



Assisting Children to Live with Death

Adults must play a significant role in assisting children to live with death. The most important thing adults can do is help children understand and accept their feelings throughout the entire death experience. The following information is intended to assist you in this effort.

- Children need to learn how to mourn; that is, to go through the process of giving up some of the feelings they have invested in an animal or person and go on with other and new relationships. They need to remember; to be touched by the feelings generated by their memories. They need to struggle with real or imagined guilt over what they could have done. They need to deal with their anger over the loss.
- Children need to mourn over the small losses, such as animals, in order to deal better with larger, closer losses of people.
- Children need to be informed about a death. If they aren't told, but see that adults are upset, they may invent their own explanations and even blame themselves.
- Children need to understand the finality of death. Because abstract thinking is difficult for them, they may misunderstand if adults say that a person or animal "went away" or "went to sleep." If you believe in an after life and want to tell your child about it, it is important to emphasize they won't see the person or animal again on earth.
- Children need to say good-bye to the deceased by participating in viewings and/or funeral, if only for a few minutes. No child is too young to participate in these activities.
- Children need opportunities to work out their feelings and deal with their perceptions of death by talking, dramatic playing, reading books or expressing themselves through the arts.
- Children need reassurance that the adults in their lives will take care of themselves and probably won't die until after the children are grown. However, children need to know that everybody will die someday.
- Children need to know that other children die, but only if they are very sick or if there is a bad accident. It is equally important that they understand almost all children grow and live to be very old.
- Children need to be allowed to show their feelings: to cry, become angry or even laugh. The best approach is to empathize with their feelings. For example, you might say, "You're sad. You miss Grandma. Tell me about it."



- Children need to feel confident that their questions will be answered honestly and not avoided. They need to know that adults will give them answers they can understand. Adults should take their cues from the children and answer only what they ask.

Developmental Stages

Children go through a series of stages in their understanding of death. Most children between the ages of 2 and 4 see death as reversible, temporary and impersonal. Watching television cartoon characters miraculously rise up while after having been blown apart tends to reinforce this notion.

Between the ages of 5 and 9, most children begin to realize that death is final and that all living things die. They still do not see death as personal. They hold the notion that they can escape death through their own ingenuity and efforts.

From age 9 or 10 through adolescence, children begin to comprehend fully that death is irreversible, that all living things die, and that they too will die someday. Many teenagers become intrigued with seeking the meaning of life and developing philosophical views of life and death.

Time Intervals for Mourning

In helping older children deal with death, it may be important to be aware of critical time intervals related to mourning. Mourning is the process whereby children work through the death of a loved one, thus regaining a sense of balance in their lives. Mourning is a functional necessity, not a weakness. It is a form of healing. Adults need to create the opportunities for children to be able to share their needs with us so we can assist them in living with death.

During the first 24 to 48 hours, the impact of the reality of death occurs. For the next 5 to 7 days, one may experience a mild depressive reaction to this reality. The next 6 to 8 weeks is the most difficult adjustment period. The impact of the death of a loved one hits with acute symptoms of anxiety and depression such as loss of sleep, overeating or lack of appetite, weeping fatigue, acute mood swings and decreased ability to concentrate and remember.

At about 3 months, the mourning person may experience irritability and complaining, physical and verbal acting-out of anger and frustration, crying and physical complaints such as headaches, backache, diarrhea, etc. At about 6 months, depression is a common occurrence with repeated depression at about 12 months. From 12 to 24 months, the mourning person usually arrives at an acceptance of the death or a resolution of the grief. Mild recurrent depression is often associated with the anniversary of the death of a loved one. Years after the death of this person, mild depression often occurs on special dates such as birthdays and holidays. These feelings and critical time intervals related to the mourning process may vary considerably for different people.