

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT DEATH

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

Kids need to talk about their feelings after death of someone close. One of the greatest gifts we can give to children is to honor their grief and teach them ways to communicate their feelings. The following may be helpful in providing some guidelines.

Age Differentiations

A child's understanding of "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 5 year old may be able to comprehend more than a less emotionally mature 6 year old.

0-3 years old

Most children this 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 for the child's sense of security.

3-6 years old

Kids in this age range tend to think that death is reversible. Children see "reversible" death in movies such as "ET", in cartoons, and even in religious stories. The youngster may not recognize how death will affect him/her as the separation is seen 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 she/he 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 old

Most children in this group understand that death is final. Honest, direct, age-appropriate communication with the child is extremely important. These kids can understand basic physiology and the results of traumatic accidents. Children this age 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 - with coloring a picture, writing a letter, or saying prayers.
- Consider allowing the youngster to participate in funeral planning, such as choosing the flowers.