

What Will I Tell the Children

helping your children cope with death

Nebraska Medicine

Dealing with the death of a family member or close friend is one of the most difficult tasks you may ever have to face. At a time when your energies and emotions have been drained, you must find the words and support to help your children cope.

You may need help understanding a child's concerns about the death. This brochure was written because a child's interpretation of death is not the same as yours. A child needs special attention to help him with feelings such as abandonment, guilt or fear at this time.

It's important to know that all of your questions and concerns may not be answered by this brochure. If you feel the need for more information, you may want to contact hospital staff or other resources such as teachers or ministers. The key is finding someone you are comfortable talking to.

This booklet includes some general guidelines to keep in mind when discussing the death of a family member or friend with a child. You may want to read through this several times. Families have told us the following suggestions have been helpful. Use the examples you are most comfortable with.



Show your understanding and caring by saying such things as . . .

"This is a very difficult time for all of us. There will be times that you may see me upset and cry, maybe even angry. But I'm not angry with you. I love you very much! This is a time of feeling very sad. This is normal and okay. If you feel like you want to cry, that's okay, too."

"Many people may be talking to you in the next few days – grandparents, aunts, uncles – and everyone might have something different to tell you about how to deal with this. I feel it is important to share this information with each other."

"I want you to feel free to talk to me any time about how you're feeling. It's okay for us to show and share our pain."

Talk at the child's eye level.

Touch or hold the child when appropriate. Speak directly and avoid clichés such as "You have to be brave now," or "Show everyone what a big girl or boy you are." Even if your voice is tearful, talking with you helps your child cope at this difficult time.

Avoid terms which seem confusing. Phrases such as "passed on," "lost" or "taken from us" may give mixed messages. Remember, children think in concrete terms. Words are not always necessary – hugs and sitting close can say a lot.

Give an explanation for the cause of the death, why the body has stopped working.

It's important that children are not forced to come to their own conclusions because what they imagine may be far worse than the reality. Go ahead and use the words "dead" and "dying." Even though these words may seem harsh, they are less likely to allow for misconceptions later. Make it clear that once the body stops working, there is no pain.

Listen and be prepared for such questions as:

"Where does the body go?"
"Is there life after death?"
"How will we get along without this person to love us, take care of the house or pay the bills, etc?"

This needs to be a sharing time. It's okay to say "I don't have all the answers, but we'll try to work it out."

Help your child say goodbye to the dying person.

Some people have found it comforting to share a special item of remembrance. This may also be a time for the dying person to share special memories with the child.

Involve your child in funeral arrangements, if possible. This shows he or she that they are an important part of this experience.

Help him/her to choose special objects to keep for his/her lifetime in remembrance of the person who has died. This special present helps keep the lines of communication open. Gradually, the need to have this remembrance close will diminish. It may be brought out at special times for discussion.

Or, suggest that your child write or dictate a letter to the person who has died. This may enable the child to say some things that were unexpressed at the time of the death, for whatever reason. The child may want the letter placed in the coffin.





Tell the child, "The intense, painful hurt will fade in a matter of months. There will always be sadness, which will probably be stronger at some times than at others. It's okay for you to always talk to me about these feelings."

Provide opportunities for the child to express himself through pretend play.

This is a child's way of working through the illness and death. Having a play doctor kit available helps make this possible. During the child's play is a good time for you to listen for any misconceptions. For example, the child may say to his doll, "You are so sick and you're going to die. And then mommy, daddy and I are going to get it too and we'll all die." This would be the right time for you to re-explain to your child the facts about the death.

Children's Understanding of Death

Children of all ages, even infants, exhibit grief reactions. Guilt, anxiety, anger, fears and sadness may be universal. The expressions of these emotions may vary from day to day. Helping a child and yourself through this difficult time may often be overwhelming.

For children who have known loved ones with chronic, long-term illnesses, their understanding of death may be different from the information on the following pages. Their understanding may be closer to an adolescent's understanding – even if the child is preschool age.

The following information describes children's understanding of death and behaviors which may be exhibited during infancy, school age and adolescence. The suggestions for "What You Can Say and Do" may apply across more than one age level. You may want to read through these several times to decide what is most appropriate for your child.



