

Parents Should be Honest With Children About Death

by Sylvia W. Lee

“Why did grandma have to die? Where did she go?” How do parents discuss such an emotionally charged subject with young children?

Edgar Jackson, author of “Telling a Child About Death,” says the appropriate time to talk about death is when it is part of a child’s experience. Plants die and provide the opportunity for parents to explain that this is part of the plant’s life cycle. Children also may hear of someone’s death in another family. When a pet dies, it may be a child’s first experience with death, and through it she can be helped to learn that death is a normal part of life.

Parents need to be open and honest and give direct, simple answers. Never tell a child something that he will later need to unlearn. Earl Grollman, in “Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child,” says, “There is no greater need for a child than trust and truth. Evasions indicate the uncertainty the adult has about his child’s capacity to deal with existing situations. It encourages a child to develop the capacity to ‘forget about things’ and does not prepare him to deal with life’s realities.”

It is not necessary to avoid the words “die” or “dead.” When euphemisms are used, they only confuse a child and create unnecessary fears; for example, if a child is told that her grandfather went on a “long journey,” it creates an impression that one who goes away may never come back. She also may feel anger because grandfather left without saying goodbye, which causes her to wonder if grandfather really loved her. Or, to tell a child that her aunt has “gone to sleep forever” may make her fearful of going to sleep because she thinks she will never wake up.

Parents also need to remember that a child’s feelings and experiences are quite different from their own. Earl Grollman illustrates this point with the following anecdote:

“Children often mistake the meaning of words and phrases. I was once asked by a young girl, ‘How long is death?’ I responded, ‘Death is permanent.’ The youngster said, ‘Oh, then it’s not so bad.’ Noticing my bewilderment, she said simply, ‘My mother has permanents all the time. It lasts for about six months.’”

He adds, “Adults should understand the progression of thought leading to the inquiry. Otherwise, their reply could be misleading. When a boy was told that his grandfather died because he was old and sick, the child became preoccupied with his parents’ health. He would cry whenever his mother and father had a simple cold. He discovered convenient reasons to stay away from nursery school and remain at home. ‘How do you feel?’ he would ask again and again. The parents were irritated, not understanding their son was convinced that their own death might soon occur. To the child, the parents were old (an old person is someone 15 years older than you are) as well as sick. What the boy wanted to hear was, ‘I have a slight case of the flu, but will get better.’”

Psychologist Maria Nagy was responsible for one of the first and most comprehensive studies of children’s perceptions of death. In the late 1940s, she studied 378 Hungarian children and discovered three phrases in a child’s awareness of death. Since children of the same age differ widely in behavior and development, these stages should be used as general guidelines:

Stage One: Children from ages three to five have no understanding of death and its finality. They sense the loss and feel the loneliness and pain from separation but expect the dead person to return because, to them, death is temporary. Death is a confusing concept at this stage, especially when cartoon characters die, but come to life again in the next cartoon. In games at this stage, the good guys “kill” the bad guys, but the victims revive when the roles are switched. Most young children can’t imagine that the body functions that are most important to them at their age will really stop at death.

At this stage, children’s questions about death may seem morbid to a parent or appear rude and unfeeling. They want to know how the dead person can breathe with all that dirt on top of him, how he will eat or go to the bathroom, and whether it will hurt the dead person when we walk around on top of him. But these are natural and merely a child’s way of trying to make sense of a very abstract concept. Parents need to treat the questions with respect and give a child helpful information as well as an open atmosphere in which feelings and questions are welcomed.

Stage Two: Children between five and nine years of age have a better understanding of death because of their emotional and intellectual development and widening life experiences. They begin to see death as permanent and may personify it as an angel, a skeleton, a space creature, a ghost in white and so on. They appear to be able to accept the idea that a person has died but may not understand it as something that will happen to everyone, particularly themselves.

Stage Three: Children from age nine and older recognize death as an inevitable experience that will occur, even to them. Death is no longer personified and means the end of life. It can be brought about naturally or accidentally.

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