Finding the Right Words When Talking About Death

DEATH IS A DIFFICULT TOPIC No one likes talking about death. Many people don't feel comfortable even thinking about it. And yet death is a part of life. At some point all of us are going to know someone who dies. Talking to children about death can be particularly uncomfortable and tricky. We don't want to cause them any more pain than absolutely necessary, but there are important things that they need to know. Here are some points to keep in mind when you have to talk to a child about the death of someone they know.

Use the words *"dead"* and *"died."*

"Lost" – The person who died hasn't been misplaced. If they were we would be out looking for them. Saying they are "lost" leaves the impression that they weren't taken care of properly and may turn up again at some point in the future.

"He went to sleep and didn't wake up." Linking death with sleep leads to children who afraid to go to sleep because they think they may never wake up again. They may also panic when they see someone sleeping, worried that the person could die if they don't wake them up right away.

"God needed her with him" This one can go two ways. One possibility is that the child may start acting out as insurance that God won't want them anytime soon. The other is that the child may wonder why God didn't want them too, leading to feelings of rejection or inferiority.

"Passed away" Many young children simply have no idea what this means. Is it the same as "went away" or "passed by?" If so, why is everyone so upset?

Explaining what it means to be dead – Children often ask a lot of questions as they to try to grasp what it means to be dead. Can they come back? Will they get cold in their grave? What will they eat? It helps to explain death in very concrete terms that the child can relate to, such as "Her body stopped working. She can't breathe or move or talk or play anymore." Answer the questions they ask. No, he won't ever come back. No, she's not cold. No, he doesn't need food anymore.

Talking about causes of death – After knowing someone who died of illness or disease, children sometimes become fearful that they could die any time they or someone they love gets even a little sick. It is important to explain that, while most of the time when we are sick there is medical treatment that helps, the person who died was so sick that there wasn't any more medicine that could have helped.

Heaven – The thought of heaven is comforting to many and is a part of many spiritual belief systems. However, if not explained carefully, it can be confusing to children.

Where is heaven? Keep in mind that children's thinking is very concrete. When they hear that a person has "gone to heaven" it may be necessary to explain that this is not the same as going to another town or even another country. Once you go to heaven, you can't come back. People cannot go to heaven while they are still alive, so we can't go to visit even for a little while.

Heaven sounds too good – In an effort to comfort the grieving, people often talk about the deceased being "in a better place." Sometimes this includes descriptions of heaven that sound amazingly good: never wanting for anything, every day is a joy, no suffering or misery. For some children, especially those whose earthly lives are less than ideal, this might sound too enticing leading to thoughts that it is preferable to be dead so that they could escape to heaven too.

Validate feelings – American culture frequently invalidates what people are feeling. Think of how often you've heard someone say things like "don't get mad," "stop crying," or "cheer up." Often these statements are made because the person making them is uncomfortable with their own feelings of helplessness in that moment. *All* feelings are valid, not just the ones that feel good. It is not only appropriate but healthy to feel sad sometimes, angry sometimes, and to cry or shout when experiencing those emotions. It is very important that children be allowed to express whatever they're feeling. When they detect adults' discomfort with their emotions, they interpret that as a sign that they've done something inappropriate or that there is something wrong with them for having those emotions. This can lead to lifelong patterns of trying to suppress emotions rather than learning to express them in healthy ways.

What goes unsaid – When we feel uncomfortable or don't know what to say, often we just say nothing. What we don't always realize is that silence sends a message too. By not talking about a topic, an event or a person we communicate to children that it is too painful, too scary or too bad to talk about. We are teaching them that I am not the person you can come to with your fears and hurts because I can't handle them. They are left to find guidance elsewhere or to deal with it alone. Instead we must show them that we are here for them in the hard times just as much as the fun ones.

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