

Talking to Children About Death

Good Grief: What is it?



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"I am bothered by death and unknown things. I don't believe in reincarnation but some of my friends do. Is there reincarnation? I know people die but I am afraid I won't be able to handle it when someone I love dies. Could you please help me?"

This letter from a young person vividly illustrates the challenges that face adults who try to help children and adolescents understand and deal with death and dying. Though it may not be the easiest thing you've ever done, helping them is well worth the effort. The death of a pet, a neighbour or even someone on TV provides a "teachable moment" for young people by offering an opportunity to begin learning about death before they lose a close family member. Many adults wish they had had such an opportunity.

When a death occurs, you can play an important role. No matter the circumstances of the death, it challenges the coping skills of youngsters. Early attention to their needs makes it possible to keep them psychologically healthy and prevents the development of future emotional problems. We hope this information will help you raise young people who are able to deal with loss in a healthy way – a way that will make their grief "Good Grief".

The four tasks of mourning...

In order for grief to be "good grief", bereaved children and adolescents must accomplish four psychological tasks. Young children who develop coping skills that help them with these tasks will be well-prepared for losses that occur throughout their life. The four tasks of mourning, as described in 1985 by the late Dr Sandra Fox, founder of the Good Grief Programme Model, are:

- Understanding
- Grieving
- Commemorating
- Going on

As you become familiar with these tasks, you will see ways you can help young people deal with death and dying.

Understanding

To understand, a person must be able to make sense of death in general and of a particular death. He/she must understand at an appropriate level what has happened and why. Understanding means knowing the person who died is no longer alive and will never be a part of our lives as in the past. It's best to provide an honest explanation that can be developed as the child grows and matures. Children's questions will usually indicate the amount and level of information they want to know.

Three predictable factors interfere with young people's ability to accomplish the task of understanding:

- the way we define death for children
- the development of a child's understanding of death and dying
- magical thinking

Defining death for children.....

The best and most basic way to explain death to children is to simply say “the body stops working”. This definition fits what children observe when they see a dead animal. The bird can no longer fly or sing. In the same way, Grandpa can no longer drive his car, breathe, talk or go fishing. This definition can be used as a base, with an explanation that reflects a family’s religious or philosophical beliefs.

For example, some families believe that when a person dies, “his body stops working and his soul or spirit lives on in heaven” or “he lives on in our memories” or “he lives on as a plant or an animal”. This basic explanation also can help children understand untimely deaths. We can honestly tell youngsters that most people live to be quite old. But occasionally, there is an illness or an accident that is so severe that doctors, hospitals, nurses and clinics are unable to keep a person’s body working and he/she dies.

Young people have a literal, concrete style of thinking. Avoid comparing the death with sleeping, getting lost, expiring, kicking the bucket, cashing in one’s chips, pushing up the daisies, buying the farm or other euphemisms that will confuse them.

For three months following the SIDS death of her baby brother during the night, Angela refused to sleep at bedtime. The death had occurred during the Christmas holidays and her parents had simply told her that an angel had picked up the baby and taken him to Heaven. “We didn’t want to scare her,” her mother explained.

When asked about the baby’s death, Angela announced: “There are two things you should know about angels. Many of them are on the loose at Christmas time. And they pick up children and don’t bring them back. Besides that, angels don’t have headlights, so you don’t dare go to sleep at night because you couldn’t see one if it came to get you.”

Angela’s parents’ efforts to protect her had created massive confusion, enormous fear and extremely difficult sleep problems. She needed to understand that the baby’s body had stopped working and he had died, a very unusual thing for babies. Then she probably could have dealt with an angel taking the baby’s soul or spirit to Heaven.

It is usually not helpful to tell a child that when you see Grandma at the funeral home she will look just like she is sleeping or is at eternal rest. When youngsters are told that they will be seeing Uncle Joe “at a wake”, they sometimes report having waited to see him “awake”, which he never did. Be careful too, about saying “mum died because she was so good that God wanted her to be a flower in His Garden of Heaven”. It is a sure fire way to convince a child to be bad for the rest of his/her natural life!

Development of a child’s understanding of death and dying...

