

In the Aftermath of Crisis: Parents' Guide to Talking with Children about Death

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To varying degrees and in different ways, the events of September 11, 2001 have touched us all, adults and children alike. Children are struggling with fears, confusing feelings, and/or sadness as they try to cope with the trauma of witnessing such a violent event and the destruction it created. Some children, who had family members or friends who died or who are missing and presumed dead, must also struggle with personal losses. Many other children, who did not know someone personally who died in the crisis, may now be more concerned about death and be asking difficult questions. This guide will review what children understand about death and how parents can help them understand it better and begin to cope with a personal loss:

- How children's understanding about death is different than adults' understanding
- What children need to understand about death in order to adjust to a personal loss
- How we can best explain death to children to help them understand and cope
- How to deal with children's common reactions to a personal loss, including guilt, shame and avoidance
- Advice on attendance by children of funerals and memorial services
- How children deal with death over time and what adults can do to help them cope
- When parents should look for outside help and where they can find it.

This guide covers a lot of information; some of it may not apply to your children or your particular situation. You may not wish to read all of it at once. Read those sections that seem most important right now -- as you and your children begin to deal with your recent loss, you may wish to read other sections. Parents may also wish to review "In the Aftermath of Crisis: Parents' Guide for Talking to their Children" from the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence for general information about how to talk with children about the recent national tragedy.

Talking with children about death can be difficult when we too are grieving. It is difficult to talk with children about a recent death, especially if you are also dealing with the same loss. When children ask for example if this means they will

never see their mother/father again, or beg us to explain why something so unfair could possibly happen, it is easy to become overwhelmed ourselves. The questions that children ask at these times are very poignant -- they often ask the same questions that we may be hesitant to ask ourselves and are afraid to answer. If you find the task of talking with your children about death too overwhelming at the moment, you may wish to have someone else start the discussion with your children -- consider giving them this guide to read until you are ready to read it yourself.

Children's understanding of death is different from that of adults. Children of different ages may see or hear the same things that adults do, but come to a very different understanding of what it means. In order to understand death as well as an adult might, children will need more than a bunch of new facts and a bigger vocabulary -- they need help to comprehend some important new concepts. Parents, teachers, and other adults concerned about children can help children understand what death means, so that they are better able to adjust to the death of a friend or family member, now or in the future. But first the adults must appreciate what children at different ages are likely to think about death, what is important for them to understand about the death, and what we can do as adults to help them understand it better.

While it is useful for adults to provide children with the basic facts about what happens to people after they die, it is important to realize that they will need not only the facts, but also the concepts that help to explain those facts. For example, young children should be told the fact that often after people have died, their body is buried in a cemetery or turned to ashes that can then be buried or scattered. But we should make sure they also understand the concept that upon death, all life functions end completely -- the body can no longer move, but it can also no longer feel pain or hunger -- that is why it is okay to bury or cremate the body.

There are four basic concepts that children need to understand. Most children come to understand these concepts between 5 and 7 years of age. There is, though, wide variation among children of the same age, based in part on prior experience and education. When faced with a personal loss, children much younger than five, if given appropriate explanations, can be helped to understand these concepts as well. It is best, therefore, not to assume what children understand about death based on their age, but to instead ask them to explain their understanding. As they explain what they already understand, you can identify what they have misunderstood and what they still need to learn.

1. Death is irreversible.

Unlike cartoon and television characters, there is no recovery and no return from death. Children who do not understand this concept fully may view death as a type of temporary separation -- they may view people who have died as being far away or on a long trip, and become angry that they do not call or return for

important occasions. Most importantly, if they do not consider the death to be permanent, they have little reason to begin to mourn. One of the first steps in the mourning process is to understand, and at some level to accept, that the loss is permanent -- and then to begin the painful process of adjusting your ties to the person who has died.

This concept may be particularly difficult for the many children whose loved ones are missing and presumed dead. Without physical remains or definite proof of the death, it is hard for even adults to believe, let alone to accept, that the person is really permanently gone. But children will need to be helped to appreciate when the hope of finding someone missing is no longer realistic and when it is time to consider the person dead. This time will come at different points for each family, and at various times for different members of the same family.

2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.

Very young children initially view all things as living. In normal day to day conversations we may add to this confusion by talking about how their doll is hungry or commenting that we are late returning home because the car "died." This is not to say that imaginative play with children is harmful or inappropriate. But there is a difference between pretending that a doll is hungry and believing that a doll can actually be hungry -- it is a difference that may not be clear to a very young child. Similarly, when we encourage very young children to talk to their mother after she has died because, even after death, she will be able to hear their words, we must be sensitive to how this may be confusing and even frightening to some children.

