

Helping Children Understand Death

The death of a family member, friend or pet is often a very difficult time in the life of a child and his or her parents. Grief is a very painful process for both adults and children, but grieving should be encouraged. How a child grieves or reacts to the loss will depend on age, previous experience with death and his or her preparedness for the event. Children will mourn differently from adults, but they *do* mourn. Since our attitudes about death are formed at an early age, we need to begin education about this part of life as well. Just as parents explain the beginning of life to their children, they must also be able to discuss its end.

Here are some suggestions for helping children understand death.

1. Make the most of every opportunity to **introduce the concept of death** to a young child. For example, finding a dead bird in the park or the death of a goldfish are good times to begin such discussions. If the child expresses sadness, encourage him or her to mourn and, if appropriate, consider helping the child to bury the animal.

2. Touring a neighbourhood funeral home and/or cemetery can be an excellent way to give your child **accurate information** about what happens to the body after death and the funeral process. Many funeral directors are experienced in answering children's questions and often parents find such a tour extremely informative and interesting as well.

3. When someone dies, be **open and honest** with your child. Don't try to protect the child from experiencing pain and grief. Talking about it brings acceptance for both the adult and the child. Be prepared to repeat explanations and reassurances from time to time and if you don't know the answer to a question, say so.

4. **Avoid euphemisms** in explaining death, such as "gone on a trip", "lost" or "sleeping". Children take such terms literally and may become fearful of sleeping or going on trips. It is best to use the terms "dead" or "died", and if necessary explain what that

means in a physical sense to the young child. For instance, "Grandpa's heart is not beating anymore. He can't breathe."

5. Tell children what happens when someone dies, according to **your religious, social and family traditions**. If you have religious beliefs that explain life after death or what death means, this can be very helpful; however, avoid blaming God with explanations such as "God loved Mommy so much that He wanted her to be with Him." This will likely result in resentful feelings towards God who took the child's Mommy away.

6. **Be aware of hidden fears**. If Grandma died in the hospital, children may think that they will also die if they need to be hospitalized. Explain the circumstances of the death — a car accident, old age or serious illness. As well, children need information and reassurance as to what would happen and who would care for them if their parents died.

7. **Expect children to play act death situations**. This is natural and quite helpful for them, particular after a death experience.

8. **Books for children** about death can be extremely helpful, both before and after a death experience. Librarians can recommend age-appropriate books. However, parents should read the book first to see if it is suitable for their child, the situation and the message that they want to give.

Books for children about death and dying

The Dead Bird Margaret Wise Brown
The Fall of Freddie the Leaf Leo Buscaglia
Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs Tomie dePaola
My Grandpa Died Today Joan Fassier
The Tenth Good Thing About Barney Judith Viorst
Love You Forever Robert Munsch

The above information was put together by Gloria Garvie, an early childhood educator in Toronto, Ontario, from talks she gives to parent groups on this topic.