

GUIDELINES FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

1. Do tell children immediately. Children should hear it from us.
2. Approach the discussion gently and lovingly in a voice that is warm, sympathetic and kind. HOW you say it is more important than WHAT you say.
3. Be authentic, be yourself; if you're sad let it show. We don't need to hide things or bottle up our feelings. Someone or something is gone and we feel badly because we care. Tears are okay, a natural thing (as long as we don't fall apart or get hysterical). It frightens children to see an adult out of control of their emotions. We can cry gently in our sadness and grief and be authentic. Death is hard to handle; it is a part of life.
4. Be realistic about grief; death hurts. It leaves a big hole in our lives when that person is gone. We are going to have our ups and downs. It's okay to feel sad and mad that they are gone and have left us.
5. Tell the cause of death.
6. When you are talking with children initially, pause from time to time to let them express their thoughts for you to observe and evaluate how they are taking it (from their non-verbal behavior). Watch for children's non-verbal response in the next few days or months.
7. Respect a child's individual response—each of us over time needs to find our own way. Let them vent the emotions of grief. It is okay to express tears, anger over the dead leaving us, the unfairness of it all. Guilt, denial, despair and protest are normal parts of the grief process.
8. Be prepared to repeat the explanation; death is a hard message to hear. Denial and numbness get in the way of hearing.
9. Let the child know that they will have questions and confusion about the death—we all have questions and you want him/her to come to you with feelings or things they want to talk about. We can talk about things that hurt.
10. Don't be afraid to say you don't know why. Death has many confusions for adults too. It is part of the mystery of life, and we have to deal with it the best we know how.
11. Pull together as a family for support. " We are together and we will come through this time together".
12. Realize that grief is a process and it can take a long time. It has its ups and downs, good times and bad. We can expect it, but eventually we do "heal".
13. Do give children the feeling that life will continue despite the fact that the dead will be remembered, that they will live in our hearts, that eventually (while things will be changed and different), we will go on. Give reassurance and hope.
14. When talking with children about death, here are three things you can say: "When you die, life stops for the physical body"; "People who are dead don't come back to this life"; tell them where the body is or will be (buried or cremated).

15. Children need simple, direct, honest information. They need time to work through their grief. They need reassurance, understanding, comfort and support.
16. Do tell children about death in your own way—in keeping with your value system. There is no one right way to approach the subject.

Challenges for Parents and Care-givers Helping Children Cope With Loss

Authenticity – Children know when you are not being honest. Yet, how can you be honest when you are feeling upset and frightened of saying the wrong thing? Focus on what is true. Focus on helping the children express their feelings. You don't have to be an expert or have all of the answers, you are there to provide a safe place for the children to express their emotions and ask questions. It is okay to say – “I don't know” or “We don't always understand why this type of tragedy occurs”. There is no “right “ or “wrong” as long as you are being honest, kind, and compassionate.

Balance – Structure and continuity are very important in helping restore the child's sense of safety. It is important to set aside time to discuss the trauma, but it is okay to set limits in between. If children know that you will listen and that they will have an opportunity to express their feelings, it will help allow them to focus.

Modeling – Remember, children are watching you for guidance on how to react. Be aware of your own behavior. Model feelings expression and self-care. For example – “When I feel scared I . . .” Don't be afraid to cry or show emotion, however, try not to break down. If you need a break from the classroom to deal with your own grief, ask for help from the support team standing by to assist you.

Styles – Keep in mind that just as children and adults learn differently, they will also react to trauma and process their grief differently. Sometimes a child's reaction to grief may seem inappropriate to an adult. Be patient with your child and with yourself.

Compounding Stressors – Be aware of compounding stressors in your life and with your children. If you or your children are currently or have recently experienced a loss or major life change, this event may hit you even harder than you expect. Watch for signs of distress in your children and in yourself. Remember – You must take care of yourself, so that you can help your children through this difficult life challenge.