Only when children are able to identify correctly what are living functions (for example, only living things can think or feel pain) will they realize that these living functions end completely at the time of death. Children may know that people can't move after they have died but feel it is because the coffin is too small, or know that they can't see well but believe it is because it is dark underground. These children may become preoccupied with the physical suffering of the deceased. Think about all of the horror films about zombies, vampires, or other characters that are dead but still retain some life functions, doomed to continue to suffer in eternity. These stories are so frightening to children, as well as many adults, because they speak to concerns related to this basic concept of death.

3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.

Children with an incomplete understanding of this concept may believe that they and others very close to them will never die. You may have, like many other parents, tried to reassure your children in the past that you will always be alive to take care of them and that they never have to be worried about dying themselves. It is understandable that we would like to shield children from having to realize that people close to them may die. But when a death directly affects children, such a reality can no longer be hidden. Unfortunately, when a significant death has occurred, children will usually fear that others, if not everyone, close to

them will die. This is perhaps the most difficult time to be confronted with the concept that everyone eventually dies. You should reassure children that you are currently healthy and are doing everything you can to stay healthy -- you hope and expect to live a very long time, until they are adults. This is different than telling children that you or they will never die.

After a death has occurred of someone they know, just as adults, children will struggle to understand why it has happened. If they do not appreciate that death is inevitable -- that everyone eventually dies -- then they must try to figure out why the person they care about was chosen to die. Children may assume that they have done (or thought) something so horrible that they are being punished by having someone they care about be killed (which leads to guilt). Or children may assume that the individuals that died had done something so horrible that they are being punished by being killed (which leads to shame). The guilt and shame not only interfere with efforts to adjust to the loss, but encourage children to remain silent about the death, afraid to expose their guilt or shame to others.

4. Children must understand the real reasons why people die.

If children do not understand the real reason why the individual has died, they are more likely to develop guilt or shame about the death. The goal is to help children feel they understand what has happened -- not to tell them everything you know or have heard. Graphic details are not necessary and should be avoided, especially if the death is violent. Instead, offer a brief explanation using simple and direct terms — take your cues from your children and allow them to ask for further explanations. As you offer these explanations, try to anticipate how they might cause associated fears and provide appropriate reassurance whenever possible. For example, school-age children may be told that a plane hit a building which caused the building to collapse -- people inside the building were killed when heavy parts of the building fell on their body causing so much damage to the body that it wasn't able to work anymore. They should then be reassured that buildings are very strong and will not fall down if they are hit by most things, such as birds or strong winds -- it is extremely unusual to have something as big as a large airplane hit a building.

Children may become confused by explanations that we offer.

As we attempt to explain to children what death means, we should use simple and direct terms. Adults may choose words and explanations that they feel are gentler and less unpleasant and avoid using the words "dead" or "died," but children may not understand such euphemisms and only become further confused. If young children are told that the deceased is in "eternal sleep," they may become scared to go to sleep themselves -- this expression does little to help children understand the difference between sleep and death.

Even when we give excellent explanations that are appropriate for the child's developmental level, children may still misinterpret some of what we have said. For example, some children who have been told that the body is placed in a

casket worry where the head has been placed. After we have done our best to explain death to children, it is important to ask again what they understand about what we have discussed. This is one way to identify explanations that have been misunderstood.

Religious explanations can be very abstract and difficult to understand by young children. But the religious beliefs of the family can and should be shared with children at the time of a death. It is best to present both the facts about what happens to the physical body as well as the religious beliefs that are held by the family. If it is consistent with the family's belief, for example, children can be told that the body does not work anymore and is therefore buried or turned to ashes, but that a special part of the person that can not be seen or touched, which some people call the spirit or soul of the person, continues on in a place we can not see or visit that is called heaven.

Children may become upset by these discussions.

You should remember that it is not your conversation that is upsetting them, but the death of someone they care about. You are only providing an opportunity for your children to show you their feelings, so that you can help them deal with them more effectively -- you are not causing them to be upset. Feel free to pause the conversation to provide support or comfort and offer to continue the discussion at another time. But be sure to let them know it is okay to show their feelings -- otherwise they may try to hide their feelings and will be left to deal with them alone. A good way to show your children it is okay to express your feelings is to show them your own feelings and to demonstrate how you effectively cope with them.

Children may seem reluctant to talk about a recent death.

