
Helping Children Cope With Death

Sadness, fear, anger, and confusion. The death of a loved one brings a whole range of feelings. Children may have many of the same feelings as adults. Yet, their understanding of death is different.

What does death mean to children?

Children's understanding of and reaction to death depend on their stage of development, closeness to the deceased and the responses or interactions with the surviving parent(s) and other family members.



Infants

Babies sense the emotions of the people who care for them. They can sense the sadness in the arms, faces, and voices of their parents or caregivers. Still, a six-month-old can't understand that a loved one has died.

Don't try to keep feelings from babies, since they're learning about emotions. The tender care given to babies can be a comfort both for them and their caregivers.

Preschoolers

Young children have a vague understanding of death and a growing curiosity. Also, they believe death is temporary and reversible. Preschoolers may ask many questions. They seem to be fascinated with the physical aspects of death. They may wonder where a deceased person is. If told death is like sleeping, children may expect the deceased to wake up. They may believe that grandma will return as she does from vacation. Some children may imagine heaven as a wonderful place with white clouds and sunshine.

Preschoolers still think that death happens only to others. You may hear questions like "Do dogs die?" "Do children die?" Your child is slowly beginning to realize that death is a part of life.

Ages 6-9

The finality of death becomes clearer to school-age children. They understand that even people close to them can die. They may find it hard to talk about death because they're afraid. Rituals may help them cope with the death of a loved one. The funeral or memorial service may give them a concrete way to deal with their sadness and confusion. If religion has been a part of their lives, religious concepts can also be a comfort.

Ages 10 and up

Older children have a clearer understanding of death. Ten-year-old children understand the biological facts of death. They know that a person's heart, brain, and breathing stop. Preteens view death as a long way off. Death is something that only happens to old or sick people. This viewpoint is normal. Most of us don't face the idea of our own death until adulthood.

Helping children understand death

There is no easy way to break sad news to a child. Parents may find these ideas help a child understand death.

- *Explain what happened* Someone close to the child should explain what happened. For example, an aunt or a grandfather might explain the death of a parent. Don't use examples that are hard to understand. A straightforward approach is best. You might say something like this: "You're probably wondering what is going on. Last night, your Daddy died. You knew he was very sick. When a person dies it means they stop breathing. Their heart stops beating. When they die, people don't feel any more pain. They don't eat or sleep any more. It means that your Dad will not come back."
- *Acknowledge feelings* It also helps to acknowledge the child's feelings, "I'll bet you're feeling sad, scared and confused." A child may cry or sit quietly. He or she may ask questions or seem to avoid the whole idea. Stay close by. Give him or her some time to think about the information.
- *Answer questions* Children may have questions immediately or in a few days. Try to answer them clearly and honestly. You may need to say the following: "No one could keep the death from happening. The person who died loved you. He did not go away because of anger. You did nothing to "make" (the person) die. There are many grown ups who still love and will take care of you. It's OK to have a lot of different feelings - even anger is okay. It's okay to play and have fun too."
- *Understand behavior* Children deal with grief in their own way. Feelings may show up in behavior. One child may become clingy or demanding. Another child may have trouble sleeping. This is a common problem if the child was told that death is like sleep. Some children cry. Some hide their sadness to protect their parents. Some children act out in anger. Others have trouble in school. Many feel guilty believing that they did something to cause the death. Still, other children complain they are sick or have stomach aches. Some children lose interest in activities, lose their appetite, or have a fear of being alone. Others may make repeated statements of wanting to join the deceased person or withdraw from friends.
- *Offer a reminder* Time and understanding will help children. Be available to listen. Have an object that reminds them of the person they lost. Many children worry about forgetting. Carrying a picture or other special reminder can help. Extreme behavior may be a cry for help. Talk to a counselor if a child's behavior worries you.

What about the funeral?

Adults may worry about taking children to funerals, wakes and memorial services. Won't it be too painful to see the body of a deceased loved one? Will a room full of sad and crying people scare a child?

Actually, rituals can help children to cope with death, just as they help adults. Rituals help us to grieve, express feelings and begin to understand death. When children are left out of rituals, they may imagine death and funerals as something much more horrible.

Young children may believe they are kept from a funeral for their own safety because dead people can hurt them. Of course, no child should be forced to go to a funeral. Still, a child may want to attend. Caring adults can help make it a positive and comforting experience.

Some ideas

- Some children like to write a letter or draw a picture to put into the casket.
- Some children may help to make plans. They might choose a song or reading for the funeral.
- If the child wants to approach the casket, go with him or her. It may be best to do this in private.
- Tell the child what to expect ahead of time. For example, “Your mother’s body will be in the casket at the front of the church. People might be crying.” Explain how the deceased’s body might look.
- A parent or adult friend should explain what is happening during the service.

If children are too frightened to attend the funeral, adults can help children mourn the family member in other ways:

- Light a candle
- Pray
- Look at old photographs
- Talk about good times the child had with family member who has died. Tell funny stories.

Be there in the weeks to come

Normally in the weeks to follow after a death, children might feel immediate sorrow or may believe the family member is still alive. Help children begin to heal by:

- Listening. Watch and listen. Get a sense of what children are feeling. What may be confusing about the death?
- Telling the truth. When questions come up, try to answer in concrete terms. If you don’t know the answer, say so.
- Accepting feelings and helping children to express feelings. Remembering can be a helpful way for children to grieve.
- Assuring children of love. Children may feel isolated and alone. They may fear they’ll die next. A stable routine can help. Affection, holding, and being told they’re loved will help too.

Suggested books

For preschool children to age 7

Badger’s Parting Gifts, by Susan Varley. Badger’s friends are sad when he dies, but they treasure the legacies he left them.

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When A Special Person Dies, by Janis Silverman. An art therapy and activity book for children coping with the death of someone they love. Sensitive exercises address all the questions children may have during this emotional and troubling time.

Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying, by Joyce Mills, Ph.D. *Gentle Willow* uses the metaphor of a dying tree to show how even the sadness and fear of death can be transformed by love and memory.

The 10th Good Thing About Barney, by Judith Viorst. “My cat Barney died this Friday. I was very sad. My mother said we could have a funeral for him, and I should think of ten things about Barney so I could tell them....” But the small boy who loved Barney can only think of nine. Later, while talking with his father, he discovers the tenth and begins to understand.

The Memory Box, by Mary Bahr. When Gramps realizes he has Alzheimer’s disease, he starts a memory box. He and his grandson keep memories of all the times they have shared.

Sad Isn’t Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss by Michaelene Mundy. Loaded with positive, life-affirming advice for coping with loss as a child, this guide tells children what they need to know after a loss – that the world is still safe; life is good; hurting hearts do mend.

For school-aged children ages 8 and up

The Remembering Box, by Edith Clifford. Joshua’s weekly visits to his beloved grandmother on the Jewish Sabbath gives him an understanding of love, family, and tradition. These help him accept her death.

My Daddy Died and It’s All God’s Fault, by Sue Holden. Young Chris tells his story and shares his feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, and confusion. He helps other young people know they are not alone.

How It Feels When A Parent Dies, by Jill Kremenz. Young people (ages 7 to 16) describe their feelings when a parent died and how they went on in life. (non-fiction)

Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss, by Enid Samuel Traisman. This is a journal that encourages young teens to work through their grief in a creative and healthy way.

Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies, by Elizabeth Richter. Young people (ages 10 to 24) describe the fears, sorrow, and other emotions they experienced when a brother or sister died (non-fiction).

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