

Telling Children of the Death of a Loved One

By HopkinsHealth, providing consumer health information from the Johns Hopkins University and Health System

Even if children are not told that someone they love is dying, they will understand something is wrong simply because of the way the adults in the house are behaving. There are more phone calls. The adults they trust whisper and become upset, though they may insist nothing is wrong. Because children will inevitably understand that they are not being told important information, they may begin to imagine the worst. For this reason, it is advisable to inform them about what is going on, without giving them more information than they can process. Keep the facts simple and listen to their questions.

Too much explanation is difficult for younger children, and it will begin to confuse and frighten them unnecessarily. The child should always be assured that the dying friend or relative will be made comfortable, that he will not be left alone, that he will have what he needs, and that he will not be left to suffer.

The grieving process varies greatly depending on the age, maturity and support system of the child. If the mother of a newborn or very young infant dies, the infant may cry and become distressed because his basic needs, such as nursing and being held, are not being met. Surrogate mothering may ease the infant's suffering. Infants from 4 months to 2½ years of age may express ongoing, nonspecific distress when their mother dies. These are the earliest manifestations of grief.

When another family member dies, the infant will react according to the mother's reactions. Although a few children from the age of 2½ years on experience grief responses similar to those of adults, most do not and may not be able to verbalize their feelings and memories of the deceased. Children between the ages of 2 and 5 may have grief responses that are variable and intermittent. Lack of a noticeable emotional reaction does not mean the child is not grieving.

If a parent dies, a young child will worry about the survival of the other parent. A child experiences the loss of a parent as abandonment or desertion, so it is important to reassure a child that the deceased parent loved him. Avoid using euphemisms when referring to death, and always speak truthfully. The child may react to grief by clinging, misbehaving or withdrawing. Offer comfort and support, and be open to questions about death and loss.

Between the ages of 5 and 8, a child will have a clearer understanding of death but will not know how to cope with his feelings of grief. Children in this age group often behave as if nothing has happened, as a way of protecting themselves from the force of their feelings. Talking to a favorite teacher or a counselor may help the child express grief. The child should also be reassured that nothing he did or thought caused the parent's death.

Children between the ages of about 8 to 12 may be shocked by death, or they may react by being anxious and distressed or by denying the death occurred. Children in this age group are still unable to accept the finality of death and loss; they may yearn for their dead parent, yet repress this yearning because they consider it childish. A child may also feel anger and express it through difficult behavior. Difficult behavior should not be punished but instead should be seen as a plea for help. Children need to share their complex and often conflicting feelings and should be encouraged to do so.

Adolescents often feel helpless and frightened when they experience the death of a parent and may retreat back into childhood in search of protection from the consequences of death and loss. Such feelings may result in ongoing depression. Adolescents are threatened by mortality and also are fearful of losing control of their intense emotions. The adolescent may respond to grief by acting out, for example, performing poorly in school or engaging in indiscriminate sexual activity. Adolescents may also feel conflicted about expressing their feelings because they feel alienated from the adults around them. An adolescent should be encouraged to share feelings with friends, teachers, a favorite coach or a mentor.

Children also need to share their own grief and have their grief acknowledged. They need to talk about death, to share their ideas about death and to be reassured that the death of a loved one does not mean that other family members will also die soon. Teaching children about the ritual and ceremony surrounding death is also important, although younger children and some older children may not feel comfortable attending funeral services or participating in extended periods of mourning. As much as possible, children should be allowed to decide how they wish to mourn their loved one and commemorate the death. Writing a poem, drawing a picture or visiting a gravesite with flowers can often be more helpful to a grieving child than attending a funeral service.

If parents do not inform their children about illness, dying and death, they may be leaving these very important aspects of living to become part of the child's fertile imagination, where they may become terrifying and distorted if they are left unexplained.

When we do not share information about death or inform children of the death of a loved one, we begin to teach them that the best way to cope with pain and suffering is to ignore or avoid it, which does not prepare a child to manage the inevitable challenges of life. Pain and loss are unavoidable, and learning how to face them openly and constructively can be an important aspect in the growth and development of a child.