Talking To Children About Death

Although it never seems as if there is a good time to discuss the topic of death with your children, you must find the time to have this discussion. Death is a natural part of the lifecycle that can present itself at any moment. It is quite understandable that you may feel uncomfortable about discussing death with your children. As a parent, your greatest desire is to shield your little ones from the sad parts of life. Death is one of the few topics that render people speechless and helpless.

Talking To Young Children

When you were a child, you learned how to process death by observing the adults in your life. If they avoided dealing with death, chances are you may handle the topic of death in the same manner. Talking with your children about death is one of the most loving things you can do for them. As a result of the conversation, your children will be able to:

- Feel more comfortable discussing this uneasy topic;
- Discover ways to process their feelings about death;
- Process their fears, concerns and misconceptions about death; and
- Adopt a healthier manner of grieving death.

If you are like many parents, you may not know how to initiate a discussion about death with your children. You may also be concerned about the way in which your children will react to the conversation. These concerns should not keep you from
having this inevitable conversation. The truth is there is no easy way to discuss death with any person — let alone children. However, there are ways you can approach this topic in a gentle and compassionate way. The life experiences and ages of your children will determine the best approaches to take to initiate the discussion.

Preparing To Have Discussion

Before you talk about death with your children, you must assess the ways you deal with the topic. What are your underlying feelings and beliefs about death? How have you handled the deaths of loved ones in your life? These personal views may play a role in the type of conversation you will have with your children. It might be a good idea to initiate a conversation about death with your children during an unemotional time. Many parents use news reports, television programs and books to initiate a conversation. Discussing death in an unemotional environment will enable you to calmly address all issues.

Children Develop Awareness About Death

Children have a keen sense of awareness about death that many adults often overlook. As they observe the world around them, they gain an understanding of death. Sometimes they see dead animals such as deer, birds and snakes in their yard. They may get glimpses of death as they watch their favorite television shows. As they pay close attention to life events, they begin to become aware of death. As children grow older, they need to be prepared for major life changes such as death. If you talk about death with your children early, they will be better equipped to cope with a crisis in a healthy manner.
Barriers to Healthy Communication

You may be tempted to shy away from the difficult topic of death. Resist the urge to do so. By using proper communication techniques, you can have healthy discussions with your children. Most people are not open to discussing topics that arouse so many negative emotions. A common way to deal with death is to avoid the topic altogether. You must remember that death does not go away just because you choose not to discuss it. As some point, life’s events will force you to deal with death. When this happens, your children will be carefully watching your actions. Your actions will determine the manner in which they deal with death.

Children have the uncanny ability to observe non-verbal messages from parents. Without saying a word, they know when their parents are stressed, angry, happy and sad. They pay close attention to body language and facial expressions. Although you may not choose to have a direct discussion with your children, your non-verbal communication sends messages. As a result, they will deal with death based on the cues that you give them through non-verbal communication.

Don’t Avoid Difficult Conversations

When you avoid difficult conversations, you are inadvertently teaching your children they should avoid difficult things in life. Your children will grow into adults who are afraid to handle uncomfortable situations. Not only will they avoid talking about death, they will also develop a habit of avoiding difficult conversations about other aspects of life. Your children will learn that it is not appropriate to deal with their feelings. They may internalize their feelings and worry. As a result, they may become anxious and act out their emotions in a negative manner.

As a parent, your goal should be to find a delicate way of
approaching the subject. You may have to begin with short discussions until you and your children become more comfortable. Use your best judgment to determine the information that you should share with your children. It can take time for you to determine the readiness of your children as it pertains to discussing this topic. You also have to find a way to encourage your children to discuss the topic by making the discussion more comfortable. Here are some things to consider before you discuss this topic with your children:

- Communicate with your children in a sensitive manner when they are ready to engage in a conversation.
- Address your internal barriers that may prevent your children from communicating with you.
- Provide your children with truthful explanations about death.
- Pay attention to and honor their feelings.
- Answer questions that they ask to the best of your ability.
- Provide answers that address their concerns and are simple enough for them to understand.
- Try not to overwhelm them with deep concepts and things they are not able to understand.
- Discuss death in a natural manner. Use examples in their lives that will enable them to understand the death better.

You Do Not Have to Know Everything

For many children, their parents are their super heroes. It is not uncommon for them to believe that their parents know everything about all subjects. As a parent, you know this is not true, but it makes you feel good to know your children think of you in this way. You may not want to discuss death with your children because you may not know all of the answers to their questions. It is okay to be unsure about the manner in which to discuss death with your children. Death is a topic
that brings up uncertainty in even the most faithful people in the world. Accept the fact that you may not know how to adequately cover this topic.

During this conversation, your children need your love and security more than they need your correct answers. At the end of the conversation, they want to know that everything will be alright. It takes a lifetime to learn how to deal with issues surrounding loss and death. Some people live their entire lives without ever coming to terms with this issue. If death makes you feel uncertain or afraid, it is perfectly normal for you to feel that way. These feelings may never go away.

Sharing Your Views On Death

Share your honest interpretation of death with your children. As long as you communicate in a sensitive manner, your children will benefit from the conversation. When your children ask you questions about things that confound you, answer truthfully. Tell them that you do not know the answer. You do not have to create answers just to give your children the illusion that you have it all together. The purpose of honestly communicating with your children is to build trust in your relationship. As discussed earlier, children have the ability to sense the subtleties in conversations. Your children may be able to tell that you are not being honest. If this happens, they will begin to distrust you and the world around them. As children get older, they will begin to see the world through a different lens. They will be able to accept the fact that their parents are not perfect beings who have all of the answers. If their parents show them that it is normal not to know everything, they will become comfortable with things they do not know. It is also a good idea to share your beliefs about death with your children. By doing this, your children may get a sense of comfort. Although a belief is not concrete knowledge, it may
provide them with the ability to discover their own beliefs about death. As you are discussing beliefs, share with them that people all over the world have different beliefs about death. Encourage your children to respect different beliefs of other people as well.

The Taboo Subject of Death

Since people have different opinions about death, it is not a popular topic of many social conversations. If you want to put a damper on any social gathering, initiate a discussion about death and dying. Death has not always been a taboo subject to be avoided at all costs. There was a time when family members faced death together. Loved ones died at home. In some cases, families had funeral services at home. This intimate setting enabled loved ones to openly discuss death and grieve with one another. As a result of modern conveniences, the ways in which people deal with death have evolved. In fact, people do not have to intimately deal with death and dying at all. Places such as nursing homes, hospitals, hospice facilities and funeral homes can keep people as far away from death as possible. Instead of spending their final days surrounded by loved ones, many people die surrounded by health care workers.

These modern conveniences make life easier. However, they can make the death process more lonely and isolating. Loved ones who are not comfortable with dying can keep the process at bay. They can deal with the necessary parts of death, and leave the other parts alone. The concept of death has changed from an accepted life event to a feared mystery. In order for society to accept death in a healthy way, the taboo, fear and mystery surrounding it must be addressed. Open communication with children about death will change the manner in which society deals with the topic. Children will grow up to be adults who know how to deal with death.
Developmental Stages of Children

Children grow and develop at various stages in their lives. In the first few years of their lives, they are learning about the world around them. With this knowledge, they are gaining new ways of interpreting events in the world. Developmental stages are primary factors that determine a child’s ability to deal with death. Children who are younger than two years old will sense the loss of a loved one. As a result, their eating and sleeping habits may change.

Children Ages 2-6

This age group typically views death as a temporary condition that can be reversed. Many of their favorite animated shows depict characters that are pulverized only to rise again. During the preschool years, death is not personal. They have a limited view of death that includes magical thinking about death. They believe that their loved ones continue to live in the sky.

Children Ages 6-9

Children who are between the ages 6 and 9 develop a more advanced view of death. During this stage, children develop a realization that living things die. Death is still not a personal concept for children during this stage. They also begin to associate things like ghosts, skeletons and inanimate objects to death. Children in this developmental stage understand that people who die will not return. It is very easy for them to confuse terms that are associated with death with other words.

Children Ages 9-12

As children approach the adolescent stage (ages 9 – 12), they develop a more advanced and realistic view of death. They no longer believe they can escape death. Children in this stage
begin to understand that they will die someday. This new knowledge causes them to try to understand death and develop their own views of death. They develop an interest in the spiritual aspect related to death.

**Teens**

When children develop into teenagers, they have seen enough about death to understand the ramification of it. They know that death will happen to every person, and there is nothing they can do about it. Although they have this knowledge, they may think death cannot happen to them. It is important for parents to discuss death with teenagers because it can be difficult for them to handle their emotions.

**Individual Development**

Children in various developmental stages tend to have similar reactions about death. However, parents must remember that all children develop at individual paces. Some children are more mature than others in their developmental stage. Other children develop at a slower rate. While it is helpful to understand about the developmental stages of children, parents should base their discussion on the readiness of their children. In addition, children have different coping mechanisms to deal with death.

Some children may seem unbothered by the death of a loved one. Other children may become emotional. Regardless of developmental stages, each child handles death differently. As you are planning a discussion about death with your children, keep this knowledge in mind. Above all, children need your sympathy and non-judgmental responses as they are navigating through issues surrounding death.
Communicating Effectively

Discussing death with a young child is a challenging task. Due to their limited understanding, they will not be able to fully grasp the concept. It is important to broach this topic in the most sensitive manner possible. Keep these tips in mind as you are discussing death with a young child:

- Avoid providing responses that are too complicated, boring or confusing.
- Provide simple and brief explanations to any questions.
- Provide examples that are simple enough for them to understand.
- Answer each question that your children present to you.

Conversations about death with young children should not be long or complicated. Young children have short attention spans. Some children do not provide an immediate response. They may think about the topic and ask questions at a later time. Since your children have the tendency to confuse information, you should be prepared to check for understanding. Ask short questions to determine whether your children have a basic understanding of the information that you discussed with them. If your children return to you with the same questions, you should not be alarmed. Young children learn best by repeating concepts. Over a period of time, they will develop a greater understanding of death.

The Process Takes Time

It takes time for your children to gain an understanding of death that they can fully grasp. After your discussion, they still may not understand the long term effect that death has on people. Children may see an adult crying about the death of a loved one. These emotions will cause them to ask questions about the emotions. You can simply explain to them that people cry when a loved one dies because they miss them. It is
important to reassure them that these emotions are normal. As children begin to process the concept of death, they will continue to ask questions. Some of the questions may seem to be insensitive or blunt. It is important for you not to get offended by the question and chastise them. They are asking questions in an attempt to make sense of the situation. Your positive response will provide them with the reassurance they need to feel more comfortable about death.

You must remember that children have less experience with life issues than adults. Although they know a person who dies will never come back, they do not fully understand the reasons. As a result, your children may begin to question you about your mortality. A conversation about your death may be uncomfortable. However, if your children want to discuss this situation, you should address their concerns. Without going into too many details, you can share with them that you do not expect to die soon. You can also remind them that there will be plenty of people to take care of them if you die.

**Avoiding Misconceptions**

In an attempt to take the fear out of death, some parents use phrases such as ‘sleep’, ‘went away’ and rest in peace to refer to death. These phrases often confuse children and make them more fearful. Some children may be afraid that they will not wake up if they go to ‘sleep’. Children understand that people who die are separated from their loved ones. When children hear that Aunt Susan ‘went away’, this may instill fear that loved ones who go away on vacation or to the store may never return. Parents should avoid using any terms that will give their children misconceptions about death. Another cause of confusion for children about death is telling them that a loved one died because they were sick.

Although a sickness may have caused the death, children have no way of differentiating sicknesses. In their minds, they may think that all illnesses can cause death. If they get a
sickness as mild as a cold, they might begin to worry about dying. When you discuss sickness and dying, explain to your children that some diseases cause people to die. Let them know that many people who get sick will often get better. Children should know that having a sickness does not automatically mean their loved one will die.

A final concept that may confuse children is when you tell children that a loved one died because they were old. This may cause them to believe that only old people die. They may get a false sense of security about death. If they experience the death of a younger person, they might become distrustful of life. Instead of using generalizations, you should explain to your children that people of all ages die. You can also reassure them that it is likely that they could live a long time.

Death and Religious Beliefs

As people deal with the inevitable hardships of life such as death, they often rely on their religious beliefs to comfort them. This can be a helpful source of strength for children who have been taught to rely on their religious beliefs prior to experiencing a death. Children who are not familiar with religious terms used to describe death can become confused if they are suddenly bombarded with unknown concepts. Religious concepts such as ‘gone to heaven’ and ‘God took your family member’ will frighten children if they are unfamiliar with the terms.

Parents and family members have the best intentions when they say these things. These phrases are often spoken to comfort people during difficult times. However, these terms may make a child worry that they will be sent to heaven or God may take them against their will. When children hear these comforting messages and see their loved ones crying, they will not understand. These mixed messages will make them wonder whether they should be comforted or sad. It is perfectly fine for
parents to rely on religious beliefs during a time of death.

However, parents should let their children know that it is okay to feel sadness and grief too. One of the ways parents can help children navigate through experiences with death is to encourage them to share their feelings. Regardless of religious beliefs, children will grieve over the loss of a loved one. You can sit with your children and allow them to tell you how the death affected them.

**Unemotional Opportunities to Discuss Death**

The best time to help your children learn about death is before they experience a personal loss. Discussing death in an unemotional setting will give children the opportunity to think critically about death. They will also be able to form their opinions and beliefs in a rational way in the absence of emotions. There are plenty of opportunities to discuss death with children during the course of the day. Some topics you can use to discuss death are dead flowers, trees, animals and insects. For example, you and your children may see a dead deer as you are walking through the woods. Take this opportunity to answer any questions about the death of the animal.

Children are inquisitive, and they may ask plenty of questions about what happens after something dies. By having these discussions, you and your children will open the lines of communication to process death. When your children ask morbid questions about death, do not dismiss them or make them feel ashamed. They are not asking the questions to be gross or inappropriate. These questions are their way of processing the event. You can share with your children that all living creatures die, but new living creatures are born to replace them. This opportunity can provide a light teachable moment for your children. The conversation should be honest and
truthful, but you do not have to make the conversation into a sad moment.

**Children Are Resilient**

Children are resilient, and they may believe they will never die. It is okay for them to believe this for now. In time, they will learn the truth about their mortality. You do not have to give them all of the specific details about death during one conversation. You can use other opportunities to discuss death such as the death of a famous person. This provides another impersonal opportunity for children to develop an understanding of death. Take this opportunity to discuss the death with your children and answer questions. Some deaths of famous people can be violent such as murders, bombings, plane crashes or automobile accidents. These incidences may cause children to be concerned about their safety. As you are discussing a violent death with children, do your best to reassure them that they will not suffer the same fate.

**When Death Affects Your Family**

When a close relative dies, the absence of the loved one and grief cannot be ignored. Children are often caught in the middle of grieving adults. In some cases, they are left to process their feelings alone. The death of a sibling or parent can often invoke feelings of guilt in children. They may wonder whether they caused the death in some way. They also may feel guilty for living while their loved one is dead. In other cases, they may become angry about the death or view death as a punishment for bad behavior.

It is during this moment when parents must step in and dispel misconceptions their children have about death. Parents can let their children know that feelings of anger and guilt are valid. However, the death is not their fault. It may take
several conversations for parents to help their children relieve themselves of guilt and anger. If you notice that your children have become depressed, withdrawn or sick, they you should seek the help of a professional.

The Death of a Child

Families tend to grieve more intensely when a child dies. Although the death of an adult and a child cause sadness, a child’s death is particularly tragic. Parents often lose a part of themselves during these difficult circumstances. Parents must remember to grieve with their surviving children. It is easy to get caught up into individual pain, but surviving siblings are feeling pain too. Sometimes parents who survive the death of a child make comparisons with the surviving siblings. When parents do this, children begin to feel guilty and feel less worth than the child who has died.

When a child dies, some parents may become overprotective of the surviving children. These actions are understandable because you want to protect your remaining children. It is important to resist the urge to smother your surviving children. They have the right to live a full life according to their dreams and aspirations.

Children and Dying Loved Ones

Many parents question whether children should visit people who are dying. In the past, many hospitals had rules against children visiting dying family members. As social norms change, many hospitals are leaving this option up to the parents of young children. Although there are no official guidelines to help parents make a decision, they should take the age of the children, patient and situation into consideration. Children who are mature enough to handle the situation should be allowed to visit their dying loved one. Children should also be consulted about whether they want to
see their dying loved one. This visit may provide them the opportunity to cope with the impending death in a healthy way.

Children may be able to comfort their dying family member and feel useful in the process. Prior to the visit, parents need to inform their children about the situation they will witness. Children should be prepared enough to not be surprised at the sight of their loved one or equipment in the room. Children who are prepared for the visit will have a better chance of handling the situation. Visiting a dying loved one should not be forced on children. Although you want your children to say their ‘final goodbyes’, they may not be prepared for the experience. If they decline the opportunity to visit, please respect their wishes.

### Children and Funerals

Funerals are a way for family members to gather and grieve the loss of a loved one. They are an important part of death. Parents must decide whether their children will attend the funeral of a loved one. This is another decision that must be based on the maturity and capacity of the child to handle the situation. Parents should tell their children about the activities that will take place at the funeral. They should be aware that people will be crying, and the body will be present. As you are sharing this information with your children, be prepared to answer questions. Remember to be as open and honest as possible.

### Keeping Children Away During Death

As your loved one is dying, it can be a stressful time for your family members. This is especially true if your family member is dying at home. You may be tempted to send children away from home during this process. You might think it would be easier for them to visit family members or friends during this time. Think about the reasons you want to send your
children away. Are you doing this to avoid having a conversation about death with them? If that is your motive, you want to carefully reconsider your actions. As stated earlier, children are aware of changes that happen when a person dies. They may feel equally as distressed, afraid and uneasy. During this time, they need the comfort of family members as much as you. If you send your children away, they may feel separation anxiety. These feelings could have unintended effects on your children.

When Children Mourn

Children may look like happy-go-lucky individuals, but they grieve in the same manner as adults. In the case of children, they may not have the tools to deal with death. Children should be allowed to experience all of the emotions that accompany grief. Encourage your children to cry if they need to. If they feel like talking about their deceased loved one, take time to have a meaningful conversation with them. As children mourn, parents must remember to be patient with them. They grieve differently.

As they learn how to express their sadness, they need to be supported. Sometimes it takes children a longer time to process grief than adults. In some instances, children do not have an immediate reaction to grief. This may lead their parents to believe they are not affected by the death. It may take years for children to process the death of a loved one.

Helping Children Grieve

As your children grieve, they have needs that must be met by their parents. Regardless of whether children display the grief, parents must find ways to assist them through the grieving process. Here is a list of some of the needs of grieving children:
Clear and understandable information about grief.
Reassurance that they will have their needs met.
Say their final good-byes and memorialize their deceased loved ones.
Assistance with understanding ideas about issues related to death.
Assistance with expressing their individual opinions and thoughts about death; and
Assistance with dealing with the grief of loved ones.

Preparing for the Imminent Death of a Loved One

Although preparation for the death of a loved one will not make it easy, it is important for parents to prepare their children. This list will help you give your children a better understanding of the impending death of a loved one:

- Allow your children to make a choice whether to visit their dying loved one.
- Give your children plenty of attention and care during the transition of their loved one;
- Inform children about the physical and mental condition of their dying loved one; and
- Allow children to bid farewell to their loved one in a meaningful way.

Signs Your Children Are Grieving

After a loss, children have a tendency to behave as if nothing has happened. Some children have developed the skills to use avoidance as a coping mechanism. Pay close attention to your children after a loved one’s death. The following signs may indicate that your children are having problems processing the death:

- Diminished performance in school and low grades.
- Showing anxiety in school or at bedtime.
- Displaying extreme outbursts of anger.
- Withdrawing from friends or activities they enjoyed in the past.
- Having nightmares and sleep disorders.
- Having the inability to show emotion.
- Participating in substance abuse, theft activities, vandalism, aggressive behavior and promiscuity; and
- Having frequent panic attacks.

Making Sense of Death Through Communication

When children feel they are free to discuss their grief with their parents, they will ask openly ask questions and share their feelings. Parents can encourage their children to discuss issues through careful listening, respect and honest dialogue. Parents and children can use the issues associated with death to build a stronger bond through communication. Although children learn about death in many ways, it is important for them to discuss this topic with their parents.

Children view their parents as people who will present them with truthful information. They will also learn how to feel safe and secure in the presence of uncomfortable circumstances. It is important to note that you will never be able to shield your children from the harsh realities of death. Your children will have to face death eventually. By providing a supporting and nurturing environment for them to discuss death, you give them the opportunity to process loss in a healthy way.