**Children Want To Know!**

By Sandra L. Graves, Ph.D.

Years ago, Art Linkletter (television host and author) wrote a book called *Kids Say the Darndest Things.* When we talk to children as grief counselors, we are daily reminded of his tremendous respect for the openness and honesty of children. They do ask the darndest questions.

There are a few good books out on the subject of talking with children about death. Unfortunately, most questions our children ask are spontaneous and immediate. Those books may not be handy at the time. Here are a few brief “rules of thumb” to remember when a child asks you questions about the person you loved who is dying or has died:

1. Be aware that children do not view death in the same way we do. They have so much life ahead of them! Death is something on television. But when they are touched by death in their own family, they have a tremendous need to gain some understanding of the subject.

2. The younger children are often confused with the terms we use to describe death, such as “lost,” “gone,” “went to Heaven.” I had one little boy who was told by his parents they had “lost” his baby sister, and he began to look for her under the couch and chairs!

   Use the word dead or death, not “asleep” or “at rest.” Some children are frightened to sleep or rest afterwards, for fear they will soon be among the missing.

3. Children are not being morbid when they ask about details of what happens to the body after death. They are very concerned about what specifically is involved with cremation, burial, caskets, and physical changes in the body, deterioration, embalming, and a thousand other questions we would prefer not to hear. If you can distance yourself from the questions thinking in terms of death in general and not about the loved one who has died, you may find it easier to answer their questions.

4. When questions go unanswered or are answered vaguely, children tend to use their imagination to find the answers they seek. Often these answers are very inaccurate. Many times the things they make up are very frightening to them. Remember, the unknown is often much worse than reality!

5. Find the warmth and humor in yourself as you seriously answer your children’s questions. Their interest is out of love. Sometimes you just have to grin and follow your answers with a hug.

Remember that children grieve, too. It is so easy for us in our pain to forget that their feelings run as deep as ours even though they may not show it. You may be tempted to try to hide your pain from your children in order to protect them, but instead, admit your grief and let children talk about theirs.

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**For Parents and Adults Supporting a Grieving Child:**

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Talking With A Child About Death

- Speak simply and honestly. Tell the truth, using words the child can understand. Avoid using abstract ideas, i.e. "Daddy went to sleep forever."
- Do not assume that a child is too young to understand.
- Use play, books, and videos: children often work through grief by behavior, not verbalization.
- Pick up cues from the child. Follow the lead of the child. Talk about the illness/death as the child indicates.
- Answer what the child asks. Let the child be in charge of what he/she is ready to hear. Children often ask the same questions repetitively. Continue to answer with patience.
- The child may not want to talk about death. Children process information as they are able, and what they do not understand at this time can be brought up later.
- "I don’t know" is an okay answer to a child’s question. Children appreciate and learn honesty.
- Make sure the child understands he/she did not cause the death by his/her angry thoughts or wishes.
- Reassure the child that one death does not mean another is on the way.
- Be aware that regression may occur in the child’s behavior; this is normal.
- Let the child know that crying is OK. Crying can help us adjust to the hurt we feel. Don’t be afraid to show your tears – your tears can give the child permission to cry when he/she needs to cry.
- Explain that death means the person will not come back to life, although dreams of the person are normal.
- Before and/or after a death the normal home routine is disrupted. Attempts by adults in the home to maintain some structure, rules and limits can provide a sense of security for the child.
- If you are unable to talk about illness/death with the child when he/she is ready, it is advisable to create an outlet for the child. Talking with someone who feels

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comfortable responding to the child’s questions may help; a friend, social worker, minister, support group, school counselor, nurse or physician may fill this need.

- Children often want concrete details of the death and of the body. They are not being morbid; they are developing their understanding. Answer simply and honestly.

- Create an environment that allows the child to express feelings and thoughts, a quiet place with play materials appropriate to age may help.

- Children have radar. They usually sense how their parents are feeling. Don’t be afraid to address your feelings with the child, i.e., “I’m sad because ______ died.”

- Do seek professional intervention (social worker, psychologist, support group) if you and/or your child are not coping well. Sometimes it takes the help of a professional or the help of other bereaved parents to help you through this difficult time.

- People experience loss throughout life; classmates move, parents divorce, pets die, events scheduled to happen are canceled. Losses, in addition to the loss of death, require the learned skills of processing and working through times of sadness.

- As adults experience the shock of death, so children experience a time of shock associated with death. This may include denial of the death, pretending that everything is normal, or refusal to talk about the loss.

- A child needs special attention to protect him/her from feelings such as abandonment, guilt and fear. Children often worry if their surviving parent will die, too.

- A child needs constant reassurance; hugs, love, and warmth.

- Speak to the child’s teacher. Explain what has happened so he/she can prepare the class. Be specific about what you want the classmates to be told. Tell your child what you have told the teacher so he/she will know what to expect, too.

- Children often work through the loss at each new developmental stage. For example, a preverbal child at the time of death may use newfound words when he/she becomes verbal to talk about his/her loss.

- Children grieve in spurts. Don’t be surprised if a child is feeling sad one minute and off playing the next.