is

dead. That means he won't ever live with us again. But we will always remember him.”

- They may not realize that death will happen to everyone and every living thing. They may need to ask again and again, “Do girls die? Do doggies die?”
- Young children need to ask questions about the death again and again. They need to learn the facts about the death and make certain the facts have not changed.
- Young children are likely to believe their thoughts or feelings have power over others. A child who was angry at his mother before her death may believe he is responsible for the death.

How Gradeschool Children Perceive Death

- Children of this age know that death is permanent and that everything dies. They often are very curious about physical details.

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- These children need physical, tangible ways to experience and express grief. Rituals such as visitations, funerals and memorial services are very important.
- Children accept their parents' religious beliefs. A belief in life after death generally comforts children if that concept has been part of their religious beliefs before the death.
- Boys tend to have more difficulty talking about death and showing their feelings.

Telling a Child That Someone Has Died

1. Someone emotionally close to the child should be the one to “break the news.”

2. Choose a location where you will not be disturbed.

3. Stay with the known facts. If you don't know the facts, find out before telling the child about the death.

4. Be concrete--avoid misleading terms like “He's asleep.”

5. Avoid phrases like “All wounds heal in time” and “Everything will be all right.” The child cannot comprehend such statements. Say, “This must feel frightening (or confusing).”

6. Simply be with the child. Allow the child to ask questions and answer as clearly and factually as possible. If you don't know, say so.

7. Be quiet and wait. Sometimes it takes a while for children to understand what has happened. The child may also need time to react to the news.

Because of young children's misconceptions about death, you may need to stress that:

- The person or the doctors could not prevent the death.
- The person loved the child.
- The person was not angry at the child.

- The person will never come back.
- The child will be loved. Someone will take care of the child.
- Feelings are all right: sadness, anger, and crying are okay.
- There's nothing wrong with playing and having fun.

You can gently reassure children with these concepts even if they have not asked questions about them. Children may not be able to verbalize some of their concerns right away or may feel too embarrassed to ask you.

One Way To Explain Death To Children

“When someone dies, that means their body is no longer working. The heart stops beating, they no longer need to eat or sleep, and they no longer feel any pain. They don't need their body any longer. That means we could never see them again as we could before.” (From *Children and Death*, by Danaï Papadatou and Costas Papadatos.)

Common Signs of Mourning In Children

When they learn of the death of a loved one, children have many of the same physical and emotional responses as adults, but children mourn their loss in different ways. Adults need to be aware of these signs of mourning in order to accurately meet the child's needs. When children's mourning behaviors are wrongly perceived as misbehavior, the child's hurt and confusion may deepen.

Anxiety

Children may lose their sense of security and fear another death or loss. Young children may become clinging or demanding.

Vivid Memories

Real or fantasized images related to the death can intrude on other thoughts. Memories can show up as dreams or nightmares.

Sleep Difficulty

This is very common. If “sleep” is used to describe death, the child may fear sleeping. Children who cannot mourn the death during the day may have more dreams and nightmares about it.

Sadness and Longing

Some children cry. Some don't. Some are sad for a long time; some aren't. Some children try to hide their sadness to protect their parents. Children may long for the loved one, become preoccupied with memories or may carry an object that reminds them of the deceased. For a while, this can help the child deal with the pain.

Anger and Acting Out

Children may become very angry at death, God, or adults in general. Or they may be angry at themselves, and somehow feel responsible for the death.

Guilt

Some children believe they are responsible for the death. Some may feel guilty because of a thought or deed. Feelings like, “It was my fault,” or “I must have been bad,” may cause lingering guilt. The child needs to talk about these feelings and needs your help to understand that they are not true.

School Problems

The child may learn more slowly than usual due to difficulties in concentrating, memories, sadness, or grief.

Physical Complaints

Common complaints include headaches and stomachaches, and may even include symptoms similar to those of the deceased.

Should Children Attend the Memorial Service?

Children need rituals. Participating in the funeral or memorial service helps make the death seem more real and encourages the healing that comes from mourning. Children may feel angry or left out if they

are not allowed to participate. Of course, no child should be forced to participate if he or she does not want to.

