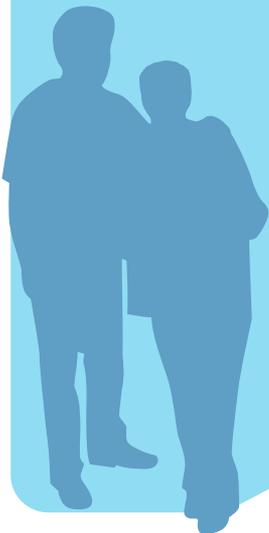
A large, stylized white tree silhouette with many leaves, serving as a background for the title.

Preparing Children for Loss



North Shore Palliative
and Supportive Care Program
www.CoastalPalliativeCare.ca

Concerns about discussing death with children is common. Many of us hesitate to talk about death, particularly with youngsters, but death is an inescapable fact of life. If we are to help them, we must let them know it's okay to talk about it.

It is only by talking to our children about death that we may discover what they know and do not know; if they have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can then help them by providing information which will help them to understand.

What we say about death and when we say it will depend on their ages and experiences. It will also depend on our own experiences, beliefs, feelings, and the situations in which we find ourselves, for each situation we face is somewhat different.

Some discussions about death may be stimulated by a news report or a television program and take place in a relatively unemotional atmosphere. Other talks may result from a family crisis and be charged with emotions.

This information provides some general information which may be helpful and which may need to be adapted to meet each family's needs.

Children are aware

Children become aware of death long before we probably realise it. They see dead birds, insects, and animals lying by the road. They may see death at least once a day on television or on video games. They hear about it in fairy tales and act it out in their play. Death is a part of everyday life, and children, at some level, are aware of it.

If we permit children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information, prepare them for a crisis, and help them when they are upset. Being comfortable with our own feelings, and talking openly and honestly will make it easier for children to talk to us and ask us questions.

Communication barriers

Avoidance, confrontation

Many of us are inclined not to talk about things that upset us. We try to our feelings and hope that saying nothing will be for the best. But Children are great observers and they read messages on our faces and in the way we walk or hold our hands. We express ourselves not only by what we say, but by what we don't say and what we do.

To a child, avoidance can be a message: "If Mummy and Daddy can't talk about it, it must be bad, so I better not talk about it either." Or, "I cannot talk about it because it will only make Mummy or Daddy more sad."

Instead of protecting our children by avoiding talk, we sometimes cause them more worry and keep them from telling us how they feel. The child's fear of the unknown is worse than facing the reality. The child may fantasize and create the worst scenario or an incorrect reality.

On the other hand, it is also not wise to confront children with information that they may not understand or want to know. As with any sensitive subject, we must seek a delicate balance that encourages children to communicate: a balance between avoidance and confrontation. This balance is not easy to achieve. It involves the following:

- Trying to be sensitive to children's desires to communicate when they are ready.
- Maintaining an openness that encourages children's attempts to communicate.
- Listening to and accepting children's feelings.
- Offering children honest explanations when we are obviously upset.
- Answering questions in simple language appropriate for their age.
- Trying to find brief, simple, and age-appropriate answers to children's questions; understandable answers which do not overwhelm them with too many words.

Perhaps most difficult of all, communicating about death involves examining our own feelings and beliefs so that we can talk to our children naturally when opportunities arise.

Not having all the answers

Young children, in particular, seem to expect parents to be all knowing, even about death. But death, the one certainty in life, is life's greatest uncertainty.

While not all our answers may be comforting, we can share what we truly believe. Where we have doubts, an honest, "I just don't know the answer to that one," may be more comforting than an explanation that we do not quite believe. Children usually sense our doubts. White lies, no matter how well intended, can create uneasiness and distrust. Our non defensive and accepting attitude may also help them feel better about not knowing everything.

Coming to terms with death can be a lifelong process.

We may find different answers at different stages of our lives, or we may always feel uncertain and fearful. If we have unresolved fears and questions, we may wonder how to provide comforting answers for our children

It may help to tell our children that different people believe different things about death, and that not everyone believes as we do. For example, some believe in an afterlife, others do not. By indicating our acceptance and respect for others' beliefs, we make it easier for our children to choose beliefs different from our own but which are more comforting to them.

Overcoming the taboos

Death is a taboo subject, and even those who hold strong beliefs may avoid talking about it. Once, death was an integral part of life. People died at home, surrounded by their loved ones. Adults and children experienced death together, mourned together, and comforted each other

Today, death is lonelier. Many people die in hospitals and nursing homes where they receive the extensive nursing and medical care they need. Their loved ones have fewer opportunities to be with them and often miss sharing their last moments of life. The living have become isolated from the dying. Consequently, death has taken on an added mystery, and, for some, an added fear.

Many people are beginning to recognize that treating death as a taboo does a disservice to both the dying and the living.

