

*This booklet was compiled by the staff of
Hospice of Southern Illinois*

Children are not born knowing how to walk or talk, nor are they born understanding that death is the natural end to life. Children learn how to walk and talk a little at a time; they also learn about death a little at a time. It is never too early for them to start to learn the important life lesson that death is natural. This is a truth from which we cannot protect them. The following information covers what we at Hospice of Southern Illinois believe children need when a loved one is dying or has died.

***Hospice of Southern Illinois**
Your Community Not-For-Profit Hospice*

Children Need Truth, Though Sometimes Perhaps Not the Whole Truth

There is story of a young child who asks his mother, "Where did I come from?" and mother enlightens the child with the entire story of conception and birth. When she finishes, the child is wide-eyed and speechless. Mother asks, "Is there anything else you want to know?" Child says, "No, Bobby was born at Memorial Hospital. I just wondered which hospital I came from!" Of course, the moral of this story is to make sure what you tell children is true, but perhaps they aren't ready for the whole story. Match the amount of facts with their ability to understand.

Sometimes adults are tempted to tell children fantasies, hoping to protect them. One children's book describes death as "going down a long tunnel." This wording was intended to protect the child reader from the seemingly harsh word "died." However, imagine a child whose beloved grandparent just died, and upon reading such a book, the child starts looking for the long tunnel so she can find Grandma. She may even develop an unhealthy terror when she is near tunnels, fearful she will fall in and disappear forever.

Using appropriate words is very important. Telling a child that his grandfather has "gone to sleep and won't wake up" could create fear of bedtime. The child might believe that going to sleep will cause death. One dying parent told his young daughter that he would be a light always shining on her. After his death, when she was lying in bed alone at night, car lights would sometimes be reflected in her room, and she was petrified that her father was "haunting her." It is important to tell children the truth and use appropriate words. It is much more helpful for the child to hear the simple truth. It is ok to simply say, "Your grandmother has died."

Children Need to Know They Will Be Safe

One of the primary needs of children is the need for security. Often, security comes from a predictable daily routine and hugs from people who love them. During a terminal illness, children may be thrown into unpredictable circumstances, which may make them wonder if they are safe. Some suggestions for reassuring children of safety include:

- Try to be intentional about letting children know what to expect.
- Provide reassurance of the child's safety and care.
- Play peaceful music.
- Stick to a regular routine as much as possible, including chores, school, extra-curricular activities, etc.
- Help the children identify all the adults in their world who love them and take care of them.

Interact with the children in quiet time or play. Children often present fears, thoughts and questions during these times.

Children Need to Know the Difference Between Illness and Terminal Illness

We as adults know there is a difference between having a short-term illness, like a cold or flu, and having a terminal illness. However, children may not understand this distinction. Sometimes, children become very frightened of illness, thinking that death will certainly follow. Explain to children, in simple language, that when they get ill, they will likely get better and that terminal illness is much different.

Children Need A Way to Contribute

Have you ever been on the receiving end of dozens of casseroles after a funeral? It seems that family and friends need some way to feel they have contributed in helping a bereaved family. In our society, baking a casserole (or bringing food of some variety) seems to be the usual practice. Certainly nobody needs dozens of casseroles, and yet each contributor needed something to do.

Children also need a way to contribute. The way they contribute will depend upon their age. Perhaps they can draw a picture for the loved one's bedside or help get a wet cloth for a feverish forehead or sit and hold a hand. Older children might read to a person who is bedridden. Children have unique gifts and talents and may come up with their own ideas on how to help if given the opportunity.

Some children, teens and young adults may be reluctant to touch, talk or even visit with a dying loved one. Do not force a child to interact with an ill family member. Do provide words of understanding and reassurance that everyone, even adults, handles illness and death differently.

Children Need To Have Ways to Cope with Unfamiliar Feelings

Many feelings are normal and appropriate during this time, ranging from anger, fear, sadness, or even happiness. It is important for children to know that all of their feelings are accepted.

Children may not have the verbal skills to effectively express their feelings. They may express anger by disobeying or bed-wetting. They may convey their sense of insecurity by clinging to others. Though the behavior may be exasperating, it is helpful to treat them with as much patience as possible. Let them know you understand this is a difficult time. Provide an open atmosphere in which they trust you enough to tell you anything that is on their minds, without being judged or reprimanded.

Children model the behavior of adults. If you avoid talking about the deceased, so will they. If you avoid crying in front of them, they will assume crying is not acceptable. If you feel like crying, cry. Tell them you are sad, and they will realize it is appropriate to express sadness. If something reminds you of a story of the deceased, share it with them, and they will realize it is acceptable and helpful to talk about their loved one. Encourage them to share their happy memories.

