



## **Helping Children With Dying**

*Chris Byrne, Canadian Mental Health Association*

It is painful for parents to see their children in distress. Try to remember that it is even harder for children not to have the death of a loved one explained to them. It is better for a child to mourn in the company of family than to mourn alone, wondering, yet afraid to ask questions.

As a parent, you can take the lead by explaining that while you might not understand everything about death, you will still try to answer the child's questions as best you can. You know your child best. You will have to sense how much of an answer, and how much detail the child is asking for. You might ask your child to repeat back to you what you have said, because you "want to be sure you explained it right."

### **Imagination is often far worse than reality.**

You are experiencing your own grief which is intense. There are many decisions and details to be handled. Although family and friends cannot take your pain away or change what happened, they may be a comfort during the first difficult weeks.

Children also need a support network. A parent is the most important part of the network. Parents who openly talk about their grief, cry, and express frustration, send a message to their children that it is okay for them to do so. Because children cannot carry the burden of all your pain, try to maintain times for play and talk without conversation about the dead person. Balance, as best you can, the sharing of sad feelings, with the sharing of more pleasant activities and times shared together. This lets your surviving children know how much they are valued.

If your child has had an experience with death, (perhaps a pet, or a grandparent), it may be easier to explain the death. Here are some questions which many children wonder about and some suggested answers.

### **Is death like sleeping?**

Death is different from sleeping. When you go to sleep your body still works. You still breathe and your heart beats and you dream. When a person is dead, his or her body doesn't work anymore. Remember that children who are told that death is like sleeping may develop fears about falling asleep.

### **Why did they die?**

If the death was from an illness, explain that the person's body couldn't fight the sickness any more. It stopped working. Make sure your children know that if they get the flu or a cold, or if mom or dad get sick, their bodies can fight the illness and get better. Their bodies still work. Explain that people do not usually die when they get sick. Most people get better. If the death was from an accident, explain that the person was hurt so badly that his or her body stopped working. Explain that when most people get hurt they can get better and live a long, long time.

### **Will you die? Will I die?**

Children are looking for reassurance. Let your child know that most people live for a very long time. Children also need to know who will take care of them if a parent or guardian dies. Let them know who to go to for help if there is a family emergency.

### **Did I do or think something bad to cause the death?**

Maybe your child had a fight with the person who died. Maybe your child wished this person wasn't around to get so much attention from other family members. Maybe your child said, "I wish you'd go away from me," or even "I wish you were dead." Reassure your children that saying and wishing things do not cause a death to happen.

### **Will they come back?**

"Forever" is a hard concept for young children to understand. They see that people go away and come back. Cartoon characters die and then jump up again. Young children may need to be told several times that the person won't be back ever.

### **Is she cold? What will he eat?**

Young children may think the dead body still has feelings and walks and talks under the ground. Some children might imagine a cemetery as a sort of "underground apartment complex." You may need to explain that the body doesn't work anymore. It can't breathe, walk, talk or eat anymore.

### **Why did God let this happen?**

Answer questions related to God and your faith according to your own beliefs. You may also want the counsel of your clergy. It's okay to not have answers for everything. Children can accept that you, too, have a hard time understanding some things. It is best to avoid suggesting God "took" someone to be with him, or that "only the good die young". Some children may fear that God will take them away too. They may try to be "bad" so that they won't die, also.

### **Returning to School**

Going back to school following a death can be difficult. You can make this easier by helping your children with possible answers to questions and remarks. Schoolmates may not always be sensitive to your children's feelings. Tell the child that, if they don't want to, they don't have to answer questions. Explain that others may be uncomfortable talking about the person who died.

Your home can be a place where you and your child can talk about and remember the loved one. You may want to talk with the school principal, your child's teacher, the school social worker, or counselor, to plan for a surviving child's return to school. You may also want to discuss what information you would like shared with his/her classmates.

*"The journey through grief is a major life task.  
The process of healing calls for moments of  
aloneness, moments of companionship."*