

# The Death Experience: Helping Parents Understand Childhood Grief

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## Introduction

People from American culture often have a difficult time discussing death and dealing with grief because it is a somber topic with many different emotions attached to it (Willis, 2002). However, despite this difficulty, death is a topic that cannot be avoided; at some point in time, everyone will experience the loss of someone through death. Even children may experience the loss of someone they love or are close to, or they may even be the one who is dying of a terminal illness. Parents and family members often seek resources in order to better understand how to help children cope with death as they seek to find answers to their children's questions about death and the dying process.

## Children's Concepts of Death

Parents often wonder how much their children are able to understand about death and dying (Willis, 2002). Children as young as one year of age experience separation anxiety when a loved one is gone. Although they do not understand death, their distress is real when someone they are close to does not return (Wolfelt, 1996).

A child's understanding of death and what happens when people die is influenced mostly by individual cognitive ability, age and death experience (Hunter and Smith, 2008). Children aged two to five often use magical thinking (Wolfelt, 1996). They may not understand that death is final and might ask when a loved one will return, along with asking questions about how the dead person eats, drinks and sleeps. School-aged children are

interested in the physical aspects of death and dying. They wonder what happens to the body after death and recognize that death may occur from a wide range of causes. By the age of nine, most children recognize that death is irreversible (Childers & Wimmer, 1971). Children of this age know that everyone eventually dies, but they don't think it will happen to them anytime soon.

Adolescents usually have an adult conceptualization of death, but like younger children, believe it won't happen to them (Perschy, 2004). Also they often have an "I'm invincible" attitude that leads to risk-taking behavior (Perschy, 2004). They may joke about death to cover their uneasiness.

Children's concepts about death and dying are influenced by the day-to-day experiences in their lives, as well as exposure to death and conversations about what happens to people when they die (Hunter & Smith, 2008). The deaths of pets or loved ones can influence children's beliefs and understanding about death and dying (Kroen, 1996). Another way children are exposed to death is through television. This exposure is often violent or highly distorted. Children's literature is another medium influencing their concepts of death. In addition, children's religious and cultural backgrounds are strong influences on their understanding of death and dying (Bering, Blasi & Bjorklund, 2005).

When children ask questions concerning death, they are looking for answers. Faulty communication, such as saying that a person has

“gone to sleep,” only confuses them. Parents should make it clear to children that the person has died and cannot come back. Parents and/or close family members are very important sources in helping children understand death and dying.

### **The Dying Child**

When children are diagnosed with a terminal illness, parents are often in a state of shock, and the family may be functioning in a state of crisis. Open communication is essential for adequate coping by family members, as well as the sick child.

Sometimes parents may be unsure of how much information to discuss or share with others.

Children know that there is something wrong, and honesty about what is occurring is important (Dunlop, 2008). Keeping open communication with a terminally ill child will help parents establish and maintain a sense of trust with each other.

Sometimes simple explanations about the illness that fit in with what the child already knows is all that is necessary. Communication is also more effective when it takes place on the child’s level of understanding.

Children who are diagnosed with terminal illnesses may have a hard time expressing their feelings. They may feel like they are a burden on those taking care of them, which can create feelings of guilt. They often desire to express their feelings associated with dying. It is especially important that caregivers allow terminally ill children to express what they are feeling (Dunlop, 2008). When children can share how they feel, it allows them to be able to mourn their own personal loss.

It is not only the illness and treatments that can cause anxiety in children with a terminal illness, but also the changed relationships with friends and family. Children can feel emotionally isolated from their friends and family. Helping them connect to family, friends and their outside social settings will allow them to feel like they still belong.

A great burden facing children who are dying is the uncertainty about the prognosis and ultimate outcome of their illnesses. Children have many concerns about dying. Not knowing when death will occur or what will happen after they die can be a source of anxiety for them (Dunlop, 2008). Trying to hide the facts from a child who is terminally ill only makes that child more anxious and afraid of the unknown. It is better to be open

and honest with the child about the illness in a way that he or she can best understand (Kroen, 1996).

Children who are dying are also faced with giving up their independence and depending on their family more and more. Grief and anger are normal emotions that a child may experience at this time. Terminally ill children need to be treated with dignity, warmth and respect. Parents and other family members who the child is close to are their greatest support. They need the assurance that someone will always be there for them. Having someone close is one of the most important aspects to their well-being.

### **Childhood Mourning**

The type of grief that children express when someone close to them dies is largely dependent on their age and stage of development. Younger children tend to react in accordance with the emotions that are expressed within the family, whereas older children often show their own unique grief (Willis, 2002). With parents grieving deeply themselves, children can feel isolated. Children need to be able to show their emotions as well. They need someone they can turn to in order to express their grief for the loved one who has died. Children should also be encouraged to attend the funeral, if one is held, as part of the process of facing the feelings of loss associated with the person who has died.

It is normal for children to express feelings of anger, guilt and despair after losing a loved one (Kubler-Ross, 1997). They should be encouraged to express these emotions without feeling ashamed or that they are being looked down upon. Parents might feel uneasy seeing their children express these intense emotions, but they should not hinder the expression of their children’s feelings. Different feelings may come and go; periods of sad feelings may be interrupted by periods of playing and laughing. This is often referred to as “on and off grief.” Behavior problems, both at home and school, can cause parents to become impatient with their children, but they should remain understanding of their children’s needs to express their feelings and encourage them to express them appropriately (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2005). Parents can support their children through this trying time in their lives by encouraging open communication, being patient and being there for their children emotionally.

Children grieve in their own unique ways. Their period of grieving can extend over a period of months and even years. Especially at first, eating, sleeping and other behaviors may be altered (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2005). As time goes by though, with the support of caring adults, children are better able to cope with the loss of a loved one. Parents and loved ones should assist children in understanding the basic concepts of death and grief as they would other topics and situations that children face in their daily lives. Inviting children to express what they are thinking and feeling is important when experiencing the loss of a loved one (Kroen, 1996).

## Summary

In years past children were exposed to death in the home as a normal part of growing up. However, with recent advances in technology, the experience of death and dying has moved from the home setting into medical facilities like hospitals and care centers. Because of these changes, children are less likely to experience death as a close and personal exchange.

Many parents are concerned about their children and want to prevent them from experiencing the harsh realities of death and dying. However, trying to protect children from that which is natural can actually end up delaying their ability to acquire a true understanding of death. By answering children's questions about life and death, parents and family members can help children increase their understanding of death and clearing up misconceptions.

Parents can be the most important source of information for their children, along with close family members, if it is the parents that children lose to death. Explanations that are simple, honest and that take place on their level of understanding are most appropriate when communicating about death with children. Encouraging children to express what they are feeling when dealing with

death and loss can help them develop the coping skills necessary to face other difficult crises and events later on in life (Kroen, 1996).

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