

Talking with Children about Death and Grief



Children need clear, simple and honest answers to help them cope with loss and grief. Children can thrive when given information and support that is appropriate for their age and development. Too much information will confuse them and create anxiety. Ask children questions in order to figure out what they already know or believe. Encourage them to talk openly and ask questions.

Begin at the child's level

- Be aware of the developmental level of the child and how this affects his/her reasoning and understanding.
- Tell the truth; honesty fosters trust and security. Involving children in the situation and letting them know what is happening can be very supportive and will lead them to cope better with bad news.
- While it may be tempting to believe that a small child has little understanding of the situation and is better off without information. Simple explanations need not be misleading.

Be guided by the child's questions

- Create an environment in which the child feels safe and secure and is able to ask questions.
- Take time to clarify what question was asked.
- Provide opportunity for the child to express his/her feelings
- Encourage the child to identify feelings related to the death, memories of loved ones and hopes for the future.

Encourage feedback

- Develop a plan to make sure the child's needs are met.
- Keep the child's daily routine as normal as possible. Children need reassurance, love, care, honesty, consistency and structure.
- Set aside time when you will not be interrupted.
- Let the child know that you have plenty of time to listen.



What You Can Do

There are many creative ways to help children express their feelings. Most children respond to warm loving adults who listen to their feelings and provide a warm, safe, nurturing environment. Books and story telling help children understand the many different ways that a “story” may end. Popular literature, as well as books specific to death and dying, are helpful. Art in many forms helps children express themselves. For example, children can draw a picture of the funeral, how they are feeling now, their family, or anything else that would help express a feeling. Music and puppetry help with re-telling the story and are particularly useful with young children.

- Ask what they know and what they want to know. Don’t assume.
- Be honest about the reason for your tears and sadness.
- Focus on reality – their vivid imaginations create answers that can be far worse.
- Make time just for them.
- Watch their play for clues about how they are feeling.
- Expect that expressions of their feelings will come and go depending on many factors including age and attention span