As part of this effort, the hospice movement provides for children and adults to die at home beside their loved ones, pets, and other favorite things.

Researchers have found that two factors influence children's conceptions of death: their developmental stages and their experiences (including environment, prior experiences, ethnic, religious, and cultural background).

Developmental stages

Studies show that children go through a series of stages in their understanding of death. For example, preschool children usually see death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal. Watching cartoon characters on television miraculously recover after being crushed or blown apart tends to reinforce this idea.

Between the ages of 5 and 9, most children are beginning to realize that death is final and that all living things die. But they still do not see death as personal.

They harbour the idea that somehow they can escape through their own ingenuity. During this stage, children also tend to personify death. They may associate death with a skeleton or with the angel of death. Some children have nightmares about these images.

From age 9 or 10 through adolescence, children begin to comprehend fully that death is irreversible; that all living things die and that they, too, will die someday. Some begin to work on developing philosophical views of life and death. Teenagers often become intrigued with seeking the meaning of life. Some adolescents react to their fear of death by taking unnecessary chances with their lives. In confronting death, they are trying to overcome their fears by confirming their "control" over mortality.

The individual experience

While it can be helpful to know that children go through a series of stages in the way they perceive death, it is important to remember that, as in all growth processes, children develop at individual rates. It is equally important to keep in mind that all children experience life uniquely and have their own ways of expressing and handling feelings.

No matter how children cope with death or express their feelings, they need sympathetic and non judgemental responses from adults

The challenge of talking to a young child

Communicating with preschoolers or young school-age children about any subject can be challenging. They need brief and simple explanations. Long lectures or complicated responses to their questions will probably bore or confuse them and should be avoided. Using concrete and familiar examples may help. For instance, Dr. Earl A. Grollman suggests in his book, *Explaining Death to Children*, that death may be made more comprehensible by explaining it in terms of the absence of familiar life functions: when people die they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel anymore. When dogs die they do not bark or run anymore; dead flowers do not grow or bloom anymore.

Checking to see if a child has understood what has been said is critical; youngsters sometimes confuse what they hear. Also, children learn through repetition, and they may need to repeat their questions and hear them answered over and over again. As time passes and children have new experiences, they will need further clarification and sharing of ideas and feelings.

It may take time for a child to understand fully the ramifications of death and its emotional implications. A child who knows that an Uncle has died may still ask why Aunt is crying. The child needs an answer. "Aunt is crying because she is sad that Uncle has died. She misses him very much. We all feel sad when someone we care about dies."

There are also times when we have difficulty "hearing" what children are asking us. A question that may seem shockingly insensitive to an adult may be a child's request for reassurance. For instance, the question, "When will you die?" needs to be heard with the realization that the young child perceives death as temporary. While the finality of death is not fully understood, a child may realize that death

means separation, and separation from parents and the loss of care are frightening. Being cared for is a realistic and practical concern, and a child needs to be reassured.

Possibly the best way to answer such a question is by asking a clarifying question in return: "Are you worried that I won't be here to take care of you?"

Other problems can arise from children's misperceptions about death. Dr. R. Fulton, in *Grollman's Explaining Death to Children*, points out that some children confuse death with sleep, particularly if they hear adults refer to death with one of the many euphemisms for sleep: "eternal rest," "rest in peace." As a result of the confusion, a child may become afraid of going to bed or taking naps.

Similarly, if children are told that someone who died "went away," brief separations may worry them. Therefore, it is important to avoid such words as "sleep," "rest," or "went away" when talking to a child about death.

Telling children that sickness was the cause of a death may also create problems. Preschoolers cannot differentiate between temporary and fatal illness, and minor ailments may begin to cause them unnecessary concern. When talking to a child about someone who has died as a result of an illness, it might be helpful to explain that only a very serious illness may cause death, and that although we all get sick sometimes, we usually get better again.

Another generalization we often make unthinkingly is relating death to old age. Children may become very concerned about people they love ageing.

Children tend to hear words literally, and religious explanations that comfort an adult may unsettle a child. For example, the explanation, "Baby brother is with God now," or "It is God's will," could be frightening rather than reassuring to young children who may worry that God might decide to come and get them just as He did baby brother.

Opportunities in daily life

It is usually easier to talk about death when we are less emotionally involved. Taking opportunities to talk to children about dead flowers, trees, insects, or birds may be helpful. Some young children show intense curiosity about dead insects and animals. They may wish to examine them closely, or they may ask detailed questions about what happens physically to dead things. Although this interest may seem repulsive or morbid to us, it is a way of learning about death.

The child may listen seriously to our answers and skip happily away saying, “Well, I’m never going to die.” We should not feel compelled to contradict the child or think that our efforts have been wasted. We have made it easier for the child to come back again when more answers are needed.

