

Parent & Teacher Tips

Family Centre

Where Children Come First



Talking to Children About Death

Communication about death, as with all communication, is easier when a child or teen feels that they have our permission to talk about the subject and believes we are sincerely interested in their views and questions. Encourage them to communicate by listening attentively, respecting their views, and answering their questions honestly.

Communication

Every young person is an individual.

Communication about death depends on their age and their own experiences. It is not always easy to “hear” what a young person is really asking.

Sometimes it may be necessary to respond to a question with a question in order to fully understand the young person’s concern. A young person often feels guilty and angry when they lose a close family member or friend. They need reassurance that they have been, and will continue to be, loved and cared for. Young people need support and understanding through this grief process and permission to show their feelings openly and freely.

Needs of a Grieving Young Person:

- Information that is clear and understandable at their development level.
- To be reassured that their basic needs will be met.
- To be reassured when grieving by adults is intense.
- Help with exploring fantasies about death, afterlife, and related issues.
- To be able to have and express their own thoughts and behaviors, especially when different from significant adults.

Signals for Attention from a Grieving Young Person:

- Marked change in school performance, poor grades despite trying very hard.
- A lot of worry or anxiety manifested by refusing to go to school, sleep difficulties, change in appetite or reduction in typical activities
- Not talking about the person or the death, physically avoiding mention of the deceased.
- Frequent angry outbursts, unexplainable temper tantrums or continual disobedience
- Withdrawing from friends and/or family, long term absence of emotion
- Many complaints of physical ailments

Typical Characteristic of Grief in Early Adolescents, Ages 9-12 Years Old:

- Develops morality - strong sense of good and bad behavior
- Begins an interest in biological factors of death
- Theorizes: People die to make room for new people
- Asks more about “what happened”
- Questions relationship changes caused by death, life changes
- Worries about who provides and cares for them
- May regress to an earlier stage
- Interested in spiritual aspects of death

Helping your Child Deal with Death

When talking about death, use simple, clear words. To break the news that someone has died, approach your child in a caring way. Use words that are simple and direct. For example, "I have some sad news to tell you." Pause to give your child a moment to take in your words.

Listen and comfort. Every child reacts differently to learning that a loved one has died. Some kids cry. Some ask questions. Others seem not to react at all. That's OK. Stay with your child to offer hugs or reassurance. Answer your child's questions or just be together for a few minutes.

Put emotions into words. Encourage kids to say what they're thinking and feeling in the days, weeks, and months following the loss. Talk about your own feelings: It helps kids be aware of and feel comfortable with theirs. Say things like, "I know you're feeling very sad. I'm sad, too."

Tell your child what to expect. If the death of a loved one means changes in your child's life, head off any worries or fears by explaining what will happen.

Talk about funerals and rituals. Allow children to join in rituals like viewings, funerals, or memorial services. Explain what happens after the service as a way to show that people will feel better. Focusing on the happy memories and on the good feeling helps people start to feel better."

Respond to emotions with comfort and reassurance. Notice if your child seems sad, worried, or upset in other ways. Ask about feelings and listen. Let your child know that it takes time to feel better after someone dies. Some kids may temporarily have trouble concentrating or sleeping, or have fears or worries. Support groups and counseling can help kids who need more support.

Help your child feel better. Provide the comfort your child needs, but don't dwell on sad feelings. After a few minutes of talking and listening, shift to an activity or topic that helps your child feel a little better. Play, make art, cook, or go somewhere together.

Give your child time to heal from the loss. Grief is a process that happens over time. Be sure to have ongoing conversations to see how your child is feeling and doing. Healing doesn't mean forgetting about the loved one. It means remembering the person with love, and letting loving memories stir good feelings that support us as we go on to enjoy life.

Although there are common feelings, thoughts, and challenges that most who are grieving will experience, each person who grieves will also experience grief in his/her own unique way. We encourage you to take time to communicate with your young person to provide a safe space for them to share their thoughts and feelings.

If you would like more information on this topic you can contact Family Centre and ask to speak with a Counselling Team Screener at 232-1116.