

The Discussion of Death and Dying with Children

A conversation with children about death and dying, while difficult, is extremely important. Withholding information to protect that child is counterproductive. Here is useful information to increase one's confidence level when approaching these topics with a child.

Children will ask a lot of questions, be sure to answer them directly. Often time's people try to protect the child by using vague language such as, their loved one is sleeping. This can be confusing for children and can create fearful situations. Instead, use direct language by stating that someone has died. Try to use age appropriate language, steering away from any clinical conversations. If the person is sick, you can simply state that they have an illness that the doctors cannot fix. Be sure to differentiate this "illness" from those such as a cold or a cut that the doctors can fix.

Children do not grieve the way adults do. Adults have years of coping mechanisms that they have developed and emotional systems that allow them to sustain that level of intense grieving. Children tend to grieve in doses. You may see a child experiencing grief emotions one minute then outside having fun with their friends the next. Sometimes children may even show some regressive behaviors. They may suddenly want to sleep in bed with their parent or show other "babyish" behaviors, this is all within the realm of "normal" grief. Allow them to experience their grief, be there for support when they need it and keep their routine as much as possible.

As the case with many adults, children tend to feel their emotions in the bodies. This can result in headaches, stomachs or other body aches. Normalize this as their grief; you can have them put an emotion to the feelings they feel within their body. Deep breathing and other meditative techniques will be useful to help cope with these feelings.

Often times, children do not have the language to express what they are feeling so they will show it through their actions. Contacting a child's school to let them know what is happening is important. A child may have trouble concentrating during class. They can be showing behavioral problems or forgetting to do their assignments. Allowing the school to be a place of support will be beneficial and can help alleviate a stressor. Be aware of the child's behavior at home, acknowledging that defiance may be the child's way of expressing his/her grief. Provide them with other forms of expression such as through art and physical ways such as punching bags.

Expressing one's grief in a group setting can be extremely valuable. The child may feel isolated in their grief, especially if they don't have friends who have experienced a similar loss. Surrounding a child with other children will validate their experience and facilitate various ways to cope with their unique grieving experience.