

When someone important to us dies, many things change in our lives. The same is true for children. To help children cope with a death, we must understand how they think about death and what has changed for them as a result of the death.

No two children respond exactly the same way to the death of a loved one. Children are likely to respond to death differently and need different kinds of help, depending on their prior experience, their age, and what happens after the death.

### **Very Young Children**

Children, ages 2 to 4, mainly miss the loved one who has died. They feel sad that they are not with the person anymore, but may think of death as a long vacation. Even with careful explanation, do not be surprised if your 3-year-old asks when the dead person will visit. This does not mean your child believes in ghosts, simply that he or she does not understand that death is really the end. Keep explaining in simple terms: "Remember Sara, Grandma died. That means that we won't see her again."

Be aware that your young child may repeat what you say but act like he does not understand what death means.

### **Young Children (ages 5 to 8)**

- **Make sure your child doesn't feel at fault.**

Young children believe that their thoughts, feelings, and words have magical power. Everyone gets angry at times with people they love. When a loved one dies, a young child needs help to understand that angry feelings or hateful wishes do not cause people to die. Even older children and adults must be reminded of this from time-to-time.

- **Keep a normal routine for your child.**

Make sure your child feels secure, even after the death of a parent. The child's well being must come first. While it is important that your child is allowed to share in the family grief process, children cope best if returned to a normal routine as soon as possible. You may be concerned about how a death will affect your young child in the long run. A child who has a safe and stable routine and reliable people who care about him will not have long-term emotional problems related to the death.

- **Let your child grieve with adults, but not the same way as adults.**

Children should not be shielded from the sad feelings of grieving adults. However, your child may happily play and go about regular activities after the death of someone very important to her. Young children do not understand that death is final and should not be punished or scolded for not grieving like adults. Children express their feelings through play and should be encouraged to do so. Children who are grieving may act younger than they are in response to the death. They may engage in baby talk or be afraid of the dark. This phase typically passes in a short time.

You should not expect young children to comfort you in your grief. They may feel overburdened and scared. Your child needs to know that the adults will take care of him and at the same time, they will take care of themselves.

Your child will use you as a role model for how to grieve. If you do not talk about your grief or the person who died, your child will learn that these topics are not safe for discussion.

Adults need to grieve, but that grieving can take away important energy from the needs of a child. If you have no energy to care for your child in your grief, ask for help. Family and friends can spend time with your child, take your child to normal activities, and attend to your child's needs. Unless you are seriously depressed, your child should not be sent away from you. There are many bereavement counselors and therapists who can help you cope with your grief and help you get your family back on track.

### **School-Age Children (ages 9 to 12)**

After the death of a loved one or parent, your school-age child may be afraid that you will die too. Help her talk about her fears. Signs of such thoughts may include not wanting to leave you to go to school, headaches and stomachaches, or behavior problems. Ask children what they are feeling and thinking. Reassure them, in a realistic way, that there will always be someone to take care of them.

School-age children often worry about their own health. This is especially true after the death of a loved one to an illness or the death of another child. If your child says his head or stomach hurts, have your doctor check him. You may also want to contact a child psychologist, social worker, or hospice counselor experienced in working with grieving children. Sometimes a few sessions of play therapy can help children express their feelings and the physical pains go away.

## **Teens**

Teenagers think much like adults do about death. They know death is the end and that the dead person will not come back. The death of a parent or other important person can be devastating to teenagers. At this age, religious beliefs can bring comfort but may also bring questions about faith. It is important to give your teenager a chance to talk about the death with adults who are also grieving. Expect that your teen will have things to say that are difficult. Be open to the possibility that he or she is angry with you or with the person who died. Give your child plenty of chances to talk about all of her feelings and have them accepted.

Although your child may wish to be alone more than usual after the death, get help from a mental health professional if your child:

- withdraws for more than a week or two
- doesn't seem to care about school or other activities that were important to them
- has trouble sleeping, does not eat, or starts having behavior problems such as destroying things
- talks about suicide, such as saying, "I wish I were dead."

Contact a local hospice organization for grief support services for children or check the National Hospice and Palliative Care Web site (<http://www.NHPCO.org>) for services in your area.

## **Death: Prepare Children for the Death of a Loved One**

Chances are that someone important to your child (grandparents, aunts, uncles, close friends, or even a parent) will die before your child reaches adulthood. How can you prepare children for the likelihood of the death of someone close to them? First, do all you can to give children a caring, supportive environment. You can help your child through this difficult time with honesty, reassurance, and a willingness to talk about and share feelings.

### **Very Young Children (ages 2 to 4)**

Talk to your children about death in a way that they can understand. Children between ages 2 and 4 react to people not being with them. Preschool children do not understand that dead people are gone forever. Stories in books, children's movies, TV shows, or the death of a pet can all be ways to start talking about what death means.

The most important thing for children to know is that someone will always be there to take care of them. Very young children do not understand time or the future. If your young child asks you if you will die, the real question she may be asking is "Will you be here to take care of me?" Reassure your child that you or someone else who loves her will be always be there. Very young children need comforting after a death to help them feel secure.

### **Young Children (ages 5 to 8)**

Children between the ages of 5 and 8 are still confused about death. Your child may think that somehow they caused the death by wishing it would happen or by not doing what they were told to do. This "magical thinking" can cause your child to feel unrealistic guilt. Children need to have honest and complete answers about the death. Without the whole truth, your child will fill in the details with self-blame. Some children want to talk about the death with adults. Others will act out their feelings in play. Both of these responses are normal.

It is very important that you use clear language when explaining death to your child. If you try to cushion the news that someone has died, you may confuse your child. If you tell your child "we lost Grandpa today", your child will expect that someone will find Grandpa. If you tell your child "Uncle Joe is just sleeping", your child will expect Uncle Joe to wake up. While it sounds harsh, the clear truth is the best language to use because your child will understand it better.

### **School-age Children (ages 9 to 12)**

School-age children are beginning to understand that death is final. They are less likely to expect the dead person to return. School-age children can think about the future more clearly and understand what it would be like to have someone important to them die. Explain the ways that your family or community grieves. Is there a funeral, a wake, a celebration of life? What happens at these events? What do people do after the funeral? Children are comforted when they know the routines and customs. Your child may want to attend these rituals. If you simply and honestly explain what your child will hear and see before, during, and after the services, it is OK to bring them to the funeral or other events related to the death.

Your child may avoid upsetting topics and ideas. Your child may change the subject or ignore you when you try to talk to them about death. Look for other opportunities or wait for them to bring up the topic again. Encourage them to play. Play is the way children process death and sort out their feelings about it.

### **Teenagers**

As your child becomes a teenager, do not be surprised if he begins questioning your family's faith and other strongly held beliefs. At this age, children may be more interested in talking about death and other abstract topics. Although teenagers know that everyone will die, they often do not act as if that means them. Careless with their own health and well-being, many teenagers still believe deep down, that the rules of death do not apply to them. However, parents still influence their teens. Most teens have views on politics, religion, and social issues that are very close to their parents' views. Don't be afraid to talk about death and dying with teens. They need to hear what you have to say.

If your teen does not want to talk to you about an important death, encourage them to talk with another adult such as a counselor, pastor, teacher, or coach.