The understanding young people have of death and dying changes as they grow and mature. Age parameters vary but most children pass through a sequence of development stages.

Infants and toddlers (birth to 3) – Many people feel young children have no understanding of death and dying. Perhaps however, such games as Peek-a-Boo lay some groundwork for the concepts of being and non-being, here and not here. Stories recounted by parents give a clear indication that many children under the age of three have some ideas about death. Listen to these youngsters and find out for yourself what they know.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5) – These youngsters see death as temporary and reversible. They believe the dead live in a city called Heaven or in a box under the ground connected to other boxes by tunnels. Preschoolers ask many questions, often gross and grubby, about how one lives on. No matter how well death is explained, many will persist in their beliefs about its reversibility. These children are likely to be literal and concrete in their thinking.

Early primary schoolers (ages 6 to 8) – Children in this development stage see death as a person or spirit that comes to get you if you aren't fast or clever enough to escape. From their perspective three groups of people die: the elderly, the handicapped (because they can't run fast enough) and the "klutzes". Klutzes are people who die that are neither elderly nor handicapped. In an effort to make themselves feel different and therefore safe, children will often find some specific way, frequently negative, to differentiate themselves from people who die.

Pre-adolescents (ages 9 to 11) – These youngsters have a more adult understanding of death – seeing it as final, universal and irreversible. They are interested in rituals and concerned about how the world will change because of the death of a particular person. This age group is frequently described as having the easiest time dealing with death and dying because they tend to intellectualise as a way of coping with the experience. They can sometimes sound crass and uncaring.

Adolescents (age 12+) – Just when adolescents are being asked to take responsibility for their own lives, they are confronted by experiences that challenge their belief in their own immortality. They often engage in risk-taking behaviour, seeming to test the limits of that mortality. Most adolescents are embarrassed when a parent, brother or sister dies; they don't want to be different from their friends. Their grief at times of death and dying tends to be expressed with peers rather than with family members, often causing family members to believe the adolescent is not grieving.

Magical thinking..

Children believe they have the power to make things happen in the world. They often believe death is the result of something they did or didn't do, think or say. If they say "drop dead" to a person who later dies they are sure they caused the death. If someone tells them "you are going to be the death of me if..." and that person dies, again they may believe they were responsible. Magical thinking allows young people to put together sequential events in a way that they appear to have been consequential.

Six-year-old Jonathan was trying to make sense out of the death of his friend Polly from a sudden virus. One day he announced that he understood what had happened. "She died because she ate her cookies before her sandwich!" On the last day she was in school before her death he had seen that happen and he could think of no other reason for her death.

Before answering children's questions, ask them what they think caused the death. This will give you a chance to correct any misconceptions. Once an adult has given a "right" answer, they may be reluctant to share what they thought. While children's magical thinking may be charming, it also can be tragic.

One morning during Show and Tell, seven-year-old Henry announced that he had killed his mother the previous day. He had given her a sip of fizzy drink and she had died.

His teacher tried to learn more about what had happened and discovered that Henry was a "junk food freak" whose family had told him that junk food would kill him. Henry was distraught because of this admonition and believed the fizzy drink had caused his mother's death.

We learned later that his mother had died of cancer but the family refused to tell Henry there was cancer in the family. Today he is acutely suicidal, believing that his forgetfulness about junk food caused his mother's death.

Grieving

Normal grief includes both sadness and anger. It is often easier to tolerate children's sadness than it is to provide opportunities for them to express their anger. For both children and adults, the death of a loved one can leave feelings of anger at having been abandoned. Such feelings however, seem selfish and unacceptable. We must let children know that anger is a predictable and acceptable component of grief. Sometimes they like to draw "angry" pictures that show how they feel. Other times they may welcome an invitation to hit a pillow, scream or talk about how mad they are about what has happened.

A young person's specific style of grieving will depend on such things as their age, relationship to the person who died and suddenness of the death. One might expect that an anticipated death, which has allowed some time for grieving prior to the death, will create less grief than one that is sudden and unexpected. While that is sometimes true, there is usually quite a bit of grieving to be done when the death actually occurs. The grieving of young children (especially pre-schoolers) can be mischievous, boisterous and aggressive.

