

## Talking about Death

### **How do you talk about death to a child?**

It is not possible to anticipate the words to use. We don't know what they might say or ask. Rehearsed answers are rarely adequate. We need to sensitively listen to and hear what children are saying.

Where the children in a family or class are at a different age or stage of development it is best to deal with the subject individually. Many of the things we do or say to protect children from death situations do more harm than good, and are often just a sign of our inability to cope with the subject. Usually it is best to simply say "Grandpa is dead". When necessary we should not be afraid to answer a child's questions by saying honestly "I don't know". But we should get to know the answers to answerable questions.

People often ask whether children should attend funeral services, or view the deceased person, or visit the cemetery. Basically these activities are quite okay for children as long as they are not forced to be involved in them, but rather allowed to do as they choose.

It seems that all these experiences can be good learning experiences for the child, especially if the child is in the presence of caring adults who are prepared to answer questions and to give physical and emotional support.

Encourage the child to talk honestly about the deceased person, allow them to express both positive and negative feelings. Let them treasure memories and meaningful possessions. It is only when grief is suppressed that delayed or distorted grief reactions occur.

## Further Reading

\*Books specifically for children

- **THE GRIEF OF OUR CHILDREN**  
Dianne McKissock  
(ABC Books)
- **WHEN DINOSAURS DIE\***  
Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown  
(Little, Brown & Company)
- **HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF**  
Alan Wolfelt  
(Accelerated Development Inc.)
- **A CHILD'S QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH**  
Neville A. Kirkwood  
(Baptist Chaplaincy Dept.)
- **LIFETIMES\***  
Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen  
(Hill of Content)
- **KIRSTY'S KITE\***  
Carol Curtis Stilz & Gwen Harrison  
(Albatross Books)
- **THE DAY GRANDMA DIED\***  
Jan Selby  
(Church Information Office)
- **TALKING ABOUT DEATH**  
Earl Grollman  
(Beacon Press)
- **HERE, THERE AND FOREVER ... WHERE?\***  
Michelle and Paul Andrews  
(Vital Publications)

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*Celebrating Lives*



*Children & Death*  
**CHILDREN and DEATH**

*This brochure aims to assist adults as they  
share with young children the journey  
through a death response.*

## Death Experiences

### **How does a young child view death?**

There is no single answer because children are individuals who see things in the context of their own personal life-story. Like adults, children differ widely in their reactions to death, depending on their experiences, personalities and environment.

At an early age most children experience the death of a pet. They see the deaths of animals, birds, flowers, insects, and trees. They read about death in the newspapers. They see many deaths on television, and in films. Many games, such as cowboys and indians, cops and robbers, and star wars, involve dying and death. Some children experience the death of a grandparent, parent, a sibling, a school friend, a playmate, a neighbour or a relative. They hear about the deaths of famous people and their heroes. A few children experience multiple death situations, such as from a major road accident.

## Reactions to Death Experiences

At various ages children react differently to death. Broadly speaking we can say the following are some of the characteristics of each age group.

**UP TO AGE 2:** The child can sense loss and suffer accompanying feelings. The child cannot comprehend death intellectually. Explanations are not usually relevant. Consistency of care is a crucial issue.

**AGES 3 & 4:** The child views death as being a temporary condition. Death is a departure from which the deceased will return in due course.

**AGES 4 TO 6:** Children still tend to view life and death as alternating conditions. Children of this age are also interested in the physical and biological aspects of death. Often death is strongly associated with personal loss. "Who's going to take me fishing now?" In talking with children of this age group it is appropriate to explain that with death, life stops as far as the physical body is concerned, the deceased cannot return, the body is buried or cremated.

**AGES 7 TO 10:** Around this age children comprehend something more of the finality of death. They often have an interest in graves, cemeteries and funerals. They are progressing through to thoughts about what happens after death, and are exploring new concepts of life after death, but their thinking is still fairly concrete.

**AGES 11 ONWARD:** From this time children are beginning to think more abstractly. They are searching for meaning and values and are involved in religious and philosophical explorations.

*\*All these statements are generalisations and should not be applied rigidly to individual children in any age group.*

## How Children Grieve

How do children react to and cope with the death of someone they know? Allowing for the individual, most children cope better than adults. This is not to say that children don't grieve. They do. However they may express their grief in different ways to adults.

The death of another person will involve emotional disruption in a family, whether that death is of a member of the immediate family, relative, friend or neighbour. The fact of a person's death can rarely be successfully kept from a child. To try and hide a death by making a statement like, "Grandma has gone away for a long time" may cause repercussions when the truth is learned.

The death of a person ought to be faced openly and shared together by a family. In fact such an occurrence can provide a real learning experience. It can be a time of discovery as the family share their feelings and reactions to the loss.

It is important for us as adults to be prepared to share our own feelings with children in order to help them react to a death. If we are crying because we are sad or lonely, we should be able to tell the child that. Feelings are more important than words, and are often communicated through actions. Be prepared to hold, caress, embrace and attend. If possible try to see that family routines are not too disrupted. This may be difficult to do when you are grieving yourself and trying to help someone else in their grieving.

A child may express their grief as adults do, or by noisy play, or playing "death games". They may become very possessive, demanding or "clingy" of surviving persons. Children can also assist adults to grieve, and can give us support and comfort in our bereavement.