



**A DEATH IN THE FAMILY:
How do we explain the sad news to children?
By Sharon Gloger Friedman**

When Mary T. was 4 years old her grandmother died. Mary was sent to stay with friends for a few days, and when she returned home she was told that her grandmother had gone on a long trip. In the days that followed, Mary waited in vain for her beloved grandmother to return, and she grew more and more angry with her for leaving without saying good-bye.

Ten year old Neal H. was not told his mother was terminally ill. Rather, in order to spare his son the pain of the truth, Neal's father told him his mother was getting better. When she died, her death was such a shock to Neal that he began to be afraid that his own death was imminent. Thus, he was afraid to go to sleep, lest he not wake up again. He dreaded leaving his house because he was convinced he too would get sick and die.

Six year old Tommy C. was told his infant sister had died and gone to heaven. Each time he flew in an airplane, he searched the clouds for sight of his sister.

Although fictitious names have been used, the above are true incidents in actual case stories. They tragically illustrate the misconceptions children can have about death. The same society that is mindful of its obligation to teach its children the facts of life has been woefully negligent in teaching them the facts of death.

There is nothing as devastating to a family as the death of a loved one. Thrown into a turmoil of grief and despair, many parents first instinct is to shield their children from the pain of sorrow. They send their children away or tell them half-truths. In the belief that children cannot comprehend death or that it will be too frightening to them, parents often offer their children no explanation at all.

If the conspiracy of silence on matters of death and dying has been entered into in an attempt to spare children from the fears and pain of grief and loss, the effort has been futile.

Our children are not ignorant about death. The technology of television brings death into our homes in vivid color for our children to see daily. Furthermore, they see dead animals lying in the road, a bug is killed, a flower withers, a pet dies.

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How children react to these incidents will be determined largely by their age and level of maturity. In what has come to be regarded as a classic study of children's perceptions of death, psychologist Maria Nagy determined that preschool-age children have no concept of death as final. To them death is like sleep. It is only "make believe" and they think the person will awaken. At ages 5 to 9, children begin to realize death's finality but tend to personify it. Death is a skeleton or a ghost that will carry people off. It is at the age of 9 or 10 that children comprehend that death is final-it does not mean being taken away by a person or a boogeyman; those who are dead are dead. They begin to sense and accept that death is an inevitable part of life.

Dr. Jeffrey Robbins Goldberg, former clinical instructor of psychiatry at Boston University Medical School and director of Framingham Psychiatric Counseling Associates, states:

"We should take care not to shelter our children from reality. Rather, we should filter it to the degree that they can understand. A simple and straightforward explanation of the circumstances of death is the best approach. Parents should be particularly careful when using such euphemisms as 'asleep', 'on a long trip', 'passed away' or 'been put to rest'. Children, especially young ones, tend to interpret such statements literally, and euphemisms only serve to confuse them and cloud their perceptions of death."

Very often the death of a pet is a child's first close experience with mortality. Sad as the occasion is, counseling professionals believe it can also provide parents with an opportunity to help their children view death in an emotionally healthy way.

Children should be allowed to mourn the pet's death and to express their sorrow. Whether it is a goldfish or a beloved dog that has died, parents should respect their children's sadness and allow them the consolation of their grief. If a rite of burial is requested, it should be encouraged as a natural way to help children accept the finality of death.

Children should also be given time to grieve. Professionals advise against replacing the pet immediately. Doing so robs children of their right to continue to love the deceased pet and also suggests to them that all loved ones can be easily replaced.

When a death in the family occurs, counselors have found it best for parents to tell their children as soon as possible. Their own grief will be apparent, and not telling their children the reason for their sorrow only gives rein to imaginations already filled with frightening fantasies.

Children should be told of a death simply, gently, and in language they can understand. Their questions should be patiently and honestly answered. Fairy-tale explanations that will later surface as untruths should be avoided.

A noted authority on death and bereavement, Earl A. Grollman, writes in *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*:

“When you mourn, you give your children a model to follow. They then understand that it is acceptable for emotion to be out in the open.”

Adults’ grief tells children that it is all right to cry when they are sad.

Medical and counseling professionals caution against urging children, however, to express unmet feelings. Like adults, children react differently to sorrow, and while one child may cry, another may not.

A child’s request to go outside to play or to resume his or her daily routine should not be interpreted as a lack of caring or feeling. Children are creatures of habit, and they need to go through their daily activities to reassure themselves that things will go on as they did before. Dr. Michael J. Robinson, a practicing pediatrician and clinical associate in pediatrics at Massachusetts General Hospital, states:

“A child’s routine is a security blanket of sorts, and as much as is possible, the parent should reassure him or her that the family’s life will go on in much the same manner it did before the loved one’s death. However, this does not mean that you should make unrealistic promises. If it is a parent who has died, for instance, there are bound to be changes in the family’s pattern of living, and it would be untruthful of you to tell your child that things will be exactly the same. But you can reassure him or her that you will make every attempt to see to it that the things that are important in his or her life will remain a part of the family’s activities.”

The grief of children is often complicated by their unspoken fears, and parents must take care to anticipate and calm their anxieties. “Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion to death,” writes psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying*, and children often suffer deep pangs of guilt when someone they love dies. Children believe that wishes come true and that bad deeds are punished, and they need to be assured that nothing they did or said or wished caused the death of the loved one.

For this reason especially it is important that a family remain together when a death occurs. When children are sent away, they often feel rejected and somehow responsible for what has happened. They see their removal from the household as a kind of punishment for the death that has taken place. Children can handle a great deal of stress if they have loved ones to lean on. They do not need to be protected from grief, but they do need the strength and comfort of family security and the reassurance that they are loved.

Children should not be denied the right to participate in the rites of burial if they express a desire to do so. Parents tend to want to shelter their children from what they consider a frightening experience but recognized authorities have concluded that if a child is old enough to attend church or synagogue, he or she is old enough to comprehend the solemnity and purpose of a funeral.

Time should be taken to explain to children what to expect at a funeral. An emphasis can be made that a funeral is a way of saying good-bye to the loved one, and that because it is a sad

occasion some people may cry. And that it is all right if they cry, too. “When your youngster understands what is occurring,” writes Grollman, “he may be more relaxed about the unfolding events. He understands his inclusion more than he would exclusion, and is far better off observing the funeral than living with fantasies conjured up by his young and fertile imagination.”

If children seem apprehensive about attending a funeral or going to the cemetery, their feelings should be respected. They should be reassured that it is all right for them to remain at home and that no one is angry with them for doing so.

Children have the most difficulty accepting death if they have been poorly prepared when someone they love is dying. If someone in the family is terminally ill, honesty about his or her condition gives the child time to adjust to the idea of the person’s death.

Authorities in the field of death and dying also believe it can be beneficial to children to visit someone who is dying if they wish to do so. However, it is important to prepare them for the visit so they will know what to expect. If, for instance the person’s appearance has altered drastically, children should be told beforehand. If the person is in the hospital, they need to know the procedures that are followed and what, if any, apparatus will be present in the room. Above all, they need to be assured that they cannot catch the person’s illness.

The death of a loved one is a traumatic and distressful time for everyone and there is no one simple way to help children cope with the upheaval it brings into their lives. Experts agree, however, that an honest and straightforward approach is the healthiest way to deal with the difficult subjects of death and dying. “A child can live through anything” writes educator Dr. Erla LeShan in *Learning to Say Good-bye: When a Parent Dies*, “so long as he or she is told the truth and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering.”

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