

HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND DEATH

Understanding death is a life-long process that continues from childhood through old age. Infants, toddlers and preschool age children react to death. Changes in the emotional atmosphere and daily routine at home may upset the secure world of the child. Young children may react with irritability, variations in eating, crying, sleeping patterns, and bladder and bowel function. Normal anxieties may intensify, fear of the dark, going to sleep, going to new places, or separation from a parent.

Children need to have information about death that is helpful and reliable. Tell your child immediately about a death in the family. Approach the subject gently. Be warm, sympathetic and kind. What you say is important, but how you say it will have a lasting impact on whether your child will accept the reality of death.

Research shows there are common questions children ask when a death occurs: What is death? What makes people die? What happens to people when they die, where do they go?" "Am I going to die, too?" "Are you going to die?" A preschool child needs to hear about death in simple terms: "Grandma is dead." "She can't move or walk around anymore." "She can't breathe." "Her heart stopped working." "She can't come to our house to visit." "She won't have anymore birthdays." Children might begin to understand about death easier if you remind them of a time when they saw an animal that was dead. "It was quiet and still. It couldn't move and it was not breathing. It was dead."

Encourage your child to express feelings and ask questions. "Will grandma come back to life?" "Why didn't she say good-bye to me?" "Did she die because I did something wrong?" Children need many opportunities over time to ask questions, say how they feel and receive a loving response.

A preschool child may believe that death is temporary. They may think the person is asleep, and will wake up. They may think the person goes away and then comes back. Children may become confused when someone speaks of 'life after death'. They may hear someone say: "we lost Grandpa Joe", and think he will soon be found. After a funeral a child may ask: "When is Aunt Sara coming back?" Explain: "Aunt Sara cannot come back because she is dead" Emphasize that death is not a temporary phenomenon.

It's okay to admit that you don't have all the answers. There are no easy answers to the mystery of death. But parents can comfort and help children learn about death. Making an effort to explain death, allowing sadness, anger and grieving to occur in individual ways, and providing loving compassion and gentle touch can greatly help your child begin to understand death.

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