Other opportunities to discuss with children occur when prominent people die and their deaths, funerals, and the public’s reactions receive a lot of media coverage. When the death is news-worthy, children are bound to see something about it on television or hear it mentioned on the radio, in school, or in our conversations. In any case, it can rarely be ignored. It is a natural time to give children needed information or to clarify any misconceptions they may have about death.

Death in the family, some children’s reactions

Guilt

Some studies have shown that when children experience the death of a close relative, such as a brother, sister, or parent, they may feel guilty. They think that in some way they caused the death; maybe their angry thoughts caused the person to die. Some children may view death as a punishment: “Mummy died and left me because I was bad.” Children may be helped to cope with guilt by reassuring them that they have always been loved and still are. It may also help to explain the circumstances of the death. Children may also feel that they will die

Anger

The death of a close relative also arouses feelings of anger in both adults and children. We feel angry with the person who died for causing us so much pain and sorrow or for leaving us alone. We feel angry at the doctors and nurses who could not save our loved one, and we feel angry at ourselves for being unable to prevent the death.

Children are more apt to express their anger openly, especially when they have lost someone upon whom they depended for love and care.

Regression

Children may regress into an earlier stage of development. For example, they may begin thumb sucking, bed wetting, or need diapers. Realize that children need support through this time and that such regressions are temporary.

Depression and other behavior problems

Some children turn their anger inward and become depressed, withdrawn, irritable, aggressive, or develop physical symptoms. If this behavior persists over several months, professional help may be needed. Remember, though, that each child deals with death differently.

Experts say that 6 months after a significant death in the child's life, a normal routine should resume. If these symptoms do not resolve, you might consider seeking professional advice

It may be helpful to give children a special picture of the person who has died. The picture will help children remember and may be used later to evoke happy memories of this person.

Should children visit the dying?

Whether or not a particular child should visit a dying person depends on the child, the patient, and the situation. A child who is old enough to understand what is happening probably should be permitted to visit someone who has played an important role in his or her, provided that both the child and the dying person want the visit.

Visiting when appropriate may diminish the mystery of death and help the child develop more realistic ways of coping. It can open avenues of communication, reducing the loneliness often felt by both the living and the dying. The opportunity to bring a moment of happiness to a dying person might help a child feel useful and less helpless.

A child who is to visit someone who is dying needs to be thoroughly prepared for what will be heard and seen. The condition and appearance of the patient should be described, and any equipment should be explained in advance. Also, it may be wise to remind the child that most hospital patients get well.

Encouraging a child to write a note or send a card to the person who is hospitalized can also help the child feel less helpless and more connected to the person who is dying.

Under no circumstances should a child be coerced or made to feel guilty for choosing not to call or visit the dying, or if contacts are brief.

Sending children away from home

The loss or impending loss of a close family member may make it difficult to care for youngsters, and sometimes we are tempted to send our children to visit relatives or friends until we can “pull ourselves together.” Keeping children at a distance may also be a way to avoid talking to them about the death.

Careful consideration should be given before children are sent away, for this is when they most need the comfort of familiar surroundings and close contact with family members.

Children need time to adjust to the loss, and, if feasible, they should be prepared in advance of the death. Even young children who do not understand the full implications of death are aware that something serious is going on. Sending them away may increase their fears about separation from their loved ones and increase their anxiety.

Having familiar and caring people nearby before and after the death can reduce fear of abandonment or other stresses children may feel.

On the other hand, we do not want to overprotect them as a way of dealing with our own anxieties and needs. Children should be given permission to play with friends or visit relatives. Children need the freedom to deal with their own anxieties and needs just as we must handle our own.

In summary

- *Communication about death*, as with all communication, is easier when children feel that they have our permission to talk about the subject and believe we are sincerely interested in their talk about the subject and believe we are sincerely interested in their views and questions. Encourage them to communicate by listening attentively, respecting their views, and answering their questions honestly.
- *Every child is an individual*. Communication about death depends on the child’s age and experiences. A very young child may view death as temporary, and he or she may be more concerned about separation from loved ones than about death itself.
- *A very young child can absorb only limited amounts of information*. Answers need to be brief, simple, and repeated when necessary.
- *Our own feelings and attitudes about death are conveyed to the child*, whether we try to camouflage our experience or not. How we talk about and share our experience with the child may be what he/she remembers most.
- *A child may need to mourn a deeply felt loss on and off until adolescence*. The child needs support and understanding through this grief process and permission to show feelings openly and freely.

Useful books

Buscaglia, L. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. New Jersey: Charles B. Slack Inc.; 1982.

White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Harper & Row; 1952.

Viorst, J. *The Tenth Good Thing about Barry*. New York: MacMillan; 1987.

Braithwaite, A. *When Uncle Bob Died*. London: Dinosaur Publications; 1982.

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