When three-year-old Maria's father died, her pre-school teacher had to share this news with the other youngsters in the group. Later one of the parents asked how the children had dealt with this tragedy.

"They were terrible! They hit each other and you should have seen Tommy. He came right up to me and said, 'you have ugly hair, your eyes are ugly, your nose is ugly and your teeth are ugly. You are the ugliest teacher I have ever seen!'"

Tommy was not being rude. He was just trying, in his own way, to get even with the adult who told him that the father of a child his own age could die. Children, like other family members, can grieve in a way that seems "out of sync" with others in the family.

Following her 14-year-old son's death, his mother expressed her dismay that 12-year-old Peter asked to go to his football game on the afternoon of the funeral. That night he asked for his brother's bed, bicycle and camera. His mother feared that she had raised a "creep" who didn't even care about his deceased brother.

With some help, Peter was able to say that he needed to see his friends at the game, none of whom had been allowed to come to his house for the last three days for fear that they would "catch death". He explained his request for his brother's possessions, "I just wanted something to remember him by."

"Of course," said his mother, "but not on the day of the funeral."

"Yes," said Peter, "on the day of the funeral. I couldn't wait any longer."

Some children who have experienced the death of a family member or a close friend appear not to be grieving. They go about their business as if nothing has happened. They may not have cried, though it seems like they should have. There can be many reasons for this. We have raised a society of youngsters who believe, for the most part, that "big boys don't cry".

Teenagers often do their grieving with friends their own age rather than with their families but it is important to let adolescents know you are there for them if they want to talk. Each individual will grieve in his own way and at his own time if we make that possible. We must be careful not to convey the message that there is only one "right way".

Normal acute grief for adults can take two to three years. This is when they finally feel that while the world will not be the same, they can still go on. For children, grieving lasts longer. Although they grieve in short spurts, most will still be actively grieving through adolescence.

Commemorating

When a friend or family member dies, youngsters must find some way to formally or informally remember him/her. Such activity confirms the reality of the death and the value of life. It is important that young people be included in planning for commemoration.

Often one of the early commemoration issues is whether or not young children should participate in the various rituals such as the wake, the funeral, the burial or sitting Shiva. Try to discuss these activities with the child. Explain what will be going on, who will be there, what the place will look like and what will be expected of the child. Be sure to find out ahead of time whether the casket will be open or closed, then share this information with the child.

Most youngsters will be able to tell you whether they would like to go the various rituals or whether they would prefer to be with a friend or relative during that time. Children who want to be involved can be given a choice about driving by the funeral home so they will know where the adults are, going in and signing the guest book, going in the room where the casket is, or going up to the casket.

There are a number of ways in which they can participate if they wish. One of the greatest regrets of many adults is that they were not allowed to go to the funeral of a beloved grandparent or other relative because they were "too young". There is a strong sense of having missed out on an important family event. Our experience is that children do fine with these rituals if the adults are comfortable with them.

When young children want to view the deceased, it is appropriate to ask the funeral director for permission to bring the child at non-public times. This will make it easier for the family to deal with the child's questions without having to worry about what others think of the child being there. Someone can then take the child home and the adults can participate in the usual rituals. If a young child will be attending a funeral service, it is helpful to bring along a neighbour or a friend who can leave the service early with the child if he/she gets restless.

Carrie was almost three when her father died. Relatives were horrified when they learned that Carrie's mum would be taking her to the funeral home to say goodbye to her father. Carrie's two clenched fists suggested to the funeral director that she was a very angry little girl.

What a surprise it was to learn each fist was holding something for her father. She opened her left hand and a muddy rock fell into the casket. "This is so daddy will remember our farm." In her right hand, she had two dollar bills – her total savings. "Please help me put these in daddy's pocket," she said to the funeral director. "I want him to have money, so he can buy something in God's store when he gets to Heaven."

Carrie may not remember her participation in her father's wake and funeral but others will be able to tell her about her very touching ways of saying goodbye.

