

## Helping Children Understand Death by Karen Nilsen

The days surrounding a death can be a confusing and disorienting time for young children. Altered daily routines and unfamiliar sights and sounds can be difficult for them to understand and cope with. Children notice even the most subtle changes in their routines and surroundings. We must validate their feelings and encourage them to share their thoughts, fears, and observations of the events taking place around them.

Most important, I believe, is to first find out what your child already knows about death, then what they *think* they know, and then provide the facts in simple, honest, terms.

Explaining death to children is similar to talking to kids about sex, except that many parents find death a more difficult topic. We often use euphemisms such as "passed away" "Grandpa is sleeping," or "we lost Grandma" instead of the words "dead" and "died." These softened explanations can cause fears in a young child that they too may get lost or go down for a nap and never wake up. Or worse yet, as 4-year-old Clayton asked, "What if I go to sleep and wake up in a casket like my Grandpa?"

Children see the evidence that living things die in many areas of their lives. They see and hear about it on the television, in movies--even cartoons, and on an ordinary walk in the park or to school, e.g., : a dead bird, a squirrel, or other small animal. They notice the change of the seasons as plants and trees appear to wither and die.

They may have experienced the death of a pet. It's hard not to notice the difference between a live goldfish and one floating motionless on the top of the fish bowl. Death causes changes in a living thing. Very young children may not be able to fully comprehend the complexities, but they are aware that death looks and feels different.

If possible, begin a dialogue with your child about how all living things

on this earth will die someday. Death is a reality; we can't hide it from our children. It is the circle of life. If the situation arises where a plant, pet or animal dies, allow the child to investigate it, see it, touch it, even smell it.

With an accepting adult standing close by or holding a child while he/she discovers death on the sidewalk, children often adopt the attitude and the emotion of the adult. Talk about feelings. Share your feelings with your child. Tell him that when someone or something dies, we might feel sad, mad, or confused. And sometimes we might even cry--and that's okay.

Explain the difference between an "alive" bird and a dead one. When the bird was alive, he could fly, and sing, and eat worms, but now, his body has died. It doesn't work anymore. He cannot see, or hear, or move. His body is dead. You may even hold a "funeral ceremony" for the animal. Explain that a funeral is a time to say good-bye. It is a Special Time to Always Remember.

Another readily available example in a child's world is a simple flower. You can show the child a living flower. Point out its qualities of life--e.g., vibrant color, soft velvety petals, strong sturdy stem and enjoyable fragrance. If you want, you may even discuss the flower's purpose here on earth. It brings us joy, brightens a room, provides food for insects and bees, etc. Then show the child a flower that has died. Compare its qualities to the living flower. The flower has *changed*. Allow the child to touch and smell the flower.

When talking to a child about the death of a family member or friend, remind them that like the flower, or bird, or pet, the body of their loved one has changed. It cannot see, or hear, or move. Look through photo albums, talk about special memories and their relationship with the deceased.

Read books available for children. Acknowledge your child's feelings. Reassure them that sad and mad feelings are normal and okay. Allow them to attend the funeral or memorial service for their special person.

Encourage them to write a letter or draw a picture that can be placed in the casket or displayed near the urn

You may want to talk about your family's faith tradition. Heaven is another concept which is a life long learning process.

Death IS a frightening concept for all of us. But, with loving explanations, acceptance of feelings and an opportunity to express those feelings, a child can begin to understand that death is a part of life.