

Children also grieve and need to express their sorrow. Sometimes well-meaning parents wishing to spare their children the pain of grief will try to shield them from what has happened. They may use death-denying or inappropriate language, which often can cause more problems and concerns for them than the truth would. "Grandpa went away on a trip" or "Your brother fell asleep and the angels took him to heaven"; may cause children to become apprehensive when anyone goes away on a trip and fearful to fall asleep lest the "angels come" for them next. Children need to be loved and reassured frequently in order to feel secure.

Children are also observant of their parents and adults. They intuit much of what is happening around them but because of their lack of life experience they may not always be able to translate what they observe into an authentic understanding of the situation. The way parents deal with death will either reassure children or frighten them. It is right for adults to express emotions and to cry for example, but children should know why grown-ups are crying and that it is perfectly acceptable to cry when someone you love very much dies. One of the worse things to do is to deny children the right to express their emotions. "Keeping a stiff upper lip", being "brave" or "manly" are all unacceptable expectations to demand from any bereaved person, let alone children.

As well, children live in a 'seem-magical' reality where cause and effect can be viewed in a simpler and unsophisticated way. They may blame themselves for the death of their sibling or parent; "if only I had behaved better and not fought with him, than by brother would not have died." Sometimes they may take upon themselves guilt for something that they are totally innocent of.

The best way to deal with the topic of death with children is with simple, straightforward statements of truth. Obviously, one may have to guide and educate them as they attempt to process this knowledge. Using their level of vocabulary, language and experience is also important. Sometimes parents find that using toys, or simply drawing and colouring with them, provides a non-threatening medium in which to engage children in such a discourse. Taking time with them and allowing them to ask whatever questions they have, even if they might seem odd or unrelated, are the best approaches. Sometimes younger children can even exhibit a morbid curiosity while teenagers may be fascinated.

It is also important to keep a child at home and in their normal routine and pattern of activity as much as is possible, in order to underline their sense of security. Permit them to play and even to laugh and carry on as usual. This may be hard for a grieving adult but it allows the child a safe environment to process their loss in their own way without additional stress and worry.

The topic of death itself should never be taboo in the home but rather openly discussed as part of the natural fabric of life itself. This helps children to understand that death is not something to be feared. The loss of a pet, or the way death is pictured on TV, can provide an opportunity for growth and insight into this ultimate rite of passage. Again, it

is important that the adult answer honestly any questions, gauging the complexity of their response to the maturity and age of the child. Burying a bird or puppy who has died allows the child to participate in the grief work of bringing closure to a loss, thus establishing a healthy pattern and understanding of the conventions surrounding the saying of good-bye.

Likewise, if a family is religious, it is also important what you say about God's role in all this. For example, parents might have taught their children that God is all loving and protecting from all harm. They might also have stressed that God hears our prayers and answers them. When a father has a fatal heart attack while driving to work, a child might not comprehend how such a thing could happen if God loves and safeguards us so much. Likewise, when the child prays that God bring his Daddy back to him, only to find that his prayer goes unanswered in the way that he wants, further insecurity, bewilderment and even a crisis of faith occurs. It is difficult enough for theologians to ponder and explain such mysteries, let alone parents or children. God, faith and religion should be always explained carefully, that allows for the existence of disease and suffering in the world, while at the same time stressing that God is still the ultimate Healer and Comfort. In this way, faith can still give comfort and perspective.

It is also important if the death be of a parent, not to tell a child that he/she is now the man or woman of the house. This places a heavy burden and expectation on their shoulders and is a set-up for future problems of perceptions of failure. A child is not a substitute or surrogate for the deceased adult. They must be free to be themselves and to enjoy their childhood.

Often parents are uncertain whether to allow a child to view the deceased or to attend the funeral itself. The general response to this question is that it is really up to your child. Certainly, they could go to the funeral home during a separate viewing time and be given the option of coming up front to see the deceased or staying in their seat or in the foyer with another adult. Naturally, they should never be forced to view against their will; but almost always, if allowed to choose at their own pace and on their own terms, they will satisfy their natural curiosity and join other family members by the casket. At this time it is appropriate to engage the child in a conversation where the adult can explain death again and where the children may feel comfortable to ask any further questions or make any other observations or statements that they wish. As for attending the funeral itself, this is more a question to be gauged by age, attention-span capabilities, and behaviour. If children are able to sit through a service without being disruptive than they may be given the option. With smaller children, whose concentration may be shorter, a private viewing usually suffices.

Whatever the level of involvement that your child chooses, it is always important that the parent(s) sit down at home with the child, and explain beforehand, what will happen when they go to the funeral home to view, or to attend the funeral, or to visit the grave. Again, any questions they may wish to ask should also be answered at this time as well,

again in the same simple but honest manner mentioned earlier. The child will feel more confident when he is prepared and knows what to expect.

Children have a need and a right to grieve. They also experience the similar stages of grief that adults do. It is important that they be allowed and encouraged to express their sorrow and have their questions answered. It is entirely appropriate for them to draw a picture, write a letter or bring a small favourite toy, to leave in the casket with the deceased. These small tokens and gestures become part of their 'grief work' and help them to feel that they are involved and contributing to the rite of saying farewell. Many funeral homes even provide complimentary colouring books that can be taken home and used by parents as a form of engaging the child in conversation about death while they are at play.

In some cases, it is not unusual for a child to exhibit aggressive or inappropriate behaviour at school or home, following the death of a parent, relative, or significant relationship. Bed wetting, fights with siblings or school friends, stealing or lying, are but a few a few problems that may occur. Certainly the school and any other areas of a few problems that can occur. Schools and other places of frequent involvement by your child should be notified by you of a significant death. Constant reassurance and conversation can usually help to restore a sense of security. Such quality time given to the child comforts and encourages him that he is still loved and wanted. If concerns continue there are community services and counsellors that should be used to assist children in working through their feelings.

Community Resources

Depending on your locale, some support sources may not be present. A family doctor, mental health centre, hospital, social worker, counsellor, clergy or your funeral director can assist you with an appropriate referral in these cases.

ARK - Counsels children and teenagers who have experienced the loss of a parent through death or divorce. Also, can suggest & assist the process of talking to children about death.

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

Suggested Reading

There are many books available on this topics The following are a few that I recommend.

How Do We Tell the Children? A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Understand and Cope When Someone Dies, Dan Schaefer & Christine Lyons, Newmarket Press, NY, 1986.

Grollman, Earl, Talking About Death, A dialogue between parent and child, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Ginott, Haim G., Between Parent and Child, New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Jackson, Edgar N., Telling A Child About Death , New York: Channel Press, 1965.

Polner, Murray, and Arthur Barron, The Questions Children Ask, New York: Macmillan, 1964.

Gullo, Steven. Death and Children. New York: Dobbs Ferry, 1985.

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. On Children and Death. New York: Macmillan, 1983.