

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

## *A Brief Guide for Parents*

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### **WHY IS IT SO HARD TO TALK TO MY CHILD?**

*As adults we are taught to protect children:* We may even have been taught that children do not grieve the way adults do. Now we know that this isn't true. Children, even infants do grieve when they lose a loved one. Sometimes the way they show grief is different, but the sadness is there.

### **HOW DO I TELL MY CHILD?**

*Tell your child the truth:* Tell them who died and tell them why. This is very difficult for a parent, but it is helpful to children. Children are very sensitive to the atmosphere around them. When they sense something is wrong, their imaginations often take them to places far worse than reality. Tell them that the person died. If you can, avoid using euphemisms like, "he passed away", or "he went to sleep and never woke up". If a child hears "sleep" used where death occurred, he or she might develop a fear of sleeping. For a young child, use simple, direct words that they can understand. Let them ask questions, and answer them as best as you can.

### **WHAT ABOUT MY OWN FEELINGS?**

*If someone you cared about died, you will have your own feelings:* If you begin to cry, that is okay. When children see that even adults can be sad, it gives them permission to be sad. If your child looks frightened you can tell them "Mommy (or Daddy) is very sad (or frightened or angry) right now, but I will be okay."

### **WHAT IF MY CHILD WANTS TO GO TO THE WAKE OR THE FUNERAL?**

*This is a decision for you to make:* It can be very healthy for a child to attend wakes and funerals, if they are emotionally mature enough, and if they have support from you, from another trusted adult or from their friends. Wakes and funerals are ways in which we all grieve together and begin to heal. If your child has never been to a wake or funeral you can help prepare them by telling them what they might see or hear. If there is an open casket, you need to help them prepare for the fact that they will see the person and that he or she might look different to them. You can also talk about the experience after you return home. If your child is very young, or emotionally immature you might not want them to go. Explain why and help them talk through their feelings.

### **WHAT IF MY CHILD DOES NOT WANT TO GO TO THE WAKE OR THE FUNERAL?**

*Do not force them:* The child is giving a clear message that they don't feel ready. You can talk to them about what would make it hard for them to go but, if at all possible, allow your child room to decide. If you will be going yourself, help your child be with a trusted adult while you are gone.

### **WHAT KIND OF REACTIONS MIGHT MY CHILD HAVE?**

*Children, like adults show a wide range of reactions to death:* Unlike adults, it may be impossible for them to hide "unacceptable" feelings. Thus, if your child laughs or giggles when they are told about the death, or when at the wake or funeral, try not to respond with anger. Laughter can be a way for a child to control his or her anxiety. Children may also be sad, angry, numb, show no reaction at all or be disbelieving. They move from one feeling to another quickly. All of these reactions are normal.

*Children, particularly those younger than age 10, express a lot of their feelings through their behavior:* Don't be surprised if your child becomes overactive, irritable, argumentative, restless, or picks a fight with another child or with you. These are all ways of expressing feelings. Gently set limits with your child and talk to them about what they might be feeling. As adults, we know that stress often brings out the worst in us...the same is true of children.

*Pre-latency children (ages 6 and below) cannot grasp the finality of death:* You might find that you tell your child that someone died and a few minutes, hours or days later they ask, "when is he or she coming back?" This is normal. This is sometimes very difficult for adults who find that they must explain the painful facts over and over again.

**Latency aged children (ages 7-12) may ask you a 1000 questions:** These questions may be gruesome or graphic. They will want to know every detail about the death, wake and burial. “Was there blood?” “What happens to the body?” “Are there worms?” Children in this age group soothe their anxiety by imagining the worst and asking about it. This can be upsetting for adults but it is important to answer these questions as best as you can. If you don’t know the answer, you can just say so.

**The grief process for children is longer than it is for adults:** Children often have to rework old losses when their understanding of death grows. Also, a new loss can bring back powerful memories of other losses. Children often feel as strongly about losing a pet as they do about losing a person. This is normal.

**Children (and adults) often struggle with guilty feelings, particularly if the person who died is another child or a parent:** They think they did something to make the person die. Children often think their behavior makes bad things happen. It makes them feel less helpless. If your child expresses these feelings, don’t jump in to reassure them too quickly as the child may not believe you. Instead you can tell them that you can hear how badly they feel, tell them again how the person died and explain that their behavior could not have caused the death. They may need to hear this more than once as they experience their grief.

**Children often respond to loss with difficulties eating, sleeping or concentrating:** They may bed wet or cling to you. They may talk about fears about their own health, their friends’ health or yours. They may be afraid of the dark, heights, etc. They may have trouble letting you out of their sight even to go to school or to let you go to work. If these symptoms are very severe or if they last for a long time, the child needs to see a professional. However, in the short run, these are normal grief reactions.

**Children sometimes feel bad if they have a happy moment:** They think if they love someone who dies, they are supposed to be sad all of the time. This is natural. Adults often feel the same way. The truth for most of us, however, is that we move from one feeling to another. It is okay to be happy. You can help your child by letting them know that this is acceptable. Sometimes, it is easier for us to feel sadness or anger if we know that we can also have moments of happiness.

**Children can be very concrete:** They take what we say literally. A counselor once gently told a child that her father’s body would be buried in the ground. The child nodded solemnly and then a couple of days later asked the counselor, “but what did they do with his head?”

### WHAT IF IT IS ANOTHER CHILD WHO DIED?

**This is a very difficult loss:** It is very frightening for a child when someone his or her own age dies. For a parent, it can be an unthinkable loss. Children often feel angry at adults who failed to “save” or “protect” the child. They may also be angry at God or even at each other. Children feel the “unfairness” of this loss as much as we do. Hearing them out and listening to their concerns is very important.

### WHAT CAN I DO FOR MY CHILD?

**Listen to them, be with them and share your grief:** Don’t force them to talk when they feel like withdrawing, but let them know you will be there for them when and if they do want to talk. Allow them time to talk to their friends. Sometimes children share with each other more easily than with adults. Sometimes they can talk to another adult more easily than they can talk to you because they want to protect you from their feelings. They know that when they hurt, you hurt.

**One of the hardest things we can do in life is just to be with another person we love who is in pain:** This is even harder when that person is your child. Knowing that we cannot take the pain away makes us feel helpless, but sometimes the greatest gift we can give is to sit with each other. Allow your child to grieve.

**Keep up your normal rules and structure:** Structure helps children feel safe. Allow some leeway if a child has difficulty doing homework, concentrating or falling asleep but try to maintain normal expectations. Let your child’s teacher know what has happened so that he or she can also help.

**Take care of yourself:** As a parent, it is hard enough to watch your child grieve, but you too may be hurting. Give yourself some time to talk to someone you trust. Death is hard for all of us and can stir up your fear and pain....so be prepared. If you rush to comfort your child too quickly, tell him or her not to cry or even snap at them in a moment of tension, you can always apologize to the child and talk it over when you are feeling stronger. Don’t forget to use your own relatives and friends for support.

**REMEMBER: There is no perfect way to handle grief. Your love is most important.**