

Talking to Kids about Death

Death is a difficult topic for adults to discuss. Talking to kids about death and dying requires even greater sensitivity. By addressing the concept with honesty, children are better able to understand the changes that the adults in their lives are experiencing.

Kids need to talk about their feelings after the death of someone close to them. One of the greatest gifts we can give to children is to honor their grief and teach them ways to communicate their feelings.

A child's ability to understand the meaning of the words forever, irreversibility, causality and transformation varies depending on age and maturity. The following age differentiations have been classified by experts in child psychology. However, keep in mind that the age categories are generalizations. For example, a mature five-year-old may be able to comprehend more than a less emotionally mature six-year-old.

0-3 years of age

Most children in this age range will understand that the routine in their home has been changed following a death. They will not comprehend that someone is dead, but they will understand the sadness. The chaos and emotionally-riddled household may produce general anxiety.

Suggestions

- Normalize routines as much as possible
- Keep the child around familiar people
- Provide as much hugging/cuddling to support the child's sense of security

3-6 years of age

Kids in this age range tend to think that death is reversible. Children see reversible death in movies, cartoons and even in religious stories. The youngster may not recognize how death will affect them if the separation is seen as temporary.

Care needs to be exercised in using specific explanations rather than overgeneralizations like "Grandpa died of old age" or "Grandpa is sleeping." The child may generalize this information to mean all older people are awaiting imminent death.

Suggestions

- Explain the difference between being old and being sick
- Monitor "magical thinking." The child may feel they caused the death by wishing the person dead. The child may also try to "wish" the person back to life
- Comfort the child by allowing free expression of all emotions including anger, fear and sadness

6-9 years of age

Most children in this group understand that death is final. Honest, direct and age-appropriate communication with the child is extremely important. Children in this age group can understand basic physiology and the results of traumatic accidents. They may respond well to books and stories that explain finality.

Suggestions

- Validate all feelings the child has, and share your own personal responses to death. Help the child to say goodbye by coloring a picture, writing a letter or saying prayers
- Consider allowing the youngster to participate in funeral planning, such as choosing the flowers

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Effective Communication with an Older Child or Teenager

The loss of a loved one is especially difficult on older children and teens. The following suggestions may be useful while guiding them through their grief.

Remember to listen/stop talking- You cannot listen if you are talking.

Put the child or teenager at ease- Help them feel they are free to express themselves. In other words, provide a permissive environment.

Show the child or teenager you want to listen- Look and act interested in what they are saying. Listen to understand, and then reply.

Give your child undivided attention- Stop whatever activity you are engaged in and put yourself at eye level. A seated position works well for children and teens.

Empathize- Try to see the child's/teenager's point of view. See yourself in their place, and remember their limited life experience.

Be patient- Do not rush the encounter and do not interrupt.

Control your anger- Harsh words accompanied by a raised voice create defensive behavior.

Avoid argument and criticism- Arguments may end in a stand-off. Criticism creates deep, lasting pain.

Ask questions and request clarification- Help the child or teenager to develop their points. This encourages them and shows you care.