

We Need to Help Children Understand Death

by Sylvia W. Lee

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 recurring questions in a child's mind:

“What is death?” – It is best to use simple information and language that is appropriate to children. It is important to be sensitive to their feelings as they use the words and try to develop a meaning for them. According to Earl Grollman, a satisfactory explanation of death would be, “The body does not move, it does not breathe. The heart does not beat. The body is still, quiet and peaceful. There is no hurt, no pain, no life. A person who dies stops walking, talking, eating, and doing all the other things people do when they are alive. It means that you won't be seeing that person again; he will not be coming back for a visit.”

“What makes people die?” – “The effort to explain death as an event that happens to older people baffles a child,” says Edgar Jackson, “because time is a new and mysterious idea to him. It is more difficult to give an explanation of tragic and untimely death. Sometimes things happen to people that keep them from growing old. Accidents happen, wars happen, or people get very sick. When that happens, they sometimes die before they are old.” Here it is important to distinguish between the kinds of sickness that gets better and a more serious illness that can lead to death. Otherwise, children may worry that they will die if they have a cold or the chicken pox.

“What happens to people when they die; where do they go?” – Saf Lerman, author of “Parent Awareness,” believes that children need accurate information. Even a three-year-old can be told that after a person dies, the body is put into a coffin (a “special box”) that is buried in the ground. Some people choose to be cremated, and this, too, can be explained to the child.

As far as answering the second part of the question, “Where do they go?” a parent can say, “There are many different beliefs about this, and this is what I believe” or “This is what our family believes.” It also is appropriate to say, “I don't really know and I wonder about it, too.” Parents need not feel that they have to have all the answers.

Parents should allow children to express their feelings about death and allow them to discuss those feelings. Parents also need to help them understand such feelings. The knowledge that it's OK to feel such emotions as anger, sadness, hurt or guilt will help a child to talk about them. Saf Lerman says, “Parents should encourage ... their children to speak about what's on their minds and in their hearts, so that they can gain comfort and clarification from the grownups around them.” But children should not be forced to express a sentiment that they don't feel or be urged to display feelings that don't exist. This will only confuse children and make them feel hypocritical.

It is extremely important to allow children to be involved in the death experience. It's helpful for them to know that it will take a long time to get over the unhappy feelings, and, in a way, that they will never really completely get over missing that person. Parents can best help their children

by sharing feelings and information with them. Talking and crying together brings parents and children closer to one another.

Of all the books and articles read, not one suggested that children be excluded from the funeral or memorial service for someone close to them because they are too little to understand or they need to be protected from such things. According to Hedda Sharapan, a colleague of Fred Rogers, “Feelings of exclusion can be much harder for children than feelings of sadness. Not only does exclusion bring a sense of rejection, but it can also result in children misinterpreting what is going on. Uncertainty can arouse anxiety.”

As long as a child has been prepared and knows what to expect, a funeral provides a structure for the early days of grieving. “It is important to realize,” writes Edgar Jackson, “that the rites and rituals that we use to mark the end of life are our efforts to say a significant and appropriate ‘goodbye.’ We don’t just dispose quickly of the bodies of those we love as if they were worthless. We cannot treat what we have loved without loving care without doing damage to all the loving relationships in life.”

However, a child should not be forced to attend a funeral. Some sort of private observance at home, followed by a visit to the grave, is suggested in this instance by Alan Wolfeit, Ph.D., “Helping Children Cope With Grief.”

Finally, when talking with a child about death, parents should remember that sadness is very different from despair. Witnessing an adult’s extreme expression of grief only exacerbates the emotional reactions of children, who still have unanswered concerns and fears and do not understand the new feelings they’re experiencing. Parents have a responsibility to express their feelings in a reasonable manner and be sensitive to their children’s feelings.

There are many books about death written for children. Parents can ask a children’s librarian for suggestions or use “The Book Finder/When Children Need Books” by Sharon Dreyer. This is a resource book for parents that lists children’s books by subject matter; it is available at the public library. Before sharing a book with a child, it is helpful for parents to read it first to allow for their own emotional responses and to prepare themselves for their child’s questions.

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