

Children's Understanding of Death

Death is difficult for all of us to understand. For children it is particularly hard to grasp. Young children have a hard time accepting the finality of death and may expect the deceased to be alive again soon. Their thinking is literal and need death explained in physical terms. As children develop, they begin to realize that death is final and that it is a part of every person's life cycle.

Children's reactions to death vary greatly. Their grief may be expressed as sadness, fear, anger and even silliness. They may fear the loss of another loved one and may want to remain closer to parents and/or other family members for awhile.

Although understanding of death may be limited, no child is too young to feel and respond to loss and sadness. Children need the support of warm, caring adults who allow them to experience their grief. The following suggestions may be helpful:

1. Accept the child's feelings. Respond to them by acknowledging the feelings and allowing the child to talk with you.
2. Don't be afraid of tears: allow your child to cry. It's a natural way to deal with grief.
3. Allow the child to see your appropriate, calm expression of feelings. It's o.k. for you to cry and to tell the child that you feel sad.
4. Children don't need all the answers: but they need to ask the questions. It's o.k. for you to tell the child that it's hard for you to understand, or that you are not sure of the answer.
5. Be honest in answering questions that you can answer. Answers should be appropriate for the child's developmental level.
6. Reassure a child that misbehaving, wishing things, or being angry cannot cause anyone to die.
7. Help a child to understand that death, in itself, is not painful. The deceased person feels no pain. Family and friends cry because they are sad about the loss of someone who will be missed.
8. Discuss death in exact terms. Use "die" and "death". If you say "sleeping" or "passing" the child may associate that with sleeping or passing on to another grade, and may experience unnecessary fear.
9. Reassure the child. "It is very rare for a child to die. Usually people live to an old age. It is rare to know two people who die at or near the same time."
10. Share your religious beliefs regarding death. Often this is reassuring to a child.