

## Helping Children Understand Death



### Helping Children at the Time of a Death

Describing a death to a child can be a difficult and painful task; it is believed that a parent or caring adult can assist a child to come to terms with the reality of death and cope with the pain of loss. It is important to consider the following.

- ▶ Try to use the word 'death' or 'dead' rather than phrases such as 'he has gone away', 'she is sleeping', as these phrases can lead to misunderstanding and distress.
- ▶ Young children need to be told repeatedly that when someone dies they can never come back - parents need to explain that the bodily functions cease - the dead person does not eat, sleep, breathe or feel any pain.
- ▶ It is important that children are aware of the cause of death - this should be explained in accordance with the child's understanding and stage of development.
- ▶ There is the risk, that if children are not given a clear explanation for the death, they may blame themselves or imagine something more terrible.

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▶ Children need to know that death is universal. It happens to everyone, but at different ages, under different circumstances. Children do ask the same questions over and over again. Answer them as simply and honestly as possible.

▶ Children and young people grieve in a more unusual way than adults do. They switch between being very sad one moment, and excited and happy another. This can be very distressing and upsetting to adults and can mislead them into thinking the child is coping better than he/she really is.

▶ Children's feelings of loss and pain are similar to adults, and can be experienced at different stages in their lives.

▶ When explaining death to a child it may be helpful to link it to an experience of a pet dying. It is believed that it is extremely important to take the time to explain the concepts of death clearly to the child as often cartoons can portray death as a temporary state.

### The Funeral

▶ It is helpful for children to be involved in the funeral. This is the time to say 'goodbye', children need to be given this opportunity.

▶ If family and friends are viewing the body, children should be given the choice of seeing the body. The children need careful preparation for this task, i.e. clear description of the coffin, the room, the body, and what to expect. They should be accompanied by a trusted adult who can support and answer any questions. Some children may need permission to touch the body; others may not want to. They may want to put a letter, drawing or favourite toy in the coffin.

Children should be given the choice of attending the funeral - again with a trusted adult who can answer any questions and be supportive. In some situations, this may be an aunt, uncle or someone who is not in the immediate family who can meet the child's needs whilst the funeral is in progress.

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## Children's Understanding of Death

Children's understanding of death will depend largely upon their developmental stage. The following guide is based on chronological ages and is a guide only, remembering that each child is different.

### Aged One to Four

Children experience feelings of pain and loss. They will protest loudly and may search repeatedly for the deceased. They need a consistent routine, affection and they need to be told repeatedly that the person will not be coming back. It is important that special memories and photographs are kept for the children as they grow older.

Children at this stage think 'literally' so use of language is extremely important. Statements such as, 'gone for a long sleep' and 'we've lost her/him' can often cause confusion. They still do not understand the finality of death and need to be told repeatedly that the dead will not come back.

They need to be told that people die for different reasons, but not because of anything they have done.

They need their questions answered openly, honestly and simply.

### Aged Five to Eight

Children can usually understand that death is irreversible and universal. They will ask frequent questions about death and may become pre-occupied with thoughts of death. They need to be allowed to be children.

It is important that they get support at school, as often children who are bereaved feel different. They may have temper tantrums, sleep disturbance, nightmares and may regress.

### Aged Nine to Twelve

Children usually at this stage understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Communication can become difficult and grief can be expressed in terms of physical aches and pains or challenging behaviour.



They need opportunity to talk to a trusted adult. Also they need support at school in dealing with peer groups and they may be more vulnerable to bullying.

### **Aged Thirteen to Eighteen**

Teenagers are particularly vulnerable as they are striving for independence. Bereavement by its nature causes dependency, which can result in feelings of confusion, isolation and guilt.

They understand the concept of death, but do not have the emotional maturity to deal with it. It is normal for adolescents to have difficulty talking about what has happened, but they need the opportunity to talk to trusted adults or peers. School can provide

security and routine however it can also be a place where they feel isolated, different and may have difficulties with school work.

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