Informal commemoration, or remembering, may mean giving a picture of the person who died or one memento that has special meaning. Children and adolescents have wonderful ideas about things they would like to do individually or as a group to remember a special person. They may want to name a star, plant a tree, collect money for medical research, purchase books for a school library or launch balloons. It is important to help children commemorate a life that has ended.

Going on

When children and adolescents have accomplished the tasks of understanding, grieving and commemorating, they often need specific permission – spoken out loud - to “go on”. It is difficult to know when one’s return to normal activities may seem untimely or offensive to other family members or friends of the person who died. When is it all right to visit the cemetery less often? When is it proper to laugh again, to have fun or go to parties?

Going on needs to be differentiated from “forgetting” and from criticism that can seem to be implied in such a description. In describing children’s reactions to the death of a bird, an author says that every day until they forgot, they went and sang songs to their little dead bird. It seems most likely that they did not “forget”, instead they were ready to go on, having done their understanding, grieving and their commemorating.

Adults should be sensitive to children’s needs to remember friends or family members on anniversaries of their death. These also might include specific dates, events and seasons that can be experienced by children as anniversaries.

When a youngster seems unable to “go on”, it is useful to review the tasks in reverse order. Is the child having trouble going on because he/she has not been able to commemorate? Is he/she unable to commemorate because it has been difficult to grieve? Has grieving been complicated by their inability to understand? If one can determine where a child is “stuck”, it is often possible to help youngsters move forward with their grief so it can be good grief.

Ways to help bereaved children...

1. **Recognise your own feelings**

Think about your own experiences with loss, separation and death. They may have an impact on your ability to help young people with their grief.

2. **Share the fact of death**

Provide age appropriate information about what happened and what rituals will occur. Be aware of the four psychological tasks youngsters must accomplish if their grief is to be good grief.

3. **Be aware of issue that make a specific child vulnerable**

These include such things as too many recent losses, knowing someone with the same illness, being the best friend or worst enemy of the person who has died or having had some actual responsibility for the death. A prompt referral to a mental health centre or professional for preventive services may be a good idea.

4. **Address the children’s fears and fantasies**

Be particularly aware of those that grow out of magical thinking and reflect an inappropriate sense of responsibility for the death.

5. **Discuss issues specific to the situation**

Every death is unique and raises specific issues. Children may want to talk about illness, about violence or suicide, about alcohol and drug use or about troubled adults who hurt children. They may want to know about wakes and funerals, about cremation and burial or about ethnic and cultural diversity in death rituals.

6. **Support children and adolescents as they grieve**

Remember that noise and activity prove that one is very much alive. Provide an environment where grieving is safe and accepted. Talk specifically about the appropriateness of sadness and anger. Share your own grief with youngsters, being sure they know they have not caused your tears or your anger.

7. Remember the person who died and help children and adolescents participate in that commemoration

Young people can often make suggestions about the content of a funeral or memorial service, about flowers and about what to do with particular belongings of the person who died. Commemorative activities may go on over a period of time.

8. Use teachable moments to begin or continue a programme to help young people learn about death and dying

Daily activities and more dramatic life events provide many opportunities to talk with youngsters about death and dying and about grief and loss. Children ask about cemeteries and funeral processions. They study and comment on dead animals and bugs. As they reach school age, many opportunities for discussion arise in the existing curriculum: selections from assigned and independent readings (literature), endings of life as well as beginnings (science), discussion of the relationship of Egypt's pyramids and mummies to death and dying (social studies), lyrics from popular songs (music), the impact of war on families (history), artistic portrayals of death and grief (art), and such. They hear on the news about tragic deaths from child abuse, plane crashes or military accidents.

Young people may raise questions for which we have no answers. It is perfectly acceptable to say that their questions are good ones and we will try to help find answers. Don't avoid listening to questions and concerns just because you are afraid you will not know the answer.

Good grief

When children and adolescents deal with a loss the resulting grief can be turned into good grief. The key is preparing young people to deal with their intense grief and loss. As mentioned before, once you are familiar with the four tasks of mourning – understanding, grieving, commemorating and going on – helping young people deal with death and dying becomes easier. Death challenges our coping skills. Turning a child's grief to good grief creates coping mechanisms that will help them be prepared for losses that occur in life.

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