

# DEATH AND GRIEF IN THE FAMILY: TIPS FOR PARENTS

By James Batts, PhD, NCSP  
Eastern Kentucky University



Our children grow up in a culture that avoids expressing grief and tries to deny the inevitability of death. The realization that all life must someday end is one of the most difficult concepts we as adults have to deal with and is one of the most difficult concepts we have to teach our children. Death is all around us, yet as parents we believe that if we do not talk about it with our children death will not touch them.

Children will face many deaths that will have an impact on their daily lives. Some of these deaths may be anticipated and some sudden. Children may have to face the fact that a friend, a sibling, or a parent has died or that they, too, will die. Children will need adult help in understanding what is happening and will typically look to adults as models for how to cope.

## Children's Understanding of Death

**Preschool children (ages 2–6).** Generally around age 4 children have a limited and vague understanding of death. Children of this age generally do not think of death as permanent. They may believe it is reversible and talk of doing things with the person in the future. Preschoolers frequently engage in magical thought and play. They may believe if they pray or wish hard enough, they could bring the dead person to life. A parent may overhear a child tell a friend, "My mommy is not dead. She is visiting Grandma."

Young children may connect events or things together that do not belong together. A child may tell his brother he hates him, and a short time later the brother is struck and killed by a car. The child may not only have guilt for what he said, but feel responsible for causing the death. As parents and caregivers we must disconnect these events in the child's thinking by reassuring the child that the events are not in any way related.

**Primary age children (age 6–9).** Children at this age have begun to grasp the finality of death, but very often they still engage in magical thinking and maintain the belief that their thoughts and wishes may have the power to undo death. This belief in their power may lead to the idea that they could have prevented the death or they should have been there to protect the person who died. This thinking also is likely to lead to feelings of guilt and responsibility for the person's death.

**Intermediate age children (age 9–12).** Developmentally, children at this age are reading adventure books, telling ghost stories, and becoming preoccupied with super heroes. They often look on death as some supernatural being that comes and gets you. Even though they think of death as something that happens primarily to old people, they realize it can happen to the young, to their parents, to their loved ones. At this age they may develop fears of their parents dying or have nightmares about the death of a friend or loved one. They may also think people die because of some wrong doing of the dead person or someone around them (death is punishment for bad behavior). Again, this type of thinking can lead to feelings of guilt and remorse.

**Adolescents (age 13–18).** By the time children reach middle school, they probably understand death as well as adults. They understand it is permanent and happens to everyone eventually. Teens spend much of their time thinking, daydreaming, and philosophizing about death. They are often fascinated with death and fantasize about their own death to the dismay of their parents. They imagine their own funeral, for example, who will come, how badly people will feel, and how people will wish they had been nicer to them when they were alive. Even with this preoccupation with death, they can feel immune to it and engage in death-challenging behaviors such as reckless driving or drinking or taking drugs.

## How to Tell a Child of a Death

Every family has to deal with death in its own way depending on the relationship of the individual, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and the age and developmental level of the child. The following suggestions can guide parents in this difficult task:

- Get to your child quickly, before friends or other relatives try to explain what happened.
- Find a quiet place to tell your child, and do it calmly and gently.
- Start with an introduction to prepare your child for the bad news. Maybe say, "A very sad thing happened. Grandpa has died." If your child is a preschooler, you may need to explain what the word "died" means. "Died" may be defined as "no longer living." Talk to your child about what it means to be alive. "When you're alive you can breathe, walk, talk, see, hear. Grandpa cannot do these things any more."
- Use clear language, such as "dead," "died," "cancer," or "Her heart stopped working." Avoid using confusing and unclear language such as "passed on," "no longer with us," "with the angels," or "gone away." And especially avoid any references to sleeping. Young children will naturally assume that their loved one will eventually wake up.
- Explain the basic facts and allow the details to come later in the form of questions. Allow your child to show strong emotions and say, "Some people cry when they are upset and other people don't show their emotions when they're upset. It does not mean they don't love the person who died."
- Describe what will happen over the next few days and where your child fits into the events. Describe the funeral arrangements, burial, and related customs specific to your family's culture and religion, where you will be, where they will be, and who will be visiting or staying in the house.
- Provide reassurance that life will eventually be more normal again. Explain to your child that he or she will return to school in a few days, that he or she will be able to see friends again. The family will go back to its usual activities as much as possible but without the loved one. Helping children maintain a positive outlook, even in times of pain, will help ensure a health recovery from grief. (For some good tips on building resilience in children, see the American Psychological Association guide in the "Resources" below.)