Children pick up readily on cues from adults when adults are uncomfortable talking about death. It is difficult for grieving adults to talk about a death and the emotions surrounding the recent crisis are unsettling and profound. Children may misinterpret adults' discomfort, though, as a sign that the questions they are asking or the emotions they are expressing are inappropriate and assume that it is best not to pose such questions or to show their feelings again. The silence that results is not an indication that children are too young to be aware of or to understand what death means, nor that they have already coped. It may instead be an indication that they do not feel it is safe to discuss their questions and concerns with those most close to them -- they may wait weeks or months until they think it is safe to bring it up again, or turn instead to other adults in their lives (such as their teacher) or their friends.

Older children and adolescents, who in other times are more apt to turn to peers than adults to discuss issues that are important to them, may be inclined at first to tell adults close to them that they don't want to or need to discuss a recent death. It is generally not a good idea to try to force them to discuss the topic. Extend the invitation to talk on several occasions, and wait for them to accept.

Help them to identify other adults in their lives that may be able to speak with them, especially people who are less directly affected by the death (such as their teacher, a chaplain, or a school counselor). Whether or not your children are prepared to talk about the death, this is a time to maintain more of a physical and emotional presence. Even though older children and adolescents may understand the basic concepts about death and be generally more independent and less in need of adult assistance than younger children, they still very much need your support and assistance as they try to cope with a recent loss.

Children have other ways to express their grief than through discussions. Children may use play or creative activities, such as writing or drawing, as a way to both express their grief and to work it through. While their play and creative work may give us some important clues to what is bothering them, we should be careful how we interpret these clues and try not to jump to conclusions. Very happy pictures after a traumatic death may actually be a sign that children are not yet ready to begin the grieving process and not necessarily that they are unaffected. Sometimes repetitive play after a traumatic death is a sign that children are stuck and not able to work through the loss.

Children often feel guilty after a death has occurred. Young children have a very limited understanding of why many things occur in their lives. Because they are normally self-centered and because they need to try to develop a sense of why things happen to them, they often develop what is called magical thinking -- they come to believe that their thoughts and wishes can make things happen in the real world. We may reinforce this type of thinking by encouraging children to wish for what they want. They may believe, for example, that if they eat their vegetables one night, they will be more likely to receive a present they wish from Santa Claus one month later. Magical thinking can help make children feel in control and more powerful. But there is also a downside to magical thinking. When something awful happens, such as the death of someone children know, they may believe that they were somehow responsible because of something they said, did, or only thought or wished. Even older children, adolescents, and adults will likely wonder what it is that they could have or should have done to prevent the death -- maybe if they had only asked their parent to take them to school that morning, they would have arrived later to work and be spared; maybe if they had been at home they would have received a call and been able to offer some assistance. When talking with children (and for that matter also adults) about a death, it is best to assume that some underlying guilt may exist regarding the death, even if the children had no logical reason at all to feel responsible. Consider reassuring children that they could not have been at all responsible for the death, even if they don't ask you directly.

Children may appear to think only about themselves when confronted with a death.

Children are often very concerned about what affects them personally. At times of stress, such as after the death of someone they care about, they may seem

even more self-centered. We often expect children to act maturely in times of tragedy -- to rise to the occasion -- to act grown-up. But children are not grown-ups. While it is true that children who have successfully coped with a tragic event may emerge from the experience with increased maturity, most children (and adults) react at first by regressing (i.e., acting less maturely). That is why children who had recently mastered toilet training may now start to have accidents or why children who had been independent may start to have more difficulty with separation. But children also regress in their social skills when under stress -- they may become more demanding or more selfish, or have more difficulty sharing or getting along with peers or family members. They may ask questions about how the death of someone in the family will affect them personally that will seem very selfish -- "Does this mean that I won't be able to have a birthday party this weekend?" "Does this mean that I won't be able to go to the college I had planned on attending?" This is often a sign that children are under stress and having difficulty coping. It is not a time to accuse them of being selfish or uncaring, but a time for adults to show more caring and concern. Expect your children to think more about themselves as they are grieving, at least at first. Once they feel that their needs are being met, they will be more able to think about the needs of others.

Even very young children can grieve, often deeply and for long periods of time -- but they may not appear to be doing so.

No child is too young to be affected by the death of someone close. Even infants are capable of reacting to someone else's death, even if they do not fully understand what has occurred. They may still sense their parents' emotions or respond to changes in feeding and caregiving. Parents may be so overwhelmed by the loss of a family member that they question if they have any resources to attend to the physical, let alone emotional, needs of their children. They often wish to send their children away to be cared for by others, until they feel they are coping better with the loss themselves. They may wish to believe that their children can not understand or react to the loss. It is important that other adults support the adults in grieving families so those parents are able to support their children as much as possible. When parents are able to cope effectively with their feelings after the death of a family member, the children are much more able to adjust to the loss as well.

