

Question: How do you help a child deal with the death of a family member? Should we take a child to the funeral home? How do you talk with children about death?

Adults often have difficulty in dealing with children in times of death because of their own discomfort with the subject. We must be confident of our own relationship with God and sure of our own hope of life after death. We must be convinced in our hearts that physical death is not the end but simply a transition into an eternity with God. Apart from this kind of faith, I know of no easy way to talk about death. Once adults settle the issue of their own view of death, they are in better position to help their children.

We can begin helping a child by identifying the developmental level of the child. As early as age 4 to 7, children still have difficulty understanding the reality of death: a person in a casket looks asleep. But a visit to the funeral home at this stage can help a child begin the lifetime process of dealing with this reality in life. Speak honestly with children when talking about death. Don't be crude or unfeeling; instead, speak with confidence about the realities. If possible, take your children to the funeral home to visit and see the body of a more distant acquaintance before facing a death in the family. Allow your child to ask questions, but don't force more on the child than he or she may indicate a readiness for. Allow each child to experience this at his or her own pace.

In addition, talk about death in a context of hope and grace. We need to teach our children about God and heaven. They can then grow to realize that the body in the casket will never function in this world again, but they can also come to understand that the real person is given another kind of body in heaven with God. If we will trust in Jesus, we can hope to see our loved one again in heaven.

However, be careful not to create misunderstandings for your child. For example, death is not just a long trip or vacation. Don't lead a child to think that somehow physical death is not permanent. Death is not sleeping. Dead people do not just wake up someday. Help children understand that death is not just for plants, bugs or animals, nor is it only for old people. People of all ages die. It is a part of our world. We should also

explain that not everyone who gets sick will die. Help a child understand that there is no reason to fear hospitals and doctors.

Explain to children that it's okay to be sad. The Bible does not teach that we must never sorrow or shed tears. Even Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35). To be separated from someone we love for the remainder of this life will naturally bring sadness and tears. However, those who believe in Jesus and his resurrection do not need to sorrow in the same way as those who do not have hope of life beyond this world. Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that when he returns at the end of the world all believers in him will be raised up to live with Jesus forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

We cannot expect children to grasp fully all the facts and implications of death. To help them, parents and adult guides must face this issue with faith and confidence in the Lord. With this kind of help and the typical resilience of childhood, children can grow into an understanding that will help them throughout life as they face the reality of life's ending. Above all, remember that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

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