



Explaining Death to Children

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A child's understanding of death will vary based upon two main factors: their level of development and their prior experience with death. The very young child (2-4 years) has a limited concept of what death is. However, this does not mean they are not affected in a very real way by the death of someone loved. A child of this age will certainly be aware that the person is *missing*. He or she may ask about the person over and over again. It is best to use the word "dead" when answering. For example: "Grandma is dead, honey. She can never come back." Even though the child may not yet fully understand what "dead" means, he or she will begin to differentiate it from such things as "bye-bye," "sleeping," or "gone." These are words that, when used in place of the word dead, can confuse the child. Instead, one should use simple, direct language when explaining: "Dead means the body stops working -- Grandma can't talk, walk, feel, or breathe anymore. The part of grandma that we loved and that made her special is gone; all that is left is her body."

By ages 5 or 6 to age 9, children begin to have a more mature understanding of death, however that understanding may not be consistent in all instances. The child may on one hand seem to grasp that physical functions cease at death, but then ask, "How will grandma be able to breathe when she is buried in the ground?" The child will have many, many questions, all of which should be answered as honestly as possible. They may ask the same questions over and over again; having them answered over and over again will only help them to understand more and more. The child may have the fear that someone else close to them is going to die next. Children of this age should be reassured that there will always be someone to take care of them.

By age 9 or 10, most children have a pretty mature understanding of death. Again it is important to answer their questions as honestly as possible, and **not** to avoid talking about the death. Sometimes adults don't want to talk about the death in order to insulate the child from "unnecessary" pain and sadness, or may possibly believe that the child "just wouldn't understand anyway." The reality is, whether it's talked about or not, the child **will** grieve, no matter what! Grief is a normal and natural response to loss no matter what our age. As children's grief expert Dr. Alan Wolfelt states so beautifully, "If a child can love, a child can grieve."

When someone loved dies, it is important to remember that a child's reactions may not be obvious or immediate. If he or she goes outside to play right away after learning about the death, that's okay! It doesn't necessarily mean the child doesn't care or doesn't comprehend -- the child is just being a child. If possible, try to stick to the child's normal routine -- especially if the person who died was close to the child (a parent or sibling, for example). Continuity provides the child with a sense of security and stability during a time full of uncertainty. And most importantly, having an understanding, supportive adult who is available to answer questions and provide comfort and reassurance, will only help the child to successfully move forward in his or her grieving process.