Children also have difficulty sustaining strong emotions over long periods of time. They may visit their concerns briefly, but then turn to play or involve themselves in schoolwork before they allow themselves to feel overwhelmed. They may also choose to express their feelings indirectly through play or through changes in their behavior. This may lead adults to underestimate their understanding of and reactions to a death.

Children should be allowed to attend funerals and other memorial events. When a close relative has died, whenever possible children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral. Children who are not allowed to attend the

funeral often create fantasies of what occurs during these ceremonies that are more frightening than the reality -- "What could they possibly be doing with my father/mother that is so awful that I am not allowed to see?" They may feel very hurt that they were excluded from an important family event and may lose out on the comfort that religious and community support can provide at this time.

You should begin by explaining to your children in simple terms what they might expect at the funeral -- if you know, let them know if the casket will be open or if there will be a gravesite ceremony. Encourage your children to ask questions and try to answer them simply and honestly. If children choose to join the family at the funeral, then assign an adult to accompany the child who is familiar with and well liked by the child, but preferably not as directly affected by the death (such as a babysitter or more distant relative). This will be particularly important for younger children. This adult can monitor the child's reactions and answer any questions as they arise. Children should not be forced to attend or participate in any ritual that they find frightening or unpleasant. They should be told that they can leave at any point or step out of the room or go for a walk until they wish to return. Children who choose to play quietly in the lobby of the funeral room throughout the ceremony may still feel a sense of having participated in the ritual more than if they were forced to stay at home or to wait with neighbors or relatives. It may also be helpful for children to have a simple task to perform at the funeral, such as handing out mass cards in the lobby of the funeral home or selecting flowers that will be placed at the gravesite -- the task should be symbolic and not overwhelming for the child.

Grieving can last a lifetime but should not consume a life.

You may wonder how long it will take for children to finish grieving a significant loss. Children grieve in stages and over many years. At each new stage in their life, they will use their new cognitive and emotional insights to try to reach a more satisfying explanation of the reason for a significant death and an understanding of the impact it is having on their own life. The work of making meaning of a death to some extent never ends. But over time, the work becomes less difficult and takes less energy. It may start as a full-time job, but later become a part-time job that allows other meaningful work to continue.

You may wonder when it is time to encourage children to move on with their lives. Shortly after a death, many children will want to and be able to resume much of their normal day-to-day life. They may find comfort and support in being back in school, spending time with their friends, and taking part in the same activities they did before the death occurred. Some children will take longer to get back to their regular daily tasks. They may wish to stay home from school, in part because they may be afraid that they will lose other members of their family if they are not home or they may wish to stay home to support and take care of a surviving family member. They will need encouragement that you are okay and that you want and expect them to return to school and to their regular daily activities. They may need some support and allowances for awhile (such as extra

help with schoolwork because they are having trouble concentrating and learning) but should be helped to resume their lives. Getting back to school and their usual activities can be very therapeutic. If they are having trouble returning to their routines after several weeks, it is a good idea to seek some outside advice and help.

A recent death may remind children, and us, of other losses. A crisis of any nature often awakens feelings related to a prior crisis or loss that was not yet fully resolved. Especially for children who are not struggling with a recent personal loss, they may now focus on a past loss. You may wonder why your children seem so concerned about a death that has not touched them directly. Or you may be bothered that they seem far more affected by their own "lesser" or past losses and seem disinterested in a national tragedy that ought to affect all of us. At times of stress and when given an appropriate opportunity, children may begin to tell adults about a wide range of concerns. If you do not realize this may happen, you can easily be caught off guard. You may also feel particularly overwhelmed because the recent events have left you feeling as if you have very limited emotional resources.

There is help available to parents.

At times such as this, parents should not try to deal with their children's, and their own, needs by themselves. When there is a traumatic and/or significant death (i.e., the death of someone that is a family member or close friend of the child), it is helpful for parents who are also grieving to ask someone else to also talk with their children. You may wish to speak with your children's teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, mental health counselor, or chaplain for advice. They may be able to speak with your children to see how they are doing, to recommend places you can go for further information (a listing of books appropriate for children and parents can be found at www.nccev.org; your local librarian can also make recommendations), and to help you find local children's bereavement support groups and counselors. Please remember that you shouldn't wait until you think they NEED counseling -- you should take advantage of counseling and support, for your children and for yourself, whenever you think it will be helpful.

You may have many more questions or concerns. If you would like further information, please feel free to contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238).