

Helping Children Deal with Death

Children understand death based on their age, development, and past dealings with death. Children also learn about death by watching how friends and family cope with it. Be honest with your child and talk to them early to help them begin to understand and cope with death.

This handout will tell you how children understand and cope with death based on age.

Children 0 to 2 Years Old

Understanding of Death

- Aware of changes going on around them
- Affected by physical and emotional changes in caregivers

Common Behaviors

- Irritable and clingy
- Trouble sleeping

How to Help

- Create a calm environment.
- Choose a small group of caregivers.
- Keep the same eating and sleeping routines.

Children 2 to 5 Years Old

Understanding of Death

- Death is temporary and can be reversed
- Based on family's actions and emotions
- Not likely to think about what death means for the future

Common Behaviors

- Clingy
- Bedwetting
- Playful
- Cheerful
- Play pretend death

What to Say

- Avoid words and phrases such as "sleeping" or "passed away."
- Use the words death, dying, and dead: Example: "Your Mom's heart was not working, and she died."
- Use child's interests to help you explain: Example: "Your Dad can't eat like you can; he can't breathe air to play at the park like you can."
- Give simple and honest answers to questions.
- Child may ask the same questions, answer the same way every time.

How to Help

- Let child play at home, school, and daycare.
- Talk about child's feelings: Example: "It is ok to be sad or cry."
- Express some of your feelings in front of your child. Example: "I am sad, too."
- Allow safe expression of feelings through art and play.
- Keep your child's routines, like going to school or daycare.

Children 6 to 12 Years Old

Understanding of Death

- Begin to understand that death is final and cannot be reversed
- Younger children may think of death as something that happens to others
- Older children may worry death will happen to them
- Older children may worry about other family and friends dying

Common Behaviors

- May have many questions about details of death and dying
- May think something they said or did caused death
- Nightmares
- May act tough, naughty, funny, or sad at home or school

What to Say

- Find out what child already knows. Example: “Why is Dad in the hospital?”
- Be honest when you answer your child’s questions.
- Ask about thoughts. Example: What do you think about that?”
- Ask about feelings. Example: “How are you feeling about what you’ve heard about your Dad?”

Common Behaviors

- Child may deny that death will happen.
- Child may feel or say, “Death will not ever happen to me.”
- Child may not show emotions.
- Child may reach out to friends for support instead of family.
- Child may want to spend less time with family.

How to Help

- Give honest answers to questions.
- Correct confusion child may have about death.
- Expect child to be moody or sad at times.
- Keep child involved in interests to help express feelings (ex. school, sports, art).
- Ask if child would like to visit loved one in the hospital.
- Ask if child would like to help create family memorials.

Children 13 to 18 years old

Understanding of Death

- Death is final and can happen to anybody
- Past experience with death may affect coping with current and future deaths
- Thinks about the future without the deceased family member
- Question learned afterlife beliefs (ex. Heaven)

Common Behaviors

- Child may deny that death will happen.
- Child may feel or say, “Death will not ever happen to me.”
- Child may not show emotions.
- Child may reach out to friends for support instead of family.
- Child may want to spend less time with family.

What to Say

- Ask, “What would you like to know?”
- Give honest answers to questions.
- Be ready to talk or listen.

How to Help

- Ask if child would like to be a part of end of life process of loved one.
- Ask child to help create family memorials and rituals.
- Support child to get support from friends and school.
- Explain importance of caring for self during the death of a loved one.
- Respect if child needs a break from talking about death or their environment.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 9/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8009