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SP567-Helping Children and Teens Cope With Death

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

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Helping Children and Teens Cope With Death



Helping Children and Teens Cope With Death

*Erica Saxby, former Assistant Professor
Family and Consumer Sciences*

Have you avoided talking about death with your children because you think they are too young to understand? Sometimes you may just want to shield them from the pain and sorrow caused by death. But today, children may see or hear of incidents of violence that result in death on television; in the newspaper; and even in their own school, neighborhood or home.

Do not try to shield children from death. That deprives children of their own right and need to grieve. The loss of someone or something that we love can be difficult to understand. How adults help a child deal with death depends largely on their own understanding of death and grieving, religious beliefs and the developmental level of the child.

The following are guidelines for helping children and teens cope with death:

- Allow children to grieve.
- Listen and watch for grief-related behavior.
- Explain death in the child's own language, be honest.
- Encourage the child to express his/her feelings about death and allow him/her to ask questions;

Questions Children May Ask

Why do pets/people die?
Am I going to die too?
Why am I hurting so much?
Is it ok to cry?
Is it ok to be angry?
Is the death my fault?
Is it still ok to have fun
Where has the person gone?
What happens to the body?
What happens to me now?

Questions Teens May Ask

Is it wrong to have fun?
Why can't I feel anything?
How can I deal with death?
How should I be acting?
How long will this pain last?
What happens to me now?

- Provide comfort, support, and reassurance without creating more stress for the child or adolescent.
- Explore your feelings and experience about death.
- Exhibit healthy coping behaviors.

Should children attend funerals?

Funeral and memorial services help death seem more real and encourages mourning that will help the child move through the grieving process. A child should not be forced to participate and ultimately, that is the decision of the parent or guardian. If a child participates in a funeral or memorial service, parents can help by preparing the child for the experience. Parents may want to explain what the room will look like, what a casket looks like, how the deceased may look and how others may behave. If the child views the body, plan for the first viewing to be private and with a loving, supportive adult. When appropriate, parents may want to include the child in planning the funeral or memorial service by letting him/her choose a song or a poem.

Lending Support

Encourage children to express feelings, possibly by writing a letter or drawing a picture. Finally, if a parent or adult is also grieving,

another caring adult may be needed to comfort and answer questions that the child may have.

Family and friends are a good source of support to help you deal with a loss. Books and support groups are also good resources. Professionals that can help children and adolescents deal with death include a clergyman, priest, minister or rabbi; school counselors; a psychologist or psychiatrist; and a physician.

When to seek professional help?

It is important to monitor behaviors that indicate a child or adolescent is having difficulties dealing with a loss. Red flags indicating professional help is needed include not wanting to go to school or a drop in grades; inability to sleep or eat; panic attacks; continued denial or feeling responsible for the death; and extreme behaviors such as suicide threats, destructive acts, substance abuse, complete isolation from friends and family or using sex to numb pain.



How Children and Teens Understand Death

Newborn to Three-Year-Olds

Child's Perception

- Senses the emotional state of the adults around them.
- May need help in understanding what “dead” means, understanding cause of death and what happens to the body.
- May exhibit changes in eating, nursing patterns, crying and bowel and bladder movements.
- May exhibit aggressive behavior.
- Depends on nonverbal communication: physical care, affection and reassurance.

Adult Support

- Keep normal routines and structure whenever possible.
- Read books about death and loss.
- Be verbally and physically reassuring and affectionate.
- Use deaths that most children experience to explain and help the child understand (e.g., death of a pet).
- Explain in a language the child will understand.
- Exhibit healthy coping behaviors.

Three- to Six-Year-Olds

Child's Perception

- Thinks that death is temporary or reversible; believes that loved ones who die will come back.
- Believes thoughts and actions may have caused death or can bring the deceased back.
- Senses the emotional state of the adults around him/her.
- May exhibit regressive behaviors such as bed-wetting and thumb sucking.
- May exhibit aggressive behavior.
- Shows sadness for short periods of time.
- Escapes into play.
- May exhibit changes in sleeping patterns or have bad dreams and other symptoms like stomachache or headache.
- May not understand a concept like “heaven.”
- Will ask questions repeatedly.
- Craves affection and physical contact.

Adult Support

- Keep normal routine and structure whenever possible.
- Read books about death and loss.
- Help child talk about fear and feelings.



- Make sure the child does not feel responsible for the death and explain death in the child’s language; be concrete and avoid statements such as “gone to sleep” or “gone away.”
- Look for and deal with thinking that death is temporary.
- Exhibit healthy coping behaviors.

Six- to Nine-Year-Olds

Child’s Perception

- Begins to understand the finality of death.
- Connects death with violence.
- Asks questions.
- May show signs of guilt and blame self for death.
- May show increased aggression.
- May have physical complaints such as as headache and stomachache.
- May view death as something that “comes to get you” or “something you catch.”
- May possibly be fascinated by things like how the deceased will eat, breathe or how they look.
- May have school phobia.
- May still have difficulty understanding the meaning of “heaven.”

Adult Support

- Talk with child and answer questions honestly.
- Make sure the child does not feel responsible.
- Provide opportunities to express feelings such as play and art.
- Help them with positive memories of the deceased.
- Explain in a language the child understands.
- Provide reassurance.
- Exhibit healthy coping behaviors.

Nine- to Thirteen-Year-Olds

Child’s Perception

- More aware of the finality of death.
- Concerns about how death will impact him/her.
- Reluctant to open up.
- Asks fewer questions.
- Exhibits more independence, but still needs the support of adults.
- May show delayed reaction to death.
- May show changes in relationships with friends.
- May have increased anger and guilt.
- May exhibit school phobia.
- May show signs that he or she fears his/her own death or death of a parent.
- May have physical complaints.

Adult Support

- Encourage discussion and provide ways to express feelings.
- Be honest.
- Avoid having the child take on adult responsibilities; avoid statements such as, “You’re the man of the house now.”
- Provide reassurance.
- Exhibit healthy coping behaviors.

Thirteen- to Eighteen-Year-Olds

Teen’s Perception

- May function as if the death really did not happen. Displays signs of numbness, shock and disbelief
- May show signs of guilt.
- May have thoughts of suicide as a way to escape the pain or join the loved one.
- May become sexually active as a way to feel close to someone or as a distraction from the pain.
- May attempt to numb the pain by drinking or taking drugs.
- May exhibit signs of anger.
- May grieve in private.
- May increase risk-taking behaviors.
- May be reluctant to open up or may show indifference to protect against feelings.
- May want to grieve with peers and not adults.
- May have physical complaints.
- May question religious/spiritual beliefs.



Adult Support

- Be available, don’t push.
- Help share special memories of the deceased.
- Help him/her find friends or other trusted adults that will support his/her feelings.
- Find professional help, if necessary.
- Provide opportunities to express grief, such as writing a letter to the deceased.
- Do not romanticize death.
- Discuss feelings of helplessness.
- Exhibit healthy coping behaviors.

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Charles L. Norman, Dean