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Helping Children Understand and Cope with Death

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Introduction

To mention the words, children and death, in the same breath is almost inconceivable. The one is life, and sunshine, and laughter. The other is closure, and darkness, and tears. Yet death touches each one of us, including children. To understand life is to understand that there is also death, and as children grow and develop, they observe that what lives must also die.

Children's Concepts of Death

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

Children aged two to seven often use magical thinking. They picture death as something personal, such as a ghost. They don't understand that death is final and may ask when the loved one will return. Although they may be told that people are buried after death, they picture life going on. They wonder how people spend their time down there. How do they eat, drink, and sleep?

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, virtually all children recognize that death is irreversible. Children of this age know that everyone eventually dies, but they don't think it will happen to them any time soon. They are also somewhat superstitious and may think that if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, they might die.

Adolescents usually have a mature concept of death, but like younger children, believe it won't happen to them. They often have an "I'm invincible" attitude that leads to risk-taking behavior. They may joke about death to cover their uneasiness.

All children's concepts about death and dying are influenced by the day to day experiences in their lives. The death of a pet or a loved one influences belief and understanding about death and dying. Television also exposes children to death, although it may be violent or highly distorted. Children's literature is another medium influencing their concepts of death.

Finally, children's religious and cultural background are a strong influence on their understanding of death and dying.

When children ask questions concerning death, they are entitled to straightforward answers. Faulty communication, such as saying that a person has "gone to sleep," only confuses the child. Evasive answers are not helpful either. Parents should make it clear to the child that the person has died, has been buried, and cannot come back. Parents are the most important source in helping children understand death and dying.

When a Loved One Dies

The most traumatic event in a child's life is to experience the death of a parent, for the child's main source of support is gone. The child may feel somehow responsible for the parent's death, and the words "You are mean!" or "I wish you were dead!" spoken in the heat of childhood anger, may come back to haunt the child. Feelings of anger, guilt, and despair are common.

When a sibling dies, problems of a different sort arise. If the brother or sister has been ill for a long period of time, the surviving child may have felt neglected by the parents. The feeling of relief in having the parents back may be accompanied by feelings of guilt. The child may also feel guilty in being the one who is still alive.

Parents may consciously or unconsciously blame the surviving child for the sibling's death, or the remaining child may be expected to take the dead child's place. The parents may expect the surviving child to live up to the expectations held for the child who has died. Either situation places an almost intolerable burden upon the living child.

The Dying Child

When children are diagnosed with a fatal illness, a crisis often occurs in the family. Parents are often in a state of shock, and family functioning may be in a turmoil. Open communication is essential for adequate coping by family members, as well as the sick child, yet parents may be unsure about how much information, if any, to discuss or share with others. Parents may take elaborate precautions to keep their children's condition secret, but the secret is no secret. Children know deep inside that there is something the matter.

It is important for parents to establish a sense of trust in their children. Sometimes simple explanations about the illness that fit in with what the children already know is all that is necessary. Also, communication is more effective when it takes place on the children's level of understanding.

It is especially important that children be able to share their thoughts about death and the process of dying. Critically ill children may feel guilty and apologetic for the burden they are placing on others, and this may interfere with their ability to express legitimate anger and frustration. The majority of children wish to express themselves and will do so if given the opportunity. When children are free to talk about their feelings, it allows them the opportunity to mourn their personal loss. Otherwise, they are isolated with their feelings and don't receive the emotional support they so desperately need.

It is not only the illness and treatments that cause anxiety in these children, but also the changed relationships with friends and family. Children may feel emotionally isolated from their friends and family. Being connected to family, friends, and school help these children feel that they still belong.

The greatest burden facing these young people is the uncertainty of the prognosis and ultimate outcome of their illnesses. Children have many concerns about dying. Not knowing when death will occur, and the unknown aspects of the hereafter, may be sources of anxiety. Dying children are also faced with giving up their independence little by little and depending upon their parents more and more. Grief and anger are normal emotions at this time. Terminally

ill children need to be treated with dignity, warmth, and respect. Parents are their children's greatest support. These children need the assurance that someone will always be there for them. The presence of someone close to them is most important to their well-being.

Childhood Mourning

Grieving in childhood is largely dependent upon the age and stage of development of the child. Younger children react to the emotional turmoil in the family, while older children show independent grief. Parents may be grieving so deeply themselves, that the children are forgotten. Children need to be allowed to grieve for a lost loved one. They should be allowed to attend the funeral if they want to, for the "letting go" process often begins at the funeral.

Feelings of anger, guilt, and despair are normal. Children need the opportunity to express these feelings unashamedly. Parents may be shocked by the seemingly inappropriate behavior of young children following the death of a family member. Because of their immature concepts of death, young children simply don't realize that the one who has died cannot come back. Therefore, feelings of sadness may be interrupted by periods of playing and laughing. Behavior problems may show up later, both at home and at school, causing parents to become impatient with their children. Behavior problems may be symptoms of distress and grief. Therefore, children should not be censured for their seemingly inappropriate behavior. Rather, parents can support their children through this trying time in their lives by encouraging open communication, being patient and understanding, and just being there for their children.

Children are capable of grieving deeply. Their period of mourning is similar to adults' grieving in that it may extend over a period of months. Eating, sleeping, and behavior patterns are altered. As time goes by, with the support of caring adults, children are better able to cope with the loss.

Summary

In years past, children were more often exposed to death as a normal part of their growing up. Medical advances and technology, have moved death from the home setting into the medical arena. Because of these changes, children rarely experience death in a personal way today.

Parents are concerned about their children and want to shield them from the harsh realistic aspects of death and dying. In reality, this is impossible. Trying to protect children from that which is natural and inevitable, is detrimental to their understanding. Children have questions about life and death, and adults can do much to clear up misconceptions and add to children's understanding.

Parents are the most important source of information for their children. Good communication between parents and children will help clarify questions children have about death and dying. Explanations that are simple, honest, and taking place on the children's level of understanding are most appropriate.

In the past decade, parents have become much more open in teaching their children about the birthing process and other important life events. Death is a natural part of life; the other end of the spectrum from birth. Perhaps the time has now come for parents to teach their children not only how life begins—but also how it ends.

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