

What Should We Tell the Children?

by Charlene Thurston, R.N., A.N.P.

Children are often considered the “forgotten grievers” after the death of someone close. As adults try to wrestle with their own grief, it is often very difficult for them to determine how to explain death to their children in a way in which they can understand. Moreover, because parents want to protect their children from emotional pain, they often feel that it might be better to shield them from what has happened. However, children will realize that something’s wrong and will come to know what’s happened. Therefore, it is crucial for the responsible adults in their lives to learn how to explain death to them in a way that’s appropriate for their developmental age, and to help support them through their grief. How children experience and adjust to loss will affect them for the rest of their lives.

The best time for children to begin to develop their understanding about death is before someone close to them dies. Parents and teachers should use the opportunities of “teachable

moments” to explain what death is, so that when the time comes that they lose someone close, some foundation of understanding has already taken place. Opportunities abound in books, tv shows, and nature (leaves falling from trees, dead birds seen on the roadside). The death of pets is also a time when children learn. Please realize, however, that oftentimes this is a very significant loss to the child.

Children’s understanding of death varies depending upon their age and cognitive development. Children less than 3 years of age may not understand death, but will feel the loss of someone close. Preschool children often think that death is reversible, especially since video and cartoon figures often come back to life. Children between 5 and 9 have a beginning understanding of death and its permanence, but often fear that death is caused by a scary figure and may have nightmares about it. After about age 9, children begin to realize what death is and that it’s permanent.

Some general guidelines in discussing death with children include the following:

- Be honest with your child in explaining what happened and in explaining death, but use age-appropriate language. Explain what death means in honest terms, not by saying “he went away” or “he went to sleep”, etc.
- Allow and encourage your child to express emotions and ask questions. Questions may be asked over and over again as the child tries to understand.
- Don’t be afraid to say that there are some things you don’t understand either.
- Be comforting and loving.
- Maintain routines as much as possible to provide order and security, but don’t be inflexible.
- Allow participation in visitations, funerals, etc. if the child would like to attend, but explain what to expect.
- Help your child say good-bye in personal ways, such as writing a letter, making a drawing, having a special ritual like lighting a candle, saying a prayer, etc.
- Help your child memorialize the person who died by looking at photos, keeping mementoes, talking about the person who died, etc.
- Remain aware of your child’s behavior, not just immediately following the death, but in the years to come, since children often continue to re-grieve losses as they develop and mature.
- Seek help if you’re concerned about your child’s behavior. According to “Facts for Families” from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry on Children,

“Children who are having serious problems with grief and loss may show one or more of these signs: an extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events, inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone, acting much younger for an extended period, excessively imitating the dead person, repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person, withdrawal from friend, or sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school.

If these signs persist, professional help may be needed. A child and adolescent psychiatrist or other qualified mental health professional can help the child accept the death and assist the others in helping the child through the mourning process.”

(See reverse side also)

What Should We Tell the Children - *continued from reverse side*

There are many excellent books and websites to guide parents and other adults in helping children learn about death and cope in healthy ways. One of our favorite books is, *Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child*, by Earl Grollman. Two excellent websites, which contain valuable information, parenting tips, and lists of other resources are The Dougy Center – the National Center for Grieving Children & Families (www.dougy.org), and The Children's Room - caring support for grieving children, teens, & families (www.childrensroom.org). One website, which contains many resources and on-line support groups for both adults and children, is www.griefnet.org.

In Nantucket, families may find education and support through our organization's Tapestries Program, in which we

offer one on one parent guidance consultations, a lending library of grief-related books for adults and children and, when there is enough interest in the community, bi-weekly supportive groups for children and their parents. Mental health counseling services are offered through Nantucket Behavioral Health Service, as well as through many private counselors on the island. Nantucket's churches and faith communities offer much spiritual, emotional, and practical support and guidance to families. Finally, please remember that your child's school is a most important part of his or her life. Connecting with teachers, guidance staff, and principal can be very helpful in ensuring the best support possible.

Did you know these facts about Palliative Care?

- That palliative care is specialized medical care that is focused on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain, and stress of a serious illness, whatever the diagnosis;
- That our team of health care professionals works together with your own physician and provides an extra layer of support;
- That palliative care is appropriate at any age and at any stage in a serious illness and can be provided along with curative treatment;
- That the goal of palliative care is to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family.

Support for Family Caregivers

Through our Caregivers' Connections Program, family caregivers of persons with any long term illness or disability can access education, support, and practical assistance from our staff, in their efforts to provide care for their loved one as well as remembering to take care of themselves. Services include:

Coaching for Caregivers – one on one consultations with our Nurse Practitioner on any aspect of care;

Time Out – stress reduction education and/or counseling, in the home or office, which may include talking, learning relaxation techniques, yoga, etc. Thai Shiatsu massage is also available;

Volunteers – can provide 1½-2 hour/week for respite breaks for caregivers, or can help with errands, transportation, etc.;

Lending Library of caregiver-related topics.

All our services are free of charge! For more information or an appointment, please call our Office at 508-825-8325