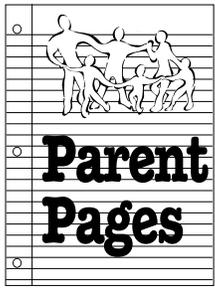


Talking with Children about Death



"Where did Nana go?" the preschooler asked after being told that her grandmother had just died. "Your Grandma was so good that she's gone to heaven to

be with God!" replied her grieving mother. The answer was intended to be a comforting one, to protect the child from the harsh reality that nobody knows for sure what happens after death.

But who did this answer really comfort, the mother or the child? Belief statements such as this one are how adults reassure themselves, a way of softening the blow of loss and separation. But what is helpful to adults may only confuse a child.

This is so because young children are literal thinkers; they do not understand the euphemisms that adults often rely on during tough times. A statement such as, "Grandma was so good she's gone to heaven to be with God," may actually make matters worse for a child. She may think, for example, that if Grandma was good and was taken away, am I going to be taken away, too, if I am good?

The same literal thinking holds true when a word such as "sleep" is substituted for the word "dead" as in,



"Grandfather's gone to sleep." On hearing this, a child may then logically wonder whether when she goes to sleep she, too, may never wake up again. To avoid such misunderstandings and the anxieties they provoke, tell children about death like it really is.

We do this naturally when it comes to flowers, for example. When flowers wilt we do not say they have "passed away" but rather that they have died. Children gradually accept death as a natural part of the life cycle of plants. People as well as flowers die and once we get used to saying the word in all its contexts, the less frightening it becomes.

Although death is the final state of life, many adults today fear it so much that they fail to recognize that children's natural curiosity about the physical world includes death, too. Just as a squashed caterpillar intrigues young children, they are likewise interested in a

dead body. When someone close to them dies, children need answers to their questions about the facts of death.

The most basic question and often most difficult to answer, is: What is death? In the book *Tell Me, Papa*, a kindly grandfather describes it in words a young child can understand:

When someone dies, everything inside of that person stops.

The heart stops.

The breathing stops.

The thinking and the feelings stop.

When a person is dead, that person cannot think about things.

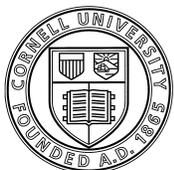
They cannot feel any hurt.

They cannot feel hot or cold.

When we are dead, we do not have any life in our bodies anymore.

What is left is just the body...like a peanut shell without the peanut...like an apple peel with no apple...like a school with no children.

~Continued~



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Other common questions include: Where has the person gone? Why is everybody so upset? Is someone else going to disappear next? If their questions are not addressed directly, children will make up their own answers, which might well be scarier than the truth.

In addressing spiritual or religious questions, parents can begin their answer with "Nobody knows for sure what happens to a person after death but I believe..." and then add those beliefs that bring comfort to you. In this way children are given a sense of continuity and are encouraged to share in their family's faith.

By the age of three, children are interested in what physically happens when death occurs. It's wise, and often easier, for parents to begin talking with their child about death before someone close to the family dies.

Seize opportunities to talk about the subject as they come along. If the goldfish dies in the night, don't flush it down the toilet before the child wakes up. Use this event to start talking together, to practice expressing feelings and sharing ideas.

Gardening is a commonplace activity that affords many opportunities to discuss death as plants wither, die and are turned into the soil again.

The act of human dying is not a familiar part of family life as it once was when people died at home. Expect that children will keep asking questions about it, if they know it's all right for them to do so. The most important thing to remember is to accept children's feelings and questions about death and encourage the expression of both. Let children know that everything human is ok to talk about.

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