Helping Children Attend Services

1. Prepare the child for the experience: what the room looks like where the body will be viewed, what the casket looks like, how the deceased is lying, and that the skin looks different than usual and is cold because the body isn't working anymore. Explain how adults at the funeral may behave, crying or even laughing while reminiscing.

2. If the child wishes, help him approach the casket. Viewing the body helps the child understand what death is and that their loved one is, in fact, dead. Few children later regret viewing the body; many regret not doing so. Most focus on the familiar features of their loved one. Plan the child's first viewing to be in private with a supportive adult. The child's age and maturity are critical factors to consider.

3. School-age children can help make some of the decisions about the service for a family member. For example, they may want to choose a song or the burial clothes.

4. Suggest specific ways for children to express their feelings. They might choose to place something in the casket, write a letter, or draw a picture. Young children may want to touch the deceased or look under the closed part of the casket to know that the legs are actually there. Older children may value time alone to talk to the deceased. Be responsive and supportive of what the child wants to do. Do not force them to engage in any uncomfortable activity.

5. The support of a trusted adult is important. A parent who has lost a spouse, child, or parent may not be able to provide this support. The parent will need to participate in the event and mourn. The child may need another caring adult who can comfort, answer questions, and leave the room with the child if necessary.

6. Encourage the child to talk, draw, or play to release emotions after the service. Patiently correct any misunderstandings about death or the service.

As You Begin To Heal

Photos and mementos are especially important for children who may fear “forgetting” the person or what the person looked like. Children especially appreciate having a photo of the loved one in a non-breakable frame that they can carry wherever they wish. The child may wish to hold on to memories by continuing traditions that involved the loved one and remembering birthdays and other important dates. These things can help the child remember the love and caring the deceased felt for him.

Does My Child Need Professional Help?

Any kind of extreme behavior is a red flag signaling a need for professional counseling: suicide threats, serious destructive acts toward property, people or animals, frequent panic attacks, or substance abuse. Other changes include an inability or unwillingness to socialize, continued denial of the death, feeling responsible for the death or a long-lasting decline in school performance.

Children may need special help if they had a difficult relationship with the person before the death, if there was confusion or misinformation surrounding the death, or if verification of the death was delayed.

Books are an excellent tool to help children become aware of and talk about their feelings concerning the death of a loved one. As you read to the child, ask questions. “How is the character feeling?” “Is it true the person died because the child was angry?” The responses will often give you clues about how the child thinks and feels, allowing you the opportunity to correct misunderstandings and suggesting what kind of emotional support to give.

Children identify with the characters in books. Learning that the characters have feelings similar to theirs helps the healing process.

Books About Death For Preschool Children

When Grandpa Died by Margaret Stevens

- A little girl learns about death from her grandfather. When he dies, she learns about mourning and how to go on living.

Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley

- Badger's friends are sad when he dies, but they treasure the legacies he left them.

Nonna by Jennifer Bartoli

- A family learns that life continues even after Nonna (grandmother) dies. They find positive ways to remember her.

The Accident by Carol Carrick

- After his dog is hit by a truck and killed, Christopher must deal with his feelings of depression and anger.

The Happy Funeral by Eve Bunting

- A Chinese-American girl participates in her grandfather's funeral.

The Memory Box by Mary Bahr

- When Gramps realizes he has Alzheimer's disease, he starts a memory box with his grandson to keep memories of all the times they have shared.

Books About Death for Grade School Children

Early readers will enjoy reading the above titles for themselves. For ages eight to ten, try these titles:

Grover by Vera and Bill Cleaver

- Ten-year-old Grover attempts to deal with the changes his mother's death made in his life in some serious and some funny ways. (Fiction)

The Remembering Box by Eth Clifford

- Nine-year-old Joshua's weekly visits to his beloved grandmother on the Jewish Sabbath give him an understanding of love, family, and tradition, which helps him accept her death. (Fiction)

My Daddy Died and It's All God's Fault by Sue Holden

- Young Chris tells his story--his feelings of sadness, anger, false guilt and confusion--to help other young people know they are not alone. (Fiction)

How It Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz

- Eighteen people (ages seven to sixteen) describe their feelings and how they learned to go on in life. (Non-fiction)

Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies by Elizabeth Richter

- Sixteen young people (ages ten to twenty-four) describe the fears, sorrow, and other emotions they experienced when a brother or sister died. (Non-fiction)

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