

Idaho Falls Pediatrics

Death: Preparing Children for the Death of a Loved One

Chances are that someone important to your child (grandparents, aunts, uncles, close friends, or even a parent) will die before your child reaches adulthood. How can you prepare children for the likelihood of the death of someone close to them? First, do all you can to give children a caring, supportive environment. You can help your child through this difficult time with honesty, reassurance, and a willingness to talk about and share feelings.

Very Young Children (ages 2 to 4)

Talk to your children about death in a way that they can understand. Children between ages 2 and 4 react to people not being with them. Preschool children do not understand that dead people are gone forever. Stories in books, children's movies, TV shows, or the death of a pet can all be ways to start talking about what death means.

The most important thing for children to know is that someone will always be there to take care of them. Very young children do not understand time or the future. If your young child asks you if you will die, the real question she may be asking is "Will you be here to take care of me?" Reassure your child that you or someone else who loves her will always be there. Very young children need comforting after a death to help them feel secure.

Young Children (ages 5 to 8)

Children between the ages of 5 and 8 are still confused about death. Your child may think that somehow they caused the death by wishing it would happen or by not doing what they were told to do. This "magical thinking" can cause your child to feel unrealistic guilt. Children need to have honest and complete answers about the death. Without the whole truth, your child will fill in the details with self-blame. Some children want to talk about the death with adults. Others will act out their feelings in play. Both of these responses are normal.

It is very important that you use clear language when explaining death to your child. If you try to cushion the news that someone has died, you may confuse your child. If you tell your child "we lost Grandpa today", your child will expect that someone will find Grandpa. If you tell your child "Uncle Joe is just sleeping", your child will expect Uncle Joe to wake up. While it sounds harsh, the clear truth is the best language to use because your child will understand it better.

School-age Children (ages 9 to 12)

School-age children are beginning to understand that death is final. They are less likely to expect the dead person to return. School-age children can think about the future more clearly and understand what it would be like to have someone important to them die. Explain the ways that your family or community grieves. Is there a funeral, a wake, a celebration of life? What happens at these events? What do people do after the funeral? Children are comforted when they know the routines and customs. Your child may want to attend these rituals. If you simply and honestly explain what your child will hear and see before, during, and after the services, it is okay to bring them to the funeral or other events related to the death.

Your child may avoid upsetting topics and ideas. Your child may change the subject or ignore you when you try to talk to them about death. Look for other opportunities or wait for them to bring up the topic again. Encourage them to play. Play is the way children process death and sort out their feelings about it.

Teenagers

As your child becomes a teenager, do not be surprised if he begins questioning your family's faith and other strongly held beliefs. At this age, children may be more interested in talking about death and other abstract topics. Although teenagers know that everyone will die, they often do not act as if that means **them**. Careless with their own health and well-being, many teenagers still believe deep down, that the rules of death do not apply to them. However, parents still influence their teens. Most teens have views on politics, religion, and social issues that are very close to their parents' views. Don't be afraid to talk about death and dying with teens. They need to hear what you have to say.

If your teen does not want to talk to you about an important death, encourage them to talk with another adult such as a counselor, pastor, teacher, or coach.

*NOTE: This information is provided as a public educational service. The information does not replace any of the instructions your physician gives you. If you have a medical emergency please call 911 or call the Hospital at (208) 529-6111. If you have questions about your child's care, please call Idaho Falls Pediatrics at (208) 522-4600.