Children Need to Know That Grief is a Process That Changes Over Time

Children don't have as much life experience as adults. They often don't realize that grief is a process. Children are very much "in the moment." They may feel overwhelming grief today and assume this is the way it will always be. Assure them that it will get better. Healing from a physical hurt, like a cut finger, is a process that takes time. An emotional hurt is much more complicated than a physical hurt, yet it is also a process, one that takes time. We do eventually heal enough to be able to go on and live a life in which joy will once again be possible. Children need the hope of knowing that time does heal. In the meantime, give them plenty of reassurance and a sense of security.

It is rather common for children to assume a death is somehow their fault, so please help them to dispel any feelings of guilt. Reassure them that they are in no way responsible for the person's death.

Children Need to Have a Voice

Let the children have a voice in decision-making. Though adults have ultimate responsibility in decision-making and must follow their best instincts, it is also helpful to let the children have a right to be heard. Children will often instinctively know what they are capable of handling.

Many parents ask, "Should my child attend the visitation and/or funeral?" If the child is old enough to make a decision on their own, ask their preference. Explain what will happen, who they will see, who will be present and that there are many emotions displayed from laughter to deep sorrow. If possible speak to the funeral director/minister prior to the visitation/funeral and perhaps visit the funeral home or church along with the child. This will give the child the opportunity to become acquainted with the facility when all is quiet and peaceful. Also enlist a family member or friend to assist you in monitoring and supporting the child throughout the event. If the child is an infant or toddler you will definitely need assistance, remember you are grieving too and need to have the opportunity to do so.

Children Need to Know Death is Natural

A woman tells the story of coming home from school one day when she was eleven and being told her grandfather had died. The adults had wanted to protect her, so they didn't include her in the three-year process of cancer treatment and terminal prognosis. The woman used an analogy when recounting the story of their "protection." She described it as, "falling quickly from a cliff into the lake of grief, while the family all walked gently into the lake of grief."

From the moment we are born, we are both living and dying. Death is a natural and inevitable end to life. In our society, we tend to disregard the fact that we will all die. We tend to attempt to protect our children from this fact by shielding them from people who are dying. In fact, letting children be present is more likely to equip children with the coping skills they need to manage this experience.

Children, at some point in their lives, will be forced to face death. It will be easier for children to learn and cope with illness and death if they are allowed to be part of the entire process. When children are kept away from the person who is dying and all the adults are sad or whispering, children tend to believe death is a fearful event. When we include children in the dying process, it prepares them more gently for the death and empowers them to cope more effectively. Listening attentively to children's feelings, being present when they need us, giving them choices regarding level of participation, and treating them respectfully will give your child the guidance they need to experience and cope with illness and death.

Children Vary in Their Ability to Understand

A twelve-year-old may understand that death is final, whereas a one-year-old has not yet developed enough to understand the notion of time. A twelve-year-old may want many gory details about the disease, but the same information would be too much for a young child.

As a child grows, they may re-experience the death all over again. A child who was six when her mother died may grieve in new ways when she is sixteen, an age at which she will be more able to understand what she has lost.

According to the noted theorist on childhood development, Jean Piaget, children go through four stages as they develop the ability to understand more and more complex issues. A child's ability to understand death will vary, depending on which stage she is in.

Stage One -Infancy

- Infant's knowledge of the world is extremely limited and infant has limited verbal abilities.
- Infant can feel grief, sensing that something is different. The infant does not have the thinking ability or speaking ability to express what she is feeling and may cry a lot in response to the death.

Stage Two - Toddler and Early Childhood

- Memory and imagination increase.
- Thinking tends to be non-logical.
- Concept of time tends to be unrealistic.
- Child may not understand the difference between “alive” and “dead,” perhaps even believing toys are “alive.”
- Child tends to feel like the center of the world.
- Child may feel responsible for the death.
- Child may not understand the finality of death.

Stage Three -Elementary and Early Adolescence

- May be interested in concrete details, like “what does a dead body look like?”
- May not understand a metaphor like “It’s going to be a bumpy road.” May need to hear concrete ideas like “Sometimes life is painful.”
- Starts to understand that death is not reversible.
- May start to understand that death is inevitable for all living things, though may still not understand death will come to self.

Stage Four -Adolescence to Adulthood

- May start to understand death as an adult would.

Summary

The changes experienced when a loved one dies can create feelings of fear and insecurity. Finding one's way toward healing is a process that occurs over time. Children and adults at any developmental level will continue to need assurance and support. Be patient with one another.

All of the above is presented as a guideline. You are the adult who knows your child best. Follow your best instincts with love and compassion.

