



Parent Q&A: How Do I Help a Child When a Loved One Dies?

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Death is an experience in life that children, like all of us, will experience at some point. Helping children to understand and accept death can be challenging. Parents and other caregivers can introduce understanding of death as part of life, talk about and share feelings or thoughts with children, and assist children in coping with loss or grief that they may experience when death occurs. Here are some common questions and answers for parents in helping a child when a loved one dies.

Question: When a death occurs, should children be allowed or taken to the funeral home?

Answer: Typically, when someone dies, a funeral home or service will handle care and treatment of the deceased person's body to follow local laws and will coordinate with family members on needs or preferences. A deceased person's body may be prepared for viewing, the person's remains might be cremated and preserved as ashes, or other steps might be taken based on individual and family preferences.

Children of any age can be allowed to go to the funeral home, though young children may be confused or upset by what they don't understand. Talk to children and prepare them for what they will see, who will be there, how people may be feeling and what they will be doing. For young children, be clear and specific in your descriptions of what the setting will be like. For example, if there is a viewing of the body, describe the casket and clothes and that the body will be lying still, not able to breathe or talk. Similarly, explain if a person has been cremated or had other preparations made with the physical body.

Answer questions and be attentive to a child's feelings and comfort level. Ask another caring adult to assist with children if you are too busy, distracted or distressed to extend such support. For children, going to the funeral home can do the following:

- Provide structure for early grieving and increased understanding of death.
- Help to bring a sense of perspective and closure.
- Provide a setting to share emotions and receive support from family, friends and others.
- Include the child so they don't feel left behind, ignored or frustrated.

Question: Should children attend a funeral, memorial service or other such events linked to a person's death?

Answer: Children of any age, just like adults, are affected when someone dies and need opportunities to understand, ask questions, grieve and share memories. Typically, families or communities process grief through shared rituals, such as a funeral or memorial service. Such grief rituals can provide children with a sense of connection to others who are mourning and the person who has died that is being remembered or celebrated.

While funerals, memorial services or other remembrance activities can provide understanding and support, children of any age should not be forced to participate. They can be invited to participate and included if they wish, but exceptions can be made if children are fearful, overwhelmed or simply do not understand. Other grief rituals that may be helpful include remembering the loved one's birthday, having a memory dinner, or reviewing keepsakes and photos to be reminded of the loved one who has died.

Question: How can I help a child who is struggling to understand or deal with the death of a family member, friend or pet?

Answer: Although children of varying ages have differences, there are common threads in what children experience when a death occurs. Children may grieve the death of a grandparent or parent, aunt or uncle, the death of a friend or even the death of a beloved pet. Death is part of life, but children may struggle to understand that when loss is first experienced. A few simple items can help in responding to a child who is struggling with a death:

- Share information at the child's level of understanding. Find out what the child does or does not understand by asking questions. Don't simply assume what they know or understand.
- Be open with talking about and expressing feelings. Talk about your own feelings and give children clear permission to "feel how they feel" and share with you if they wish.
- Share grief rituals such as lighting a candle in a person's memory, being involved in a memorial service, or going through photos and memories of a loved one.
- Be available for ongoing conversations since mourning is a drawn-out process. Explain that you don't have all the answers but are patient and willing to listen.
- Share available information in doses that a child can handle, perhaps in small bits at a time if needed. Let children know that it's OK to be sad, OK to be confused, or OK to be frustrated.

Question: What do I say to a child about a deceased loved one and the future around birthdays or special holidays?

Answer: Children often grieve a loved one who has died because that person was a familiar part of their life, being present at birthdays or sharing time and activities such as dinners, outings or trips together. So, they tend to miss the person and wonder what will happen in the future.

It is important to address child concerns with honesty and reassurance, helping children understand the process of death in a way that eases their worries while providing comfort and closure. We need to be as truthful as possible about the finality of death so that children can understand it as their cognitive abilities develop. They need to know that the deceased person will not call or text on the phone again, play with them or give them presents again. Even though it might seem like a kind gesture, we should not try to temporarily comfort children by telling them lies.

Children are still developing cognitively and emotionally, trying to make sense of their experiences and the world around them. Not being clear and truthful with them creates confusion and hinders their understanding of death. Though we may wish to shield them from pain by avoiding the facts of death, this may ultimately lead to trust issues and feelings of betrayal toward the people they depend on.

As adults, we must be as supportive as possible by sitting down with children and having honest conversations that help them process the difficult reality that death is irreversible. Being truthful while offering comfort will help them develop emotional resilience.

On a child's special day, if parents choose to do so, we can explain that we might choose to do an activity that helps to remember the loved one and the time once shared with them. For example, you might spend time doing something that the deceased person enjoyed doing with the child (e.g., going out for ice cream) or making a meal that they enjoyed together (e.g., Saturday morning pancakes). Note that if the loved one were still alive, they would have wanted to bring the child joy. Additionally, involving children in meaningful rituals to honor the deceased, such as placing flowers on the grave, cleaning around it or other efforts, can foster healthy ways of dealing with grief and loss. Special holidays can be lovely times to remember a deceased loved one with photos or shared memories and help children connect with them.

Question: What can I do if a child is constantly overwhelming me with questions following a person's death?

Answer: Be prepared to answer a child's questions in simple terms with warmth and patience. Questions are often an expression of a child's connection to someone and provide a mechanism for them to increase understanding and explore their thoughts and feelings. In addition, children need reassurance that they aren't doing something wrong to think about the deceased person or wonder about their status.

Also, take time to share love, appreciation and cherished memories of the deceased. Seek to model healthy discussion of questions and also expression of the complicated feelings that come up with a person's death. If discussing death becomes too overwhelming, it may be helpful to seek guidance from child professionals such as counselors, social workers, or psychologists.

Question: While burial might be easier to explain, how should I approach telling a child that their deceased family member was cremated?

Answer: When a person dies, children need to gain understanding that the physical body no longer works and that burial, cremation or other methods are ways in which we handle the body after death. Some people choose to have their body buried, while others may choose to have it cremated or handled in other ways. Share with children that people often choose before their death what will happen to their body, and in such cases, we try to learn about and respect the wishes of the deceased person regarding how their body is handled upon death.

Explain this process to children and be open to their questions. Choosing your words carefully, you might say, for example, "When a person dies, every part of their body stops working and they no longer feel any pain. Instead of burying your grandmother, we decided to cremate her because that was her desire. This means that her body was carefully turned into ashes, and we are keeping her ashes in a special place to remember her life."

Different cultures have varying traditions related to how a body is or should be treated upon a person's death. Help children to understand that we try to treat a person's body with respect after death but that there are multiple ways a body might be handled. Introduce them to meaningful rituals or creative opportunities to remember the person who has died.

References

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