



Children's Grief

Talking to your child about death

One of the hardest tasks after the death of a loved one is talking about and explaining the death to your child or children. It is even harder when you are in the midst of your own grief. This flyer offers some ways to help your child cope.

How will my child be affected by death?

Many adults have trouble dealing with death. Because of this, they assume that children cannot cope with it well, either. They may try to protect children by leaving them out of rituals or not talking to them about the death. When this happens, children may feel anxious, confused, and alone. They may be left on their own to find answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and guidance of those around them.

You can help to prepare your child to deal with losing people who are important to them by helping them handle smaller losses. This might mean asking them about their feelings when a pet dies, or talking about death that happens in a story or on television.

Your child will be affected in some way by a death in the family. If you have a young child, they may not talk about their feelings about the death. It might look like they are not affected by it. But this might just mean that they are holding back their feelings because they are so overwhelming. It is more common for them to express their feelings through the way they act or the way they play.

Whether or not they express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply. Children who are too young to talk about death need love from the important people in their lives when a person dies. This helps them to keep a sense of safety and security.

What can I expect from my child as they grieve?

Most people who are grieving pass through four major stages of feelings: fear, anger, guilt and sadness. Everyone who is touched by a death goes through these emotions to some degree – grandparents, friends, doctors, nurses and children. Each adult's and child's reaction to death is unique. But there are some common reactions. Children may go through shock, sadness, guilt, anxiety and fear. They may have physical issues, like headaches or stomach aches, or act younger than they are, like going back to bedwetting or sucking their thumbs. These are all typical ways for children to express grief. It may take some time for your child to go through their grieving process. If your child continues to have a lot of trouble more than 6 months after the death, you may want to seek professional advice of people who know your child, like their teacher, doctor, clergy person or a trained mental health provider.

How can I help my child cope with death?

These are some of the issues that your child may be dealing with after a death of someone close to them and some of the ways that you can help your child face the death:

Shock

A child may not believe the death really happened and may act like it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.

How to help your child cope:

- Maintain usual routines as much as possible.
- Show your child love, and make sure that your child knows that the people close to them will keep giving love and taking care of them.

Anger or sadness

Your child may be angry at the person who died because they feel that they have been left alone, or that God didn't make the person well. Your child also may be sad, or may be less interested in the things they usually like to do. They may seem to be much more quiet than usual.

How to help your child cope:

- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings. Share with your child how you feel. You are a model for how to express feelings. It is helpful to cry.

Guilt

Your child may think that they caused the death. They might think that the death happened because they were bad or because they were angry with the person. They may feel responsible for not having been better in some way.

How to help your child cope:

- Reassure your child about the cause of the death and explain that any thoughts they may have had about the person who died did *not* cause the death.

Anxiety and Fear

Your child may wonder who will take care of them now. They might be scared that some other person they love will die, or that they will die. They may cling to parents or caregivers. Your child might ask you or other people who are important in their life whether or not you love them.

How to help your child cope:

- Reassure your child that the death does *not* mean that they or someone else they love is likely to die soon.

Acting younger than they are

The child may go back to behaviors they had outgrown before the death, like wetting the bed or sucking their thumb.

How to help your child cope:

- A common reaction to stress is to go back to an earlier stage of development. Your child may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for awhile. Support your child in this and keep in mind that these changes are temporary.

In general, it is best to be loving, accepting, truthful and consistent with your child as they deal with a death. These are some other general tips about helping your child cope with death:

- Your child may have many questions and might need to ask them again and again.
- Encourage your child to ask questions and give honest, simple answers that are easy to understand.
 - Be patient and keep showing your child that you care about them.
 - Answers should be based on the needs your child seems to be expressing, not necessarily on the exact words they use.
- Your child will not know appropriate behavior for the situation.
- Avoid telling your child how they should or should not feel.
- The child may wish to be a part of the family rituals.
 - Explain these to your child and include your child in deciding how to participate. Remember that they should know what to expect and have a supportive adult with them.
 - Do not force your child to do anything they do not feel comfortable doing.
- Let your child express their caring for you. Loving is giving *and* taking.

Answers to avoid giving your child:

Sometimes, adults explain death to children in a simple but dishonest way. Unfortunately, this can only serve to make children feel more fearful and unsure.

Children tend to be very literal, and can understand things in a very different way than adults might mean. Below are some common answers that adults give to children that are less helpful and sometimes harmful. It is best to avoid these when talking to your child about death:

- “Grandpa will sleep in peace forever.” This explanation may cause your child to fear going to bed or to sleep.
- “Daddy went away on a long trip and won’t be back for a long time.” Your child may wonder why the person who died left without saying good-bye. Eventually they will realize that the person who died is not coming back and may feel that they did something to cause the person to leave.

The Grief of Children

To Learn More

- Journey Program
206-987-2062
- www.seattlechildrens.org

- “It is God’s will.” Your child may not understand this concept. They might think that God took the person because they were so good, and may decide to be bad so God will not take them away, too.
- “John was sick and went to the hospital where he died.” Your child might need to learn more about the difference between “little” and “big” sicknesses. Otherwise, they may be very fearful if they or someone they love has to go to the hospital in the future.

Again, it is important to remember the 4 key concepts in talking to your child about death: be loving, accepting, truthful and consistent.

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child’s nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
- For Deaf and hard of hearing callers
206-987-2280 (TTY)

Adapted from “The Grief of Children” by The Circle Solutions, Inc.

Seattle Children’s offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children’s will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children’s. However, your child’s needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child’s healthcare provider.

©2009 Seattle Children’s, Seattle, Washington. All rights reserved.

2/09

PE858