## Children's Reactions to Death

Childhood grief is different from the grief experienced by adults. Adult grief is usually experienced

more immediately, more intensely, and often times more compactly. You may observe some of the following in grieving children:

- They are more capable of putting aside their grief for periods of time. You may see them engage in play a short time after being told about a death as if nothing has happened.
- They tend to grieve over a longer period of time and more sporadically.
- They often will become more dependent and need additional support even with initiating and maintaining routine activities.
- They can have feelings of unreality, as if all this is happening to someone else.
- They may describe themselves as tired and bored and will experience sleep disturbances.
- They may be preoccupied with the dead person; simple events like a Little League game will trigger a memory or feeling of "I wish Grandpa could have been here for my game."
- They may have a difficult time focusing, may become overactive, and have difficulty with school work.
- They may become aggressive, short tempered, and even engage in uncharacteristic destructive behavior.
- They may revert back to a behavior during an earlier developmental period, such as wetting the bed, sucking a thumb, wanting the nightlight on, or sleeping with a transitional object such as a teddy bear. Regression is a common symptom of grief.

## Helping Children Cope With Death

- Funerals and memorial services help us accept death and provide the love and support of families and friends. These services may be more important for children than they are for adults. In an inviting way, ask your child if he or she wants to attend the funeral. Do not force your child to attend the funeral if he or she is adamant about not going.
- Talk, listen, and nurture your child. Children can have endless questions and need for reassurance. Be patient and understanding when asked the same questions over and over. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Remember that your child will watch your reactions and use your reactions as a model.
- Try to keep your child's routine as normal as possible or at least return to the normal routine as soon as events allow.
- Children need help in expressing their feelings. Encourage your child to draw pictures for the dead

person or talk about the dead person or even write letters.

- Reading books about death can be helpful, but make sure the book conveys the theme or message you want. Different cultural and religious beliefs may conflict with the message and activities described in some books.
- Provide your child opportunities to do something in memory of the person who died: light a candle, plant a tree, make a memory scrapbook, or give a gift in memory of the person who died.

### When Parents Should Be Concerned

These are some warning signs that children may need assistance dealing with their grief:

- Refusal to attend school especially out of fear of something happening to their parents or themselves.
- Physical symptoms that linger, even after a visit to the doctor for reassurance that they are fine. Be especially concerned if the physical symptoms seem to be related to identification with the person who died. (for instance, if the person died of a heart attack and the child suffers from unexplained chest pain or the person died of a stroke and the child complains of headaches).
- Fears and anxieties that interfere with normal activities or routines. Give your child a reasonable period to grieve, but if your child continues to exhibit anxieties, then something may be wrong. Be especially concerned if this behavior is observed across different settings such as at school, home, or in the community.
- Depression that remains for a long period. Depression often follows a major loss such as the death of a loved one, loss of a pet, or divorce. Symptoms of depression may include withdrawal, poor concentration, significant lack of energy, disturbed sleep and appetite, overwhelming sadness, and frequent crying. Be concerned if these signs are present almost all day and nearly every day for a 2-week period. Be concerned if your child is more preoccupied with death than you feel is comfortable or normal.

### Other Support for Grieving Children

In addition to your friends and family, the following individuals and organizations may be helpful: the clergy, the funeral director, school psychologist or guidance counselor, hospice, local mental health center, local bereavement support groups, and online support groups. Remember that not all help is helpful.

Sometimes the help that is offered does not meet the family's or individual's needs or expectations and therefore a parent should feel comfort contacting other resources. The publications and websites below may offer grieving families information and support.

### Resources

- American Psychological Association. (2003). *Resilience for kids and teens: A guide for parents and teachers*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: [http://helping.apa.org/resilience/kids\\_pt.html](http://helping.apa.org/resilience/kids_pt.html)
- Fitzgerald, H. (1992). *The grieving child: A parent's guide*. New York: Fireside. ISBN: 0-671-76762-3.
- Silverman, P. R. (2000). *Never too young to know: Death in children's lives*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0-19-510955-4.
- Wolfelt, A. (1996). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief, and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651106.
- Worden, J. W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572301481.

### For Children

- Gootman, M. E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 0915793660.
- Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta: Peachtree (for ages 9–12). ISBN: 1561450448.
- Wolfelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651270.

### Websites and Organizations

- America Hospice Foundation—  
[www.americanhospice.org](http://www.americanhospice.org)
- American Psychological Association—[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)
- Compassionate Friends—[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)
- Griefnet—[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org) (has an excellent area for children)
- Mister Rogers—[www.misterrogers.org](http://www.misterrogers.org) (see the booklet, *Grieving for children 4–10 years*)
- National Association of School Psychologists—  
[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

*James Batts, PhD, NCSP, is on the faculty of the School Psychology program at Eastern Kentucky University.*

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.