Infancy



Children's Understanding

This age has no understanding of death but reacts to:

- Fear of separation; is mostly disturbed by loss of physical and loving presence of parent
- Parents' emotions; infants are very in tune with parents' anxiety level

Possible Behaviors

- Crankiness
- Crying
- Slight skin rash
- Clinging

What You Can Say and Do

- Talk about your feelings and concerns with available personnel
- Let family and friends help with care and household tasks
- Try to spend some of each day with your child to keep the feeling of security intact
- Provide much loving/patting/holding
- Keep baby's routine as consistent as possible

Preschool ~ Age 2 1/2 to 5 Years

Children's Understanding

- Death is not seen as permanent, but rather, as reversible and temporary
- Death may be confused with sleeping or being away – with the belief that the person will return
- Death may be seen as punishment for some wrongdoing
- Death may be seen as violent
- Child considers self as center of universe (egocentric: sees all events as either caused by or related to them)
- Death may be seen as caused by a death wish, or that anger may produce death. These are examples of magical thinking
- Child may think he might catch the same thing
- Child may think dead people live underground

Possible Behaviors

- May show little concern at times
- May go back to:
  - bed wetting
  - thumb sucking
  - baby talk
  - fear of dark
- May show fear of separation from significant others:
  - at bedtime
  - attending preschool
- May need to talk about the death a lot, often at what seems inappropriate times. This repetition helps make it real for a preschooler. Child may need to repeat the fact of death. He/she may say such things as, "We're all going to the zoo, but not Daddy, he's dead." or "Ben doesn't need a plate, he's dead." or "Ben can't use his dump truck anymore because he's dead."

What You Can Say and Do

- Tell them about what they can expect; how things might look and what might happen:
  - house filled with people
  - funeral arrangements
  - change in traditional routine
  - parents and family grieving
- Encourage anyone explaining the death to this child to use the terms "dead" or "death"
- Do not use these phrases as they give mixed messages:
  - passed away
  - sleeping
  - taken from us
  - resting
- Other examples include:
  - "Ben is sleeping in the arms of God." The child may have subsequent sleep disturbances and be afraid to go to bed
  - "Ben was so good, God wanted him to come to live with him." The child might react with bad behavior to avoid death or develop fear of God
  - "Ben is just away." The next person who goes away may not be trusted to come back
- Respond to the child's security needs and concerns about "Who will take care of me?"Reassure him regarding routines, activities and schedules.
- Keep explanations short, simple and truthful. They may need to be repeated over and over again. "Ben was very ill. The doctors and nurses could not make him better, although they tried everything they knew. They are sad, too. But Ben's body could not work anymore. His breathing stopped. Being dead doesn't hurt"



School Age ~ Age 5 to 11 Years

Children's Understanding

5 to 9 years

- Death seen as possible, but not for them, only for others

9 to 11 years

- Death now may include them
- Child may begin to understand irreversibility of death
- Death becomes more real, final, universal and inevitable
- Child can differentiate between living and non-living
- Child may show interest in biological aspects of death and details of funeral



Possible Behaviors

- Crying
- Anxiety
- Headache
- Abdominal pain
- Separation anxiety at time of going to camp, away to school
- Denial of death
- Hostile reactions toward deceased
- Guilty, blame someone other than self
- Poor grades
- Day dreaming
- Lack of attention
- Loss of manual skills
- Withdrawn
- Fear of continuing friendship bonds, might lose friend
- Try to fix things and find solution to death
- May fear they will die at same age
- Display similar symptoms of deceased person

What You Can Say and Do

- The suggestions for the pre-school age child may also apply to the school-age child
- Explain that everyone has different reactions to death at different times. The reaction might not happen until the funeral or two weeks later or on Christmas or other special occasion
- Give permission to cry through words and example; let them know it's okay not to cry, if child doesn't usually react in that way
- Give an honest explanation for the person's death, again avoiding previously outlined statements
- Encourage attendance at funeral as a final ceremony, a way to say goodbye. Abide by the child's wish and be sure to understand reasons if child chooses not to go
- Be a good listener
- Let them know their feelings are very important

Adolescents ~ Age 12 to 18 Years

Children's Understanding

- Child begins to think more like adults
- Child is able to think more abstractly; now understands more fully the implications of death
- Child may view suicide as means of getting back at someone, but also see it as reversible because some survive it and repeatable because some try it more than once
- Can acknowledge that life is fragile

Possible Behaviors

- Want to assume more adult role
- Anger
- Preoccupation with death:
  - taking on mannerisms of deceased
  - aggression
- Regression:
  - idealization of deceased
- Practice denial of death by risk taking
- May be very critical of parents' handling of financial arrangements, funeral traditions, etc.

What You Can Say and Do

- Review suggestions for school-age children for "What You Can Say and Do"
- Encourage communication first in family, but may also find it beneficial to involve a trusted friend or counselor
- Important to have physical touch and "I love you" spoken often
- Discuss role changes which may occur in family structure

Conclusion



Coping with death is difficult for everyone. Remembering that children interpret the world they live in differently at different ages and differently than you do is not easy. You may want to call on friends and relatives to help you with this.

It is very important to help children feel that they are a part of this experience. This will help them understand and work through the death.

To order brochures, please visit NebraskaMed.com/Helpingchildren.

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To the parents, family members and, especially, the children who shared personal experiences and insights with the authors. Thanks to a special little girl named Amy who taught one author much about love and how it is communicated.

We hope this booklet will help families know where to begin.

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Jacque Bell Contributing

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