

# Talking To Children About Death

## **Introduction**

If you are concerned about discussing death with your children, you're not alone. Many of us hesitate to talk about death, particularly with youngsters. But death is an inescapable fact of life. We must deal with it and so must our children; if we are to help them, we must let them know it's okay to talk about it.

By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know - if they have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can then help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk does not solve all problems, but without talk we are even more limited in our ability to help.

What we say about death to our children, or when we say it, will depend on their ages and experiences. It will also depend on our own experiences, beliefs, feelings, and the situations we find ourselves in, for each situation we face is somewhat different. Some discussions about death may be stimulated by a news report or a television program and take place in a relatively unemotional atmosphere; other talks may result from a family crisis and be charged with emotions.

This pamphlet cannot possibly deal with every situation. It does provide some general information which may be helpful—information which may be adapted to meet individual needs.

## **Children are Aware**

Long before we realize it, children become aware of death. They see dead birds, insects, and animals lying by the road. They may see death at least once a day on television. They hear about it in fairy tales and act it out in their play. Death is a part of life, and children, at some level, are aware of it.

If we permit children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information, prepare them for a crisis, and help them when they are upset. We can encourage their communication by showing interest in and respect for what they have to say. We can also make it easier for them to talk to us if we are open, honest, and comfortable with our own feelings - often easier said than done. Perhaps we can make it easier for ourselves and our children if we take a closer look at some of the problems that might make communication difficult.

## **Communication Barriers**

Many of us are inclined not to talk about things that upset us. We try to put a lid on our feelings and hope that saying nothing will be for the best. But not talking about something doesn't mean we aren't communicating. Children are great observers. They read messages on our faces and in the way we walk or hold our hands. We express ourselves by what we do, by what we say, and by what we do not say.

When we avoid talking about something that is obviously upsetting, children often hesitate to bring up the subject or ask questions about it. To a child, avoidance can be a message - "If Mom and Dad can't talk about it, it really must be bad, so I better not talk about it either." In effect, instead of protecting our children by avoiding talk, we sometimes cause them more worry and also keep them from telling us how they feel.

On the other hand, it also isn't wise to confront children with information that they may not yet understand or want to know. As with any sensitive subject, we must seek a delicate balance that encourages children to communicate - a balance that lies somewhere between avoidance and confrontation, a balance that isn't easy to achieve. It involves:

- trying to be sensitive to their desire to communicate when they're ready
- trying not to put up barriers that may inhibit their attempts to communicate
- offering them honest explanations when we are obviously upset
- listening to and accepting their feelings
- not putting off their questions by telling them they are too young
- trying to find brief and simple answers that are appropriate to their questions; answers that they can understand and that do not overwhelm them with too many words.

Perhaps most difficult of all, it involves examining our own feelings and beliefs so that we can talk to them as naturally as possible when the opportunities arise.

## **Not Having All the Answers**

When talking with children, many of us feel uncomfortable if we don't have all the answers. Young children, in particular, seem to expect parents to be all knowing - even about death. But death, the one certainty in all life, is life's greatest uncertainty. Coming to terms with death can be a lifelong process. We may find different answers at different stages of our lives, or we may always feel a sense of uncertainty and fear. If we have unresolved fears and questions, we may

wonder how to provide comforting answers for our children.

While not all our answers may be comforting, we can share what we truly believe. Where we have doubts, an honest, "I just don't know the answer to that one," may be more comforting than an explanation which we don't quite believe. Children usually sense our doubts. White lies, no matter how well intended, can create uneasiness and distrust. Besides, sooner, or later, our children will learn that we are not all knowing, and maybe we can make that discovery easier for them if we calmly and matter-of-factly tell them we don't have all the answers. Our non-defensive and accepting attitude may help them feel better about not knowing everything also.

### **The Individual Experience**

While it can be helpful to know that children go through a series of stages in the way they perceive death, it is important to remember that, as in all growth processes, children develop at individual rates. It is equally important to keep in mind that all children experience life uniquely and have their own personal ways of expressing and handling feelings. Some children ask questions about death as early as three years of age. Others may outwardly appear to be unconcerned about the death of a grandparent, but may react strongly to the death of a pet. Some may never mention death, but act out their fantasies in their play; they may pretend that a toy or pet is dying and express their feelings and thoughts in their make-believe game, or they may play "death games" with their friends, taking turns dying or developing elaborate funeral rituals.

No matter how children cope with death or express their feelings, they need sympathetic and nonjudgmental responses from adults. Careful listening and watching are important ways to learn how to respond appropriately to a child's needs.

### **The Unemotional Opportunity**

It is usually easier to talk about death when we are less emotionally involved. Taking opportunities to talk to children about dead flowers, trees, insects, or birds may be helpful. Some young children show intense curiosity about dead insects and animals. They may wish to examine them closely or they may ask detailed questions about what happens physically to dead things. Although this interest may seem repulsive or morbid to us, it is a way of learning about death. Children should not be made to feel guilty or embarrassed about their curiosity. Their interest may provide an opportunity to explain for the first time that all living things die and in this way make room for new living things to take their place on earth.

This kind of answer may satisfy for the moment, or it may lead to questions about our own mortality. Honest, unemotional, and simple answers are called for. If we are talking to a very young child, we must remember that she can absorb only limited amounts of information at a time. She may listen seriously to our answers and then skip happily away saying, "Well, I'm never going to die." We shouldn't feel compelled to contradict her or think that our efforts have been wasted. We have made it easier for her to come back again when she needs more answers.

Other opportunities to discuss death with children occur when prominent persons die and their deaths, funerals, and the public's reaction receive a great deal of media coverage. When a death is newsworthy, children are bound to see something about it on television or hear it mentioned on the radio, in school, or in our conversations. In any case, it can rarely be ignored and, in fact, should not be. It is a natural time to give them needed information or to clarify any misconceptions they may have about death.

For more information on children's understanding of death, please go to [www.hospicenet.org](http://www.hospicenet.org)

Compiled from Keynote Addresses by J.W. Worden PhD at 1991 ADEC Annual Meeting. This booklet was made possible by a gift to The Outstretched Hand Foundation from the Variety Club of Australia: the children's charity.