

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

Death should not be a “hush-hush” topic with children. Relying upon euphemistic phrases such as “She passed away”... “He’s gone to sleep”... “Grandma went away on a long trip”... is often more harmful than helpful. Death is a NATURAL AND NORMAL CONSEQUENCE OF LIVING. It should not be a taboo subject for thought or discussion.

Virtually every child will experience the death of a friend, a pet or a family member (or knows someone who has had such an experience and shared it with them). Children do develop thoughts and ideas about death at an early age. They also learn quickly whom they can and cannot talk about those thoughts and ideas!

Ages 3-5: These children do not yet accept death as a permanent process. They often ask questions such as “When will Grandma come back?” They fear separation more than death.

Ages 5-9: These children are beginning to understand that death is permanent, but it is not yet universal. Death is often personified and given powers to select those who are to die.

Ages 9-12: Death, for these children, is permanent, personal and universal. They understand they, too will die...SOMEDAY. They are fascinated with the macabre and find details of death events appealing.

Ages 12+: Most adolescents have reached adult levels of understanding about death. Many adolescents have very intense emotions about death and do spend time thinking about death.

Children should be offered opportunities to talk about death whenever possible and appropriate. They should be offered the opportunity to participate if they so desire.

Expressions of sadness and grief should be shared. Children can participate in the support to family and friends and should be included in family visits and conversations.

Children’s questions about death should be answered as honestly as possible. It is important to try to discover what is behind the question being asked and to respond appropriately. Do not feel obligated to have all the answers! Sometimes wondering and exploring are more important than answering. Do not ignore questions, however. Some type of response is always needed, as children will create answers for questions not heard and explored.