

# Talking to Children About Death

Children have the same need as adults to mourn.  
by Victor Parachin

On most days at four o'clock, Michael and his grandfather could be seen walking down the street, hand in hand, to the corner store. It was a daily ritual for the little boy and the elderly man. Although separated by decades, the two enjoyed a precious common bond. They shared a two-family house in an outlying section of New York City. The grandfather lived in the upstairs unit; Michael and his family lived downstairs. It had been that way since Michael's birth.

When Michael turned seven, his family moved to Long Island, leaving the grandfather back in the city. "See you on Thanksgiving!" they all said. Thanksgiving came and went, however, and they did not see the grandfather. The same thing happened at Christmas.

"Grandpa's away for a while," Michael's parents explained. "Don't worry about it." Months went by and Michael waited. When his birthday came without a card from his grandfather, Michael grew concerned and wondered what he could have done to make the elderly man not love him anymore.

It was nearly two years before Michael's parents told him the truth: his beloved grandfather died shortly after they moved to Long Island. "I know they thought they were doing the right thing," Michael says, "but it was a terrible time for me. They certainly didn't spare me any pain while I was wondering what had happened. And then when they finally told me the truth, I still had to deal with the feeling of losing Grandpa."

This true-but-unfortunate story is reported by funeral director Dan Schaefer and Christine Lyons in their excellent book, *How Do We Tell The Children: A Parent's Guide To Helping Children Understand and Cope When Someone Dies*. The fact is that every day of the year, children lose someone they love to death: a parent, grandparent, siblings, friend or relative. Like Michael's family, parents may try to shield the child from the blow. When death is improperly explained and responded to, however, it prevents a child from experiencing the loss, expressing their grief, sharing in the family mourning and moving on toward recovery. Children have the same need as adults to process what has happened and to mourn. Here are some basic do's and don'ts when talking to children about death.

**DO** be honest about death. Although you may find it difficult to speak with your child about death, keep in mind that honesty is the best policy. There is nothing worse for a child than being the last to know; accidentally discovering the "secret" and then receiving the excuse: "We thought it was best not to tell you." As soon as you learn about a death, inform your child simply and directly: "Honey, a very sad thing happened this afternoon. Grandmother died." Once you have given your child this information, gently make sure they understand what you have just said.

**DON'T** use euphemisms. When her aunt died, a six-year-old girl was told, "Aunt Ellen went away on a long trip." Because her aunt never returned from that trip, the little girl was terrified when her family announced that they were all going on a "trip" for their summer vacation. Here is the point: death is not a "long trip;" death is not "sleeping;" death is not "resting;" death is not "passing away."

"When you're talking with your child, avoid euphemisms," say Schaefer and Lyons. "Use simple words like 'dead,' 'stopped working' and 'wore out' - simple words establish the fact that the body is biologically dead." For example, if your child asks, "What does dead mean?" respond simply by stating, "Dead means a person's body has stopped working and won't work anymore." If your child asks, "Is death like

sleeping?" a good response is to state simply, "Dying is nothing at all like sleep. When someone dies, their body stops working. It is not resting. Its job is over."

**DO** help Children express their thoughts and feelings. Encourage children to cry-out their grief and talk out their thoughts, and feelings about the death. Be aware that children are often verbally limited when it comes to stating their feelings and often express their grief in a variety of non-verbal ways such as sleeplessness, nightmares, clinging behavior and school difficulties. Because of their verbal limitations, you, as the parent or important adult, may have to take the initiative to help your children ventilate grief. One effective way of doing this is to pick-up on a child's feelings and say, "I know you miss Daddy very much. I miss him too." A simple statement like that is often enough to help a child open up.

**DON'T** tell a child how to feel. Some parents unwisely tell children: "Be brave. Be strong, you're the man in the family now," or "Don't cry, it was the will of God." Instead of such statements, let a child experience and express grief in their own way.

**DO** offer continuous love and assurance. "In the early stages of mourning, a child needs reassurance that he is loved. This will make him feel more secure. Parents cannot shield their children from painful feelings, but they can help the child to bear them. So openly express your caring - show him in many ways that you love him," writes psychologist Charles E. Schaefer, Ph.D., in his book *How to Talk To Children About Really Important Things*. Dr. Schaefer also says one of the best ways a parent can show they care is by being readily present and available during the difficult months of grieving.

**DON'T** hide your grief from your children. Be open with your own grief and emotions. It is all right if your children see you crying, or feeling sad. Your open grieving gives a child "permission" to grieve as well. By seeing you grieve, a child will know that it is normal and healthy to cry and feel sad after a death.

"A child takes his cue from the adult," says Sacramento, California, family therapist Jerri Smock, Ph.D. "You need to handle your own emotions - anger, hurt, grieving, tears, whatever - and you need to be vulnerable. You need to be able to express and identify your feelings so a child can do the same with his or her own feelings."

**DO** invite others to help your children. Enlist the assistance of other family members - uncles, aunts, grandparents, as well as close friends and clergy who can help grieving children. Often, someone outside the family can provide much needed additional comfort, concern and care. Welcome their assistance and aid with open arms.

**DON'T** assume children will just get "over it." The idea that children are more adaptable, that death is less traumatic to them, is a myth," say authors Candy Lightner and Nancy Hathaway in their book *Giving Sorrow Words*. "The fact is that children are in many ways most affected by a death for, unlike adults whose identities are formed, they must brave a further challenge: growing up in the face of loss. Whether the death takes place during their infancy or their adolescence, whether the person who dies is a relative or a friend, the impact can last for the rest of their lives." Do not assume your child will get over the death naturally and on their own. Be proactive and provide all of the comfort and consolation you can.

**DO** be a good listener. Like adults, children need to talk about the loss and their feelings connected to it. That means they need adults who will take the time to listen carefully and compassionately. "Listening to the child is an effective way of putting care into action," writes grief authority Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., in his book *Helping Children Cope With Grief*. "Listening requires hearing not only the content of what the child is saying but also hearing the content of that which is only being hinted. The child may need help in terms of being able to put thoughts and feelings into words. While you will certainly want to listen with your ears and see through your eyes, you will also want to hear and respond with your heart."

**DO** Nurture faith but **DON'T** blame God. Death is a profoundly theological issue and children will ask religious questions. Some parents unwittingly create future spiritual problems for children by incorrectly

assigning blame to God for a death. This is done when a child hears an adult say, "God needed daddy," "It was God's Will," "God loved your sister so much, He took her," or "God punished him." Rather than speak of God "taking" a loved one, convey to your child that God has "received" a beloved family member and that God is also sad about the tragedy. Remind your child that "God shares our pain and will help us get through the crisis."