

Talking With Children about Death

TEACH YOUR CHILD THAT DEATH IS PART OF LIFE:

- Discuss “small losses,” such as the death of a plant, a fish, or other pet. This will lay the groundwork for discussing a more painful death when it occurs.

TELL YOUR CHILD SIMPLY, BUT HONESTLY, ABOUT THE DEATH THAT HAS OCCURRED:

- Feeling excluded can be much harder than feeling sad.
- A child’s keen senses will tell them that something is wrong.
- Feelings of uncertainty may arouse feelings of anxiety.
- Prepare your child for what he/she will see and do at the funeral or memorial service

GRIEVE WITH YOUR CHILD

- This gives you a chance to comfort each other and work through some of the grief together.
- A child may feel guilty, as though somehow he/she caused this death by something he/she has said or did. Talk about these feelings and reassure children that they did not cause the death, nor could they have prevented it.

WHEN ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH, AVOID CIRCLES OR EUPHEMISMS:

- Children take things literally. If a death is linked to “sleep,” the child may fear going to bed.
- If a child hears that they have “lost” grandparents, they may conclude that someone will find them eventually.
- It is alright to use words like “dead” and “died” with children.
- What kids image with “being lost” or “sleeping forever” or “being ill” can sometimes create more anxiety than hearing that someone they love has “died.”

CHILDREN MAY ASK MANY QUESTIONS:

- Some of the same questions are asked again and again in attempt to understand the finality of death.
- Even if you have answered your child’s question already, answer it again.

CHILDREN CAN WORK OUT THEIR GRIEF:

- Your child may wish to make a “memory book” of the person who has died. It can include notes, pictures, or other special items related to the loved one who has died.
- Feelings about the death can be expressed through play, drawings, or even with puppets. A child may express anger or guilt, as well as sadness, through play.
- Talk with your child. In the days and weeks that follow the death, he/she may have moments of unending questions, or may go through several days without mention of the loved one.
- Like adults, children grieve in their own ways.
- Even a brother and a sister may express their grief differently.