



Talking to children about death

*What do you say to a child who has
lost someone close to them?*

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What do you say to a child who has lost someone very close?

One of the most difficult challenges that we face after the death of a loved one is discussing it with the children in the family. This can be especially difficult when the adults close to the child are also trying to come to terms with their own grief. As adults, we don't realize how much confusion children feel after the death of a loved one, and we often don't know what to say or how to answer their questions. Parents often put a great deal of pressure on themselves when the time comes to discuss death with their children. Many parents feel that if they say and do the "right" things, or answer their children's questions in the "right" way, then their children will not suffer. But from our own experiences, we know that there are no magic words that anyone can say to make our grief disappear.

The aim of this booklet is to provide parents and other concerned adults with the information needed in order to talk to children effectively about death. We can use this information to nurture our children as they wade through their grief and to help them learn and grow from the experience.

What do children understand about death?

The first question that we must address

is one of understanding. What do children understand and perceive about death at different ages? In his 1991 book, *Young People and Death*, J.D. Morgan gives us the following insights about children's perceptions about death at different ages.

- **1-3 Years:** The child has very little or no understanding of the idea of death.

- **4 Years:** Very limited concept of death. The child uses the word with some vague notion of its meaning. No particular emotion is related, though the child may verbalize a rudimentary notion that death is connected with sorrow and sadness.

- **5 Years:** Concept of death becomes more detailed, accurate and factual. Children may still think death is reversible. They may develop actions or reactions to things that are associated with death. For example, the child avoids dead things or may enjoy killing bugs.

- **6 Years:** New awareness of death is developing. Children begin to form an emotional response to the idea of death. They may fear that their mother will leave them, or form an idea that death is the result of aggression or killing. Some preoccupation with graves, funerals and burial may develop. Children this age do not believe that they will or can die.

- **7 Years:** The perception of death is similar to six-year olds, but it is more detailed and realistic and they have a better understanding of the situation. Children have

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Young children have a very limited concept of death.

an interest in the causes of death, old age, violence and disease. The child expresses an interest in visiting cemeteries. There may be comments such as "I wish I was dead!" The child gets the notion that he or she may die, but will usually deny this when confronted.

• **8 Years:** The child progresses from an interest in graves and funerals to an interest in what happens after death. The child feels that he or she has a better understanding of the concept of death. Still retains some "magical" thinking regarding death.

• **9 Years:** References now made to logical or biological reasons for death. For example, "Not living is when you have no pulse and no temperature and can't breathe." Children now look straight at death, not just at the peripherals such as coffins and graves. They accept quite realistically the fact that when they become old, they will die.

How can I help a child get through their grief?

Now that we have some understanding about the ways in which children of different ages understand death, we can examine ways to help our children through this difficult time.

