

# How do you talk to children about death?

--Bruce Conley

Children need caring adults to accept and name their losses and to provide them with information in a manner that matches their ability to understand. When considering these ideas, remember to mold them to each individual child. Factors to consider are age in years, maturity, personality, cognitive ability, past experiences with loss and death and the religious and social beliefs that surround the child.

Children gain life skills by being included in life events, even painful events such as the death of a loved one. Children gain competency by observing, through play, and by being involved. Children need to be involved to the extent that they choose and to be given flexible, open-ended choices. Children can usually be counted on to limit their involvement to fit their tolerance for dealing with situations and emotions.

## Guidelines for discussing the death of a loved one with children

**1. In clear words tell that the death has happened.** Be specific and literal. Use factual information to explain what death means. This is important for young children who may not understand that death is permanent and irreversible. An example: "When someone dies it means that their body can no longer work. Their heart stops working and they don't breathe anymore. They don't have to eat or sleep and they no longer see anything or get hungry. They are never too cold or too hot. Nothing hurts them because they no longer feel anything at all. They don't need their body anymore."

**2. Tell how the death happened.** Briefly tell where and how the death happened and what the cause of death was.

**3. Reassure children that a wide range of reactions is acceptable and normal.** All feelings are normal. Feelings about

death often seem strange, confusing, intense or mixed up. People can feel sick, sad, silly, mad or bad. Describe common thoughts and physical reactions. Encourage children to express their thoughts and feelings through words, drawings, and where possible, safe physical release. Let children know that adults have these thoughts and feelings also and that people who are grieving the same loss often react very differently.

**4. Explain that sometimes people don't feel much at all.** Sometimes when a death happens our bodies feel numb. Even if adults around you are showing a lot of feelings, it's okay if you don't feel the same way. Everyone is different.

**5. Tell where the body has been taken and what will be done with the body.** Tell briefly about funeral customs, wakes and visitations.

**6. Give information about who will provide care and intimacy.** Tell children who will answer their questions, provide them with love, meals, emotional support, play time and daily care. Check to see that children know who the person(s) is that will be present for them and that they feel comfortable with this person(s).

**7. Share that life has meaning and will not be forgotten.** Let children know that life has value and that the person who has died will be remembered. Share what opportunities there will be to honor and remember the person who has died, Ask for suggestions.

**8. Tell how they can be involved in remembrance or burial ceremonies.** Briefly explain what services or ceremonies there will be and how the child can participate if they wish. Explain what to expect when they view the body. This is a time when words may lack meaning, but hugs, handshakes and sharing memories can help a lot.

**9. Give ongoing information as requested and repeat the information above.** Children may by repetition; be prepared to repeat information or answer questions to clarify understanding.

**10. Empower children with choice and control.** As much as possible involve children in decision-making. Ask them about the level of involvement they wish to have. Since they may change their minds, ask more than once.

**11. Recognize and support a child's need for both solitude and support.** Children should not be coerced to talk about death or to participate in burial practices. At times their ability to create distance and maintain hope is effective coping.