

## SOMETHING TO KEEP IN MIND

As an adult, you understand all too well the inevitable nature of death. To a child, however, death may be a unique, disturbing and incomprehensible experience. Most children can sense that “something” has happened, but cannot comprehend “what” has happened. The fear of the unknown is, and can be, a terrible thing for a child.

The most painful thing about death for a child is the idea of separation. As an adult, you must be patient and help the child realize that he has not been abandoned or rejected. Most children are very dependent on physical presence and closeness for their feelings of security and confidence.

Any explanation of things and events should be made at the child’s level of intellectual development. The answers and explanations should be appropriate to the child’s understanding and maturity.

*Please consider the following...*

### **Three to Five Years**

- Usually knows little or nothing about death
- May think of the person as dead, but still attribute consciousness to the deceased
- Death may be considered temporary or very gradual
- May think of the person as having gone away and is still living somewhere else
- Death may be perceived as a rejection
- May be unable to express his feelings in words and may show it by sullenness or withdrawal

### **Five to Nine Years**

- Usually have some idea about the finality of death
- May think of death as a thing or person who takes people away
- May connect death with darkness
- Ask hard-to-answer questions
- May seem to fasten on to the gruesome or morbid details of the death
- May seem more interested in life than in death

### **Ten to Teen Years**

- Usually begin to realize that death is inevitable for all persons, including themselves



# HOW TO TELL A CHILD ABOUT DEATH

BY JOAN BECK

Strodz Funeral Home  
610 S. Duncan  
Stillwater, Oklahoma 74074  
(405)372-5550

## HOW SHOULD YOU EXPLAIN TO A CHILD ABOUT DEATH?

Sooner or later, you'll have to cope with this problem – when your youngster finds a dead bird, or a classmate is killed in an accident, or a grandfather dies. Because a child's feelings about death are mixed up with magic, fear and guilt, and because children can't understand abstract ideas about spirit and eternity, their questions can be difficult and disturbing. They urgently need your calm help.

Here are some suggestions you can use from Dr. Edgar N. Jackson pastor of the Mamaroneck Methodist Church in New York, and author or co-author of six books dealing with death and grief. His newest, "Telling a Child About Death" was published early in 1964.

### MUST TELL THE TRUTH

1. Basically, you must tell your children the truth, regardless of their age, stresses Dr. Jackson. You must not encourage children to build immature fantasies or tell them about untruths which will hamper future spiritual and emotional development.
2. Uncalculable harm can be done if you tell a youngster that "Grandpa has gone to sleep," or that "Daddy has gone away on a long trip." Children are likely to begin to fear that they, too, may never wake up if they go to sleep. Or they may ask themselves, "Why is Daddy so angry at me that he didn't even say goodby? Am I so bad that he won't ever come back?"

*"It is also unwise and dangerous to lie to children about death," emphasizes Dr. Jackson. "It produces anxiety in youngsters because they can't get answers to their questions. And it undercuts their confidence in adults when they are already deeply troubled."*

### CHILDREN ARE SENSITIVE

5. Don't try to exclude children, even very small youngsters, from the fact of death or from a family's grief. "A child is sensitive to deceit," explains Dr. Jackson. They will feel threatened by feeling left out at a time when they need closeness and security.

3. Somewhat older children who want to visit the funeral home or attend the funeral service should be permitted to go, Dr. Jackson believes. But a wise and calm adult should be with them to answer questions. Youngsters should not be forced against their wishes to attend a funeral or view the person who has died, stresses Dr. Jackson. "It is important to remember that children's feelings are worthy of respect," he notes.
4. Give Children all the reassurance you can that the person who has died is now free from pain and at peace in the world of the spirit, and then they have no reason to fear death for themselves.

*"When an elderly person dies, it is simple to explain that if the body is worn out the person has no more use for it," Dr. Jackson suggests. "Their spirit leaves it, just as we move out of a house when it is too old to live in any longer. Children of any age can accept that. They may be helped to grasp the idea of a spiritual world where bodies are no longer needed."*

6. Listen closely to the questions and comments of your children so you'll know what is troubling them most and how much information they are ready for, says Dr. Jackson.
7. Be alert to possible feelings of guilt your children may have about their having caused the death by their angry thoughts. These feelings are quite common and emotionally devastating to a youngster.
8. Sometimes analogies can be helpful. Dr. Jackson suggests explaining that just as a piano becomes quiet and lifeless when the pianist leaves, so a body lies quiet and unused when the person who controlled it is gone. A youngster of 10 or older may appreciate the comparison of dying with an unborn infant being forced out of its safe, nourishing environment by the process of birth – only to inherit the whole bright world.

*They can also be reassured that a "Creator wiser than we governs the universe. And even though we do not understand all about it, we rest secure in the belief that there is reason beyond our own that undergirds life."*