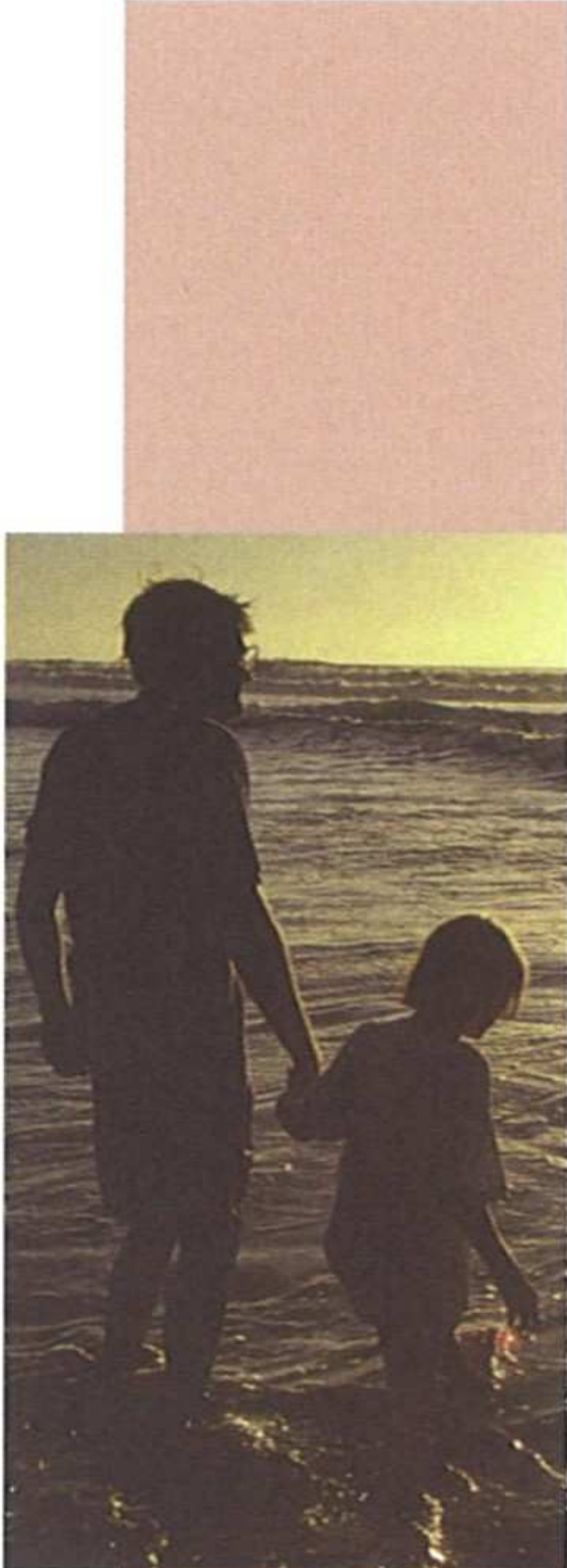
Give the child as many facts as possible concerning the death, repeating them as often as the child wishes. If a parent finds it difficult to talk about, ask another adult that the child trusts to answer these questions. Children don't like being told that everything is OK when they know that it is not. They want the "real"

facts. By answering all of the child's questions truthfully, we take some of the mystery out of this scary and confusing time in a child's life.

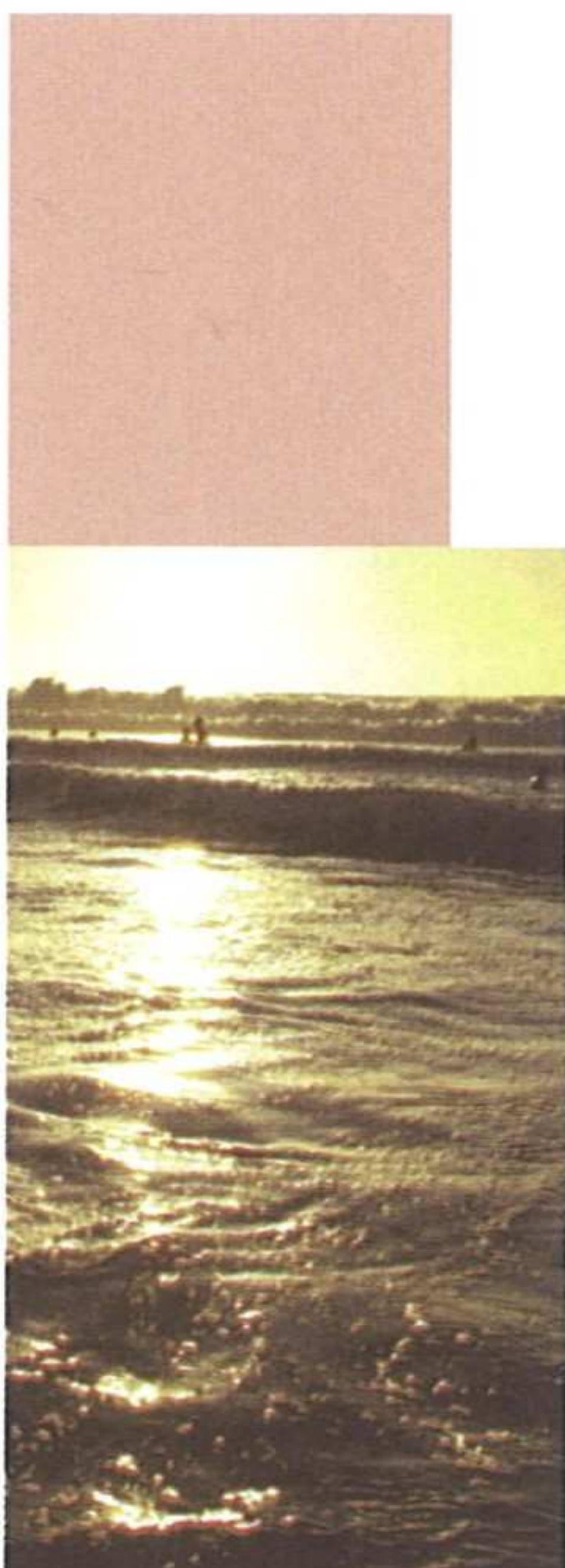
As adults, it is often helpful if we can put a name to our emotions, in order that the child may understand his/her own feelings. This should be done in a simple and straightforward way. "I am crying because I feel sad," or, "I feel sad because your grandmother died" are very good examples of how we can help children understand their own grief.

