

## Explaining Death to Children

It is a natural tendency for parents and adults to try to insulate a child from the pain and shock of a death. Unfortunately, this tendency is not helpful for children and often results in fear, anxiety and confusion.

What is helpful are statements that simply and honestly give the information requested and assure the child that he or she is loved and will be taken care of.

Children may ask endless questions, and you may not have all the answers.

Be honest in explaining death to children. Tell the truth about the cause of death including illness, traumatic injury, suicide and murder.

*"Avoidance of the realities does not protect children but may add to their fears."-Edna Furman*

*"What is said is important but how it is said has even greater bearing on whether the child will develop anxiety and fears or accept, within his capacity, the fact of death."-Earl Grollman*

*"...they will make up their own answers, which are usually very mixed up and much more frightening."-Anna Freud*

## What to Say and What Not To Say to A Grieving Child

### WHAT TO SAY

- We will never forget him.
- Your sister is dead.
- When you are dead, the body does not move.
- It isn't anyone's fault.
- Daddy loved you very much.
- Your brother can never come back.
- It's ok to cry.
- Yes, it's tough.
- The rest of us will take care of you.
- It's ok to be angry.
- No, it isn't fair, is it?
- I wish I could take the hurt away.
- 'I don't know.
- It isn't your fault.
- It's all right to laugh and play.
- Being dead doesn't hurt.
- You're not going to die too.
- IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY, JUST GIVE A HUG.

### WHAT NOT TO SAY

- She's been put to rest.
- He will live eternally.
- You still have other siblings to play with.
- We must be brave and accept God's will.
- God took Mommy to Heaven.
- Your sister has gone on a long journey.
- Grandma died because she was sick.
- Be a man.
- You'll have to take care of Mommy now.
- Be a strong soldier.
- Daddy's watching you from Heaven.
- He's so much better off in heaven.
- Your dad went to sleep and won't wake up.
- Try to put it behind you.
- You're too young to understand.
- I understand exactly how you feel.
- You're the Man of the House now.
- Only the good die young.

## Commonly Used Words and Explanations

Some words that adults use may be confusing for children. Carefully choose words when giving explanations about death. Avoid words such as “sleeping,” “gone away,” “passed away,” or “taken from us.” Your child may need further discussion as to the meaning of some of these words.

- **Bury:** Placing the coffin or urn of the dead person in the ground.
- **Cemetery:** A place where people who die are buried.
- **Coffin (Casket):** A box that contains the person who died.
- **Grave:** A hole in the ground at the cemetery where the coffin or urn is buried. The hole is then covered with dirt.
- **Cremation:** Heating a dead body to ashes. Some people choose to be cremated. Cremation is used instead of keeping the body in a coffin.
- **Dead:** The body is no longer living. The body stops working. The dead person doesn't breathe, walk, eat or feel any pain.
- **Embalm:** Removing body fluids from the dead person and adding a liquid chemical to keep the dead body together.
- **Funeral (Memorial Service):** A ceremony to honor and remember the person who died. These can take place in many different places including the funeral home, mortuary, church, synagogue, mosque, or cemetery.
- **Headstones (Gravestone, Monument or Plaques):** The headstone lists the person's name, date of birth, date of death and sometimes a few words in loving memory. The headstone marks where the body of the person who died is kept.
- **Hearse:** A vehicle used for taking the casket or coffin to the funeral or cemetery.
- **Mausoleum:** A building in a cemetery where caskets or urns are placed.
- **Morgue:** A place where the person who died is kept until taken to the mortuary.
- **Mortuary:** A building where the person who died stays and is prepared for burial or cremation.
- **Urn:** A container that holds the ashes of the person who died. Explain what will be done with the ashes based on your family traditions and beliefs.
- **Viewing (Wake, Memorial Service):** A service or gathering to remember the person who died and view the body.

## Ways to Help Children Cope with Death

- Be direct, simple and honest. Explain truthfully what happened.
- Encourage the child to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful.
- Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Don't tell the child how he or she should or should not feel.
- Offer warmth and your physical presence and affection.
- Share your feelings with the child. Allow the child to comfort you.
- Be patient. Know that children need to hear "the story" and to ask the same questions again and again.
- Reassure the child that death is not contagious, that the death of one person does not mean the child or other loved ones will soon die.
- Maintain order, stability, and security in the child's life.
- Listen to what the child is telling or asking you. Then respond according to the child's needs.
- Allow the child to make some decisions about participating in family rituals, i.e., visitation, the funeral, socializing after the funeral. Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.
- With your loving and patient concern the child will be better able to work through the grief process and to adjust to life without the deceased.