



Helping Children During a Death



Don't hold back important information:

It is important to let children know that a loved one is seriously ill and may die. If the person dies and they are not told, they are left unprepared. Because younger children are egocentric, it is important to reassure them that nothing they did or said caused the death.

Children need honest and correct information given to them in a language they can understand:

For example, "Daddy is in the hospital because he is sick with cancer. It is nobody's fault. It is a different kind of sick than a cold or flu. You cannot get it from him. You can still hug and kiss him." Ask children to repeat back what you said so you can be sure that they understand. Invite children to ask questions about words or things that they do not understand. Knowing that they will be kept informed about things that are happening will lessen their anxiety.

Children still need consistent guidance and boundary-setting:

Children still need parents to set limits. When parents are in shock and grieving themselves, setting limits can be hard. "Oh... let it go; her mom is dying." Maintaining boundaries, keeping routines in place and keeping household rules intact, help kids to feel safe. Without the limits, children feel like things are out of control which makes them very insecure. Try to keep the schedule as normal as possible.

Visiting the seriously ill:

Visiting someone who is very sick can be traumatic, if children are not previously prepared. First of all, ask children if they would like to go. If the answer is no, ask why. Once the matter is discussed children will usually opt to go along. Let children know in advance what the person will look like, what the machines in the room are for, what the room will smell like and be like. Let them know if it's ok to touch or hug the person, it's also ok to NOT touch or hug. You can suggest bringing a gift for the person or have them draw a picture or write a letter. The visit should be relatively short. Ten to twenty minutes is long enough for a child of any age. Set a time for debriefing after the visit. The most important reason for letting a child visit is giving them a chance to say good-bye.

Telling your child that someone has died:

Because parents love their kids, it is natural to want to protect them from the pain of loss. However, we all do better when we are trusted with the truth and can begin to understand what is happening. What children dream up or imagine can be far worse than the reality. Simplicity and honesty are best. Give concrete, clear explanations. Refrain from "passed away" or "gone to heaven." It is important that children understand that death is permanent, that a person who has died no longer can feel, or think, and that they won't be able to come back. "Daddy's cancer got so serious that his body was not able to heal. His heart has stopped beating, he has stopped breathing. He has died." Answer only direct questions. Do not give more information than is asked for. Children will come back with more questions after they have processed what you have already said. It is important that children are reminded – this death was no one's fault. After they understand the permanence of death, then you can introduce your family's beliefs about the afterlife.

Is it okay to take children to funerals?

Parents often worry that a funeral can be too traumatic for children. Funerals are an opportunity to connect with family and friends and offer support and sometimes it is the only time all are openly crying and showing their sadness. A child should be allowed to have the chance for support that a funeral can offer. Designate a trusted adult to be a safe support just to the children. This role should not be done by the caregiver, as they will be dealing with their own experience. First, explain to children about the funeral, what will happen and what to expect. Then ask children if they want to go. If no, ask if they know why they do not want to go. If children understand what will happen, they usually want to go. Funerals help us accept the reality of the loss, the first task of grieving. If possible, let kids be part of decision-making. Can they draw or write a message to go in the casket or select pictures for a memory table?

Viewings:

There is a more relaxed feeling during a viewing. Friends and family visit and cry together. Children left to freely move about will make their way to the casket a few times to look at the body. Seeing a dead body can be very helpful to children. Children are curious and may want to touch the body too. Prepare them beforehand that the body will feel cold and not look exactly the same. This is another opportunity to explain the difference between “alive” and “dead.”

Burials:

If you take children to the cemetery, explain that the body is going to be buried there. Explain to your child what will happen to the casket and remind them that the loved one cannot feel anything anymore.

Cremation:

Adults worry that children will be horrified to learn that their loved one was cremated. If you convey your comfort with it, the children will likely feel the same way. “Cremation is one of the ways we manage our loved one’s body after they die. Their body is dead. It doesn’t hurt them in any way.” You can explain that cremation makes the body break down faster than if it were buried.

Going back to school:

Friends and teachers may already know what happened and might not know what to say. Children may be ignored or have too much attention drawn to them. Children do not like being different and this may cause anxiety. Talk with your child before going back to school. You can even practice answers to questions you think kids and teachers might have. Children who have had a parent die may have a difficult time going back to school, because they don’t want to separate from the surviving parent. Reassure them.

Living life without the person who died:

Healing from a significant loss spans over a lifetime. The first year after the death seems hardest on families, and attending peer grief support groups can help with the healing process. In grief support groups, participants are given the opportunity to express their feelings, acknowledge their loss, embrace their memories, and learn coping strategies.



Connect With Us & Learn More

The Grief Center provides a safe and supportive environment for young people (ages 5—25), their caregivers and all adults who have experienced the death of someone significant in their lives.

During the school year, support groups meet twice per month at different locations as well as on Zoom.

Services are provided at no charge. Donations gratefully accepted. To get started, families just need to call the Grief Center. After a brief phone intake, families will be invited to the next orientation.



The Grief Center
SERVING BEREAVED CHILDREN & ADULTS SINCE 2001

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