Children often become very concerned and worried about their parents when they see them upset or emotional. It is important that we reassure our children that we will be OK even though we feel sad right now. Give children a reason for your sadness, such as how much you miss your newly departed loved one. Once again, do not try to tell children that everything is fine. They will not believe you and it could add to their confusion. It is much better to tell them that things will be much better after everyone has time to be sad for a while.

One of the best ways to communicate with children is to sit with them and watch them play. Children will often exhibit feelings that they wouldn't otherwise talk about, while they are playing. It is easier for a child to "talk" when he or she is pretending to be someone else. It is often during play that children's misconceptions about what has happened and their unanswered questions start to emerge. This can be a wonderful opportunity for us to



Give the child as many facts as possible...



Give children a reason for your own sadness.

recognize a child's worries and fears and to explain to them what is really happening. By telling them the truth about an illness or death, we de-mystify the situation and make their lives a little less confusing.

Finally, expect that as children grow they may want to discuss again what has happened as they try to put their past loss into perspective. This revisiting may be triggered by a family event, a milestone in their own life, or another death of someone who is close. Death is a profound mystery for us all, and it is only natural that children will continue to struggle with its meaning and its relevance to their lives.

What will children want to know about death?

Why did he/she die?

Be straightforward with the child. Tell them the cause of death and don't dance around the subject or try to sugar-coat it. Never tell a child that someone died because they were old. The child may become afraid that other people that they think of as "old" will also soon die.

Where did he/she go?

It is important that you explain to the child what their family believes about what happens after death. This can be a good time to talk about religious or spiritual beliefs. It is often helpful to explain what will happen to

the body after the funeral. Make sure the child understands their loved one is no longer alive in the body and that they can no longer feel any pain. You should not use metaphors to describe the death, such as the deceased is "sleeping forever". This will only give the child anxiety by making them afraid to fall asleep, and will also raise questions about the finality of death.

Will I die?

It is natural for children to wonder about and be afraid of their own mortality following the death of someone close. It is often helpful to explain that yes, everyone dies, but most people live to be 70 years old or older.

Above all, it is important to be forthright and honest with our children when answering questions about death. Stories and fairy tales may make us feel like we are comforting the child, but they only serve to cause fear and confusion in the long run. The truth will never scare a child as much as his/her own imagination will. Always remember that people learn how to deal with death when they are young. If children are not allowed to come to terms with their loss, it will be difficult for them to grieve in a healthy manner when they become adults.

About the author:

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