



Talking with Children about Death

PBCC Childrens Ministry

As adult members of our community, we have the privilege of speaking into the lives of those younger than us and helping them process their experiences. There are few experiences in greater need of processing than death in its many forms. Whether we do so as parents, pastors, of Sunday school volunteers, talking with young people about death as it touches their lives can have a significant impact on the people they become. Here are some things to consider when broaching the topic of death with children:

The following is quoted and adapted from the following resources – no original authorship is claimed, and we recommend reading the original sources:

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/death.html>

<https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/children-and-grief>

<https://jimdalysfocusonthefamily.com/how-to-talk-with-young-children-about-death>

Processing Death

Our culture holds many false assumptions about processing death, such as:

- ...adults can easily explain death;
- ...the experience of grief has orderly stages;
- ...the grief of adults does not affect the bereaved child;
- ...adults should avoid topics that cause a child to cry;
- ...an active, playing child is not a grieving child;
- ...infants and toddlers are too young to grieve;
- ...children need to "get over" their grief and move on;
- ...children are better off not attending funerals.

Before speaking with a child about death, we should consider whether or not we hold any of these assumptions ourselves. What we believe about how children process death will shape our engagement with them on the topic, for better or for worse.

Children at different stages of development respond to death differently:

- ❖ Infants and toddlers express their pain with sadness, crying, difficulty sleeping or eating, or clinging behavior.
- ❖ Children 2 to 7 years of age may believe they caused the death. Other emotional responses may be regression, lack of feeling, explosive emotions, fear, acting out behavior, guilt, and sadness. Children at this age need constant reassurance and repeated explanations in order to make sense of the situation.
- ❖ By 7 to 8 years of age, children know that death is irreversible, inevitable, and universal.

Preparing in Advance

If possible, we recommend speaking with children about death before someone close to them dies. Introducing the concept of death may seem awkward or unnecessarily frightening, but it is easier on both the child and the adult to discuss death at a time when emotions are not as activated as they are in the wake of a loved one's death. The following conversation topics – and many others – may be used as opportunities to talk about death or some aspect of it in a safe way:

The Life Cycle of Plants & Animals

The Changing of the Seasons

The Miracles of Jesus

Teaching children about death gives us a chance to tell them about Jesus Christ's gift of eternal life and the hope of heaven. Ahead of time, prepare to answer questions common to this age group: "What does heaven look like?", "Who's in heaven?" and "What if I'm mean to someone, can I still go to heaven?"

Sharing with Our Children

When the time comes to talk with our children about death, consider these suggestions:

- ❖ Talk to the child as soon as possible after the death.
- ❖ Give the child a simple, honest explanation using clear, concise words.
- ❖ Find familiar surroundings to have the talk with the child.
- ❖ Be sure the child understands the meanings of the words used.
- ❖ Give adequate but not detailed information about the death.
- ❖ Address the child's fears and anxieties.
- ❖ Reassure the child that he is not to blame for the death and that someone will care for him.
- ❖ Listen carefully to the child, validating feelings, assisting with overwhelming feelings, and involving and including the child.
- ❖ Offer help identifying feelings and putting them into words.
- ❖ Continue the child's routine.
- ❖ Model appropriate grief behaviors.
- ❖ Provide opportunities to remember the loved one who has died.
- ❖ Give the child plenty of time and comfort.
- ❖ Get more help if needed from a professional.

We encourage sharing our own feelings with our children in clear and honest ways. For example, you can say things like, "God is getting Grandma ready to be with Him. And while Grandma gets to go be with Jesus, I'm going to miss her. I'll get to see Grandma again, but in the meanwhile I'll miss her and that makes me sad. So, you might see Daddy cry, and that's normal." You might also have to help your child understand why God didn't answer his or her prayers for the loved one to get better.

In accepting loss, children have to understand, grieve, remember, and find a way to go on with life. Sensitive adults can assist children by providing a safe place to express feelings, being willing to listen attentively and caringly to children's stories of loss, and utilizing methods to help children express their thoughts and feelings.