

FAMILY RESOURCE

C O N N E C T I O N

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It is natural for children to fear death. Encourage your child to talk about personal feelings.



How to Help Children Understand and Cope with Death

Children have a natural, healthy curiosity about death. A child's prior experience with death, developmental level, and emotional maturity will affect his or her response to the loss. Young children under the age of four may have difficulty comprehending the meaning and finality of death and often equate it to the cycle of sleep. It is not until the age of five or six that children begin to realize that when someone dies they do not come back. At about the age of nine, children realize that death is part of the inevitable biological process and that anyone, not merely the aged, can die.

The strength of the bond between the child and the deceased will play a large part in determining the intensity of the child's grief. When families face the death of someone near and dear, it is difficult to avoid the issue. At this point parents are facing double stress. Not only must they cope with their own grief, but also must explain to their children what happened. It is very helpful for children if their trusted adults provide a model for coping and expressing their grief.

There are a variety of suggestions to help children understand and cope with death.

1. If possible, avoid waiting for your child's life to be touched by death to deal with it. Use the natural life cycle of plants and animals to discuss the transition from birth to death. Use the death of a small mammal or fish to teach about burial. Accept your child's curiosity about death as natural and healthy. Do not be shocked if the child asks probing questions, such as how someone looks after death, or wants to see or touch a dead pet. Be open to discuss death. In the event of death, communicate your grief or sense of loss.
2. Encourage your child to talk about personal feelings. Explain that it is natural for children to experience a fear of death. Tell your child that you know how it feels to worry about death or to grieve or be sad after a death. Pick up on the cues from your child. Talk about death when your child wants to and avoid forcing your child to talk about it when he or she may not be ready.

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To open "New Horizons" of self-esteem and potential for the little people entrusted to our care, their families, and our employees by providing and continuously improving the best child development on the planet!



3. Avoid offering your child explanations about death that may confuse him. For example, telling your child that “Grandma went for a long sleep” may make your child fear bedtime. Some mental health professionals believe that telling a child “Grandma went on a long trip” may make the child wonder why Grandma deserted them without even saying good-bye.
4. Avoid sheltering your child from death. Allow your child to experience the loss and grief, and tell your child you are feeling it too. A reasonable period of mourning is important for everyone. Avoid rushing out and replacing your child’s dead pet with a new one or immediately distracting the child from the sorrow of losing a loved one by arranging a vacation. For example, one young lady who lost her mother at five years old grew into a guilt-ridden teen who said, “I must have been an awful person. You know I never even cried when my own mother died!” Solicitous relatives provided the young girl with one diversion after another, and the child never experienced a normal grief until she was a teenager.
5. Understand that some young children will not show grief at the loss of someone close. Children under the age of five or six really do not comprehend the finality of death. Many young children keep the relationship alive by fantasizing and may not understand the loss for months. In the death of a mother or father, reality only hits some children when the surviving parent begins dating again. Gently remind the child over and over again about what has happened until it finally sinks in. Let the child know where the body is buried and visit the grave. Keep in mind that it is normal for children to have a shorter period of sadness than adults.
6. Understand that it is normal for children to sometimes become angry at the deceased for leaving.
7. Realize that your child may fantasize about death by role-playing a death, discussing how he or she would cope with the death of a parent. Children need reassurance that the likelihood of a parent’s death is remote or at least not for a long time. Often questions about death are really their way of asking, “Who will take care of me?”
8. Allow children to attend funeral services if they want to, provided the service will not be extremely emotional and the child will be cared for by an adult not experiencing intense grief.
9. In the event of a terminal illness, prepare the child by talking about the seriousness of the illness and the possibility of death.
10. Since young children are egocentric, make it clear that the child had nothing to do with causing a death. Let your child know you cannot “wish” a person to death, nor does misbehaving cause someone to die.
11. Watch for the warning signs of stress in your child, such as headaches, stomachaches, change in appearance, pale, nervous tics or twitches, acts of aggression or violence, testing or defying authority, tantrums, loss of interest in activities, clinging, excessive sleeping, etc. Seek help from professionals for your child if signs of stress persist or affect their regular personality and daily routines over a period of time. ♥

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