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# Do You Have Tips On Explaining Death To A Child?

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#### A weekly question/answer column

## **Do You Have Tips On Explaining Death To A Child?**

Glen Jenson\* answers:

How death and dying are discussed in the younger years of a child's life may well determine how well the child is able to handle grief and sorrow in the future. If properly handled in family discussions, this can be a growth-producing and relationship-bonding experience for the child and the parent. When a loved one does die, consider these ideas for discussing death with the child.

- Tell the child as soon as possible that the person they love has died. It is usually better that the child be told of the death by someone close.
- The child should be given an honest explanation of the death and the events that lead to it. Statements like "Grandfather has gone to sleep," or "He was so sick," are not good explanations because children sleep and get sick. It is better to indicate that a certain organ was not functioning properly and as a result the loved one died. You might want to indicate that when we get old this often happens. It is important to share with the child how the person died so the child does not develop magical thinking that could include them being the cause of death.
- Keep in mind during your discussions about death that children were not born with a fear of death. Any fears they have or later develop are things they have learned since birth. Be careful not to instill any fears about the death and dying process.
- Tell the child that it is normal to feel sad and wish that the loved person had not died. Share with the child that you, too, have those same feelings.
- As soon as possible, a responsible adult should explain their beliefs about death and what has happened to the loved one. A religious explanation is often very helpful for a child. It is wise for parents to think this out beforehand so they know what they will tell their child about death. The child should be invited to ask questions and be given a chance to share concerns and fears. There will likely need to be multiple discussions.
- Children who are old enough to talk and understand feelings along with being able to sit still for the length of a funeral should be included in the service and other rituals associated with it. Professional funeral directors will often visit with children about death and give them the opportunity to ask questions as well as see the deceased loved one in the casket. They will explain what a dead person looks like and how their body feels. This is often very helpful to remove some of the fears of death.
- Help the child remember the deceased person by establishing memories that are pleasant and uplifting. It is appropriate to help them collect memento and stimulate recollections of the loved one who has died. Discussions need to be held in the days and months ahead to instill in the mind of the child the good attributes of the person who died.

* Glen O. Jenson is Utah State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist