

Talking to Children about Dying and Death

by David Tillman

Take a moment to think about how you are going to talk to children about dying and death. I vividly remember talking with my grandmother as she was lying in bed at our home. She was dying of cancer. My grandmother asked me to come close to the bed so she could tell me something important. With sadness, I do not remember what she told me. However, as I was with my grandmother that day, I remember having the feelings of fear and sadness, blended into a numbness. This is a memory I will never forget.

Think about how your family saw and talked about death as you were growing up. Many of those same attitudes and beliefs about death and dying may be with you today. I learned in my family when a loved one was dying, we would care for her or him in our home like my parents did for my grandmother. Or we would visit, or call, him, or her often. Our family saw death as part of life. We have faith that our loved one would go to heaven, and we would see her or him again after we die. Before and after death, we grieved, in a stoic way, being careful not to show too many emotions. At our loved one's funeral/memorial service we celebrated his or her life with family and friends.

Each child will deal with the dying process and death in their own unique way. Next time you are at a funeral or memorial service, just watch for the many ways children react to what is going on. Some children (and adults) will not go up to view their loved one's body or urn. Others will want to be close to their mother or father, at times holding their hand. Some will distract themselves by playing with cousins and friends. Still, others will sit quietly in the corner or next room.

When our four-year-old son saw his grandmother Bebe's picture and urn on the table at the church, he asked, "how did they get Bebe in there (urn)?" As he asked this, his words and gestures told us he was trying to visually understand how Bebe's body got into that urn. We explained to him that Bebe had been cremated. He seemed to understand what we told him. At four years old, that is so much to hear and understand.

Make time to talk with each child separately, in a quiet space, without interruptions. As you listen, notice the feelings underneath a child's words. Acknowledge what they are feeling and then let them share more. For example, say, "you sound sad" or "you sound afraid." Say only a few words and be quiet. Give them plenty of time to process their feelings, even if the silence is difficult for you at the time. They will say more when they are ready. In your first few conversations try to stick to acknowledging and talking about their feelings. If they are not very talkative, briefly share how you are feeling. Often, this will give the child permission to share how they are feeling.

Children may have many questions, and emotional expressions, or may be in denial. They may think that their loved one is taking a nap and will wake up again. At first, just focus on their feelings. In our hearts, we want to make them feel better. If you give them time to experience their feelings and acknowledge them, that will be the best gift you can give. Answer their

questions. However, give them brief answers. Then invite them to respond. Children are, as adults are too, when dealing with the dying process and death of a loved one are facing their own mortality, their own ultimate death. Our culture promotes the notion that our bodies will live forever. We know this is not true. Think back about how your parents told you about dying and death. How has that shaped your thoughts about dying and death that are still with you today?

Ask a child to write a letter, or draw a picture, or sing a song to their loved one. This will open up creative ways to express what they are feeling. Allow them to feel what they are feeling. Watch yourself as not to minimize or redirect them to think or feel differently than they are at that moment. Grief and loss are experienced differently by each person.

Writing a letter or drawing a picture on the birthday of grandma, grandpa, or others can be helpful in the grieving process. Find a picture of them being with your loved one. Then ask them to write (or tell you) about that experience, what they did and how did they feel back then. I think we all have a deep feeling and inner desire of wanting to be remembered after we die. Remembering our loved ones on special days provides us with hope and trust that we too will be remembered.

Check-in with children often throughout the dying process of a loved one, at the time of death, and months after death. Just a few minutes each day will be a blessing to them as they, and you, navigate all the emotions and things taking place moment by moment. Ask about how they are sleeping, about their dreams, and how they are doing in school. This may give you insights into how they are feeling and dealing with all that is happening as they grieve. Seek medical help if sleeplessness and other expressions of grief are not beginning to normalize one or two months after the death of your loved one.

God bless your loved one, family, friends, caregivers, and you on this sacred journey of being present for each other as a loved one nears death and dies.

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