

Talking To Children About Death A Short Guide For Teachers

Talking to children about death does not come easily to adults. We have been schooled to protect children, and to hide our own feelings, but we now know that children need to grieve, just as much as adults do. By being brave enough to provide them with information and to be there for them, we can help them through this process. Don't forget that children, even infants, do grieve.

HOW AND WHAT DO I TELL THEM?

It is best to tell the children the truth: "Jimmy died yesterday". Try not to use euphemisms, like "Jimmy passed away", or, "Jimmy went to sleep and no one could wake him up." For a child, equating sleep with death can cause sleep disturbances.

Tell them the truth about the reasons the person died. Believe it or not, what they will imagine happened can be much worse, than what actually happened. For young children, be sure to keep the words as simple as possible. You don't have to give all the details, but ask them if they have any questions, and if they do, answer them to the best of your ability.

If it is a child who died, share with the children that it is unusual for a child to die, but it does happen. They know it does, they see it every day on television.

Be sure to ask the children if they have any questions. If they do, answer them. If you don't know the answer, tell them so. You can share with them your beliefs, and ask them about theirs. Try to stay open-minded.

WHAT DO I DO WITH MY OWN FEELINGS?

If the child or adult who died is someone you knew and cared for, you will have your own feelings of grief. Don't be afraid to let the children see you cry. Your feelings can give children permission to express their own. Often children become more frightened when adults try to hide things from them. If children seem frightened by your feelings, you can explain that you feel very sad (or angry...or frightened), but you will be okay.

WHAT KINDS OF REACTIONS CAN I EXPECT FROM THE CHILDREN?

Children, like adults, experience a whole range of feelings when they hear that someone died. Unlike adults they are less able to hide "unacceptable" feelings. Children who become anxious may start to giggle or laugh. They are not being disrespectful. They are just reacting to the tension of the moment. Children may also cry, show little or no emotion, go "numb" or get angry, particularly if it is another child who died. Up to age 10, and sometimes even beyond, language is less familiar to children than behavior. Don't be surprised if children "act out" their grief. They may grow restless, find it difficult to concentrate, tease another child, or pick a fight. You may have noticed that under stress, your own "worst" traits tend to show themselves. Remember that the same is true of children.

It often takes children longer to grieve. As they get older, their perceptions of death change, and they may re-work old losses.

Pre-Latency children (ages 6 and below) do not understand the finality of death. Even after explaining the death several times, young children will often ask “when will he or she come back?”

Latency aged children (ages 7 – 12) may ask a 1000 questions. They may want to know every detail of the death, the funeral and what happens after death. Children manage their anxiety through asking questions or imagining the most gruesome details. Don’t be shocked if children ask about blood and guts, worms, etc. These questions are normal, even if they are difficult for adults to handle. Answer them to the best of your ability.

Remember children can be very concrete. After telling a child that her parent’s body would be buried in the ground, a therapist was taken by surprise when a few days later the child asked: “What do they do with the head?” You can help by asking the children what they were told, and then gently correct misperceptions.

If a classmate, teacher or a parent dies, children will be particularly vulnerable to feelings of fear and guilt. A child who may have had a fight with the deceased might well fear that he or she caused the death. Children often feel as though their behavior causes bad things to happen. You can help by hearing the child’s fears, and by telling them that many children (and some adults!) feel this way when something bad happens. It is also important to provide reassurance. Please acknowledge the strength of the fear, before you reassure them, otherwise, the child may find it difficult to believe you. When a child dies, children may show anger at the adults who “let this happen”. That is also a normal reaction.

One death may bring up the pain of other deaths or losses a child might have had. They may react very strongly to the death of a child or adult they may barely know, because they are remembering other losses (consciously or unconsciously). Let them talk about these losses, which may range from grandparents to pets! Remember that, to children, pets can be as important as people. This is normal.

In addition to “feelings”, children may also display a wide range of symptoms. Headaches, stomach aches, bedwetting, a variety of fears (about their health, their parent’s health, your health, fear of the dark, heights, etc.) or difficulties with eating, sleeping and concentration may surface. If these symptoms are extremely severe, or persist over an extended period of time, then the child needs to be assessed for depression. In the short term, however, these symptoms are normal part of the grief process.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THE CHILDREN?

Listen to them. Answer their questions as best as you can. Don’t tell them not to cry. Tell them that people feel a lot of different things: denial or disbelief, numbness, anger and sadness, and that all these feelings are normal. Tell them they may feel sad, and then feel happy again. This is normal, too. It is okay to have moments of happiness, even when someone just died. Children are prone to feeling guilty if they have a happy moment.

Be with them. Share your grief. When you think about it, one of the hardest things we can do in life is to sit with another person in pain and provide comfort through our presence. By not rushing to try to make the pain go away, you allow healing to begin.

Provide normal structure. General rules for safety and behavior should be gently enforced. Structure helps.

Provide time in the day for some quiet time. If you have an exam scheduled for the first few days, postpone it. The children will not be able to do their best.

Allow the children to write about their feelings, or draw pictures. Studies have shown that when painful feelings are let out this way, they may seem stronger at first, but they begin to recede. Let the children write cards and letters to the one who dies, to the bereaved family, to God, or to whoever else they might want. In this process not only do children learn to comfort themselves, but they also learn to give comfort.

Encourage the children to provide comfort and understanding for each other. However, understand if the children show more irritability and anger with each other. Gently enforce limits. Let them know that disrespect and violence is not acceptable. This is best done through your positive example.

If a classmate dies, don't erase his or her presence in the classroom. Leave the desk vacant for a period of time. Let the children decide what they want done with the desk. Often children may want to decorate it with pictures and cards, or even take turns sitting at it to think about or remember their friend.

Keep parents informed, so that the parents can also be prepared to support their children. Share with parents how you think their child is coping.

If children want to go to the wake and/or funeral (with their parents permission), let them. Encourage their parents to prepare them by letting them know what they might see and hear. Make sure they have some support available, preferably from a trusted adult. Adolescents may want to go with each other without an adult. That is normal.

JUST DO YOUR BEST!

There is no perfect way to handle grief. Death is hard for all of us, and can stir up our own pain. Be prepared. If you rush to comfort, tell a child not to cry, or even snap at a child in a moment of tension, you can always apologize and reach out for the child when you are feeling stronger. Use your peers for support.