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A guide to explaining death to a Child

When a loved one dies, it can be difficult to know how to help children cope with the loss, particularly as you work through your own grief. How much children can understand about death depends largely on their age, life experiences, and personality

Explaining Death in a Child's Terms

Be honest with children and encourage questions. This can be hard because you may not have all of the answers. But it's important to create an atmosphere of comfort and openness. You will find the right way and right opportunity to tell them but here are a few ideas to think about:

A child's capacity to understand death — and your approach to discussing it — will vary according to the child's age. Each child is unique. Until children are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal. So you could explain the death in basic and concrete terms. If the loved one was ill or elderly, for example, you might explain that the person's body wasn't working anymore and the doctors couldn't fix it. If someone dies suddenly, like in an accident, you might explain what happened — that because of this very sad event, the person's body stopped working. You may have to explain that "dying" or "dead" means that the body stopped working.

Children this young often have a hard time understanding that all people and living things eventually die, and that it's final and they won't come back. So even after you've explained this, children may continue to ask where the loved one is or when the person is returning. As frustrating as this can be, continue to calmly reiterate that the person has died and can't come back.

In our office we have small books called 'Water Bugs and Dragonflies (explaining death to Children) Please ask for a free copy to aid you in your explanation

Children from the ages of about 6 to 10 start to grasp the finality of death, even if they don't understand that it will happen to every living thing one day. A 9-year-old might think, for example, that by behaving or making a wish, grandma won't die. Often, children this age personify death and think of it as a ghost or a skeleton. They deal best with death when given accurate, simple, clear, and honest explanations about what happened.

As children mature into teens, they start to understand that every human being eventually dies, regardless of grades, behaviour, wishes, or anything they try to do.

Mourning the Loss

Is it right to take children to funerals? It's up to you and your child. It's appropriate to let children take part in any mourning ritual — if they want to. First explain what happens at a funeral or memorial service and give children the choice of whether to go.

What do you tell a young child about the funeral? You may want to explain that the body of the person who died is going to be in a coffin, and that the person won't be able to talk or see or hear anything. Explain that others may speak about the person who died and that some mourners may be crying.

Many parents worry about letting their children witness their own grief, pain, and tears about a death. Don't — allowing your child to see your pain shows that crying is a natural reaction to emotional pain and loss. And it can make children more comfortable sharing their feelings. But it's also important to convey that no matter how sad you may feel, you'll still be able to care for your family and make your child feel safe. Parents can't always shield children from sadness and losses. But helping them learn to cope with them builds emotional resources they can rely on throughout life.