

Talking to Children About Death

One of the more difficult things that a parent of a dead child faces is talking with the other children about death. In our society, we prefer to spare children conversations about death. However, it is both helpful and healthy to talk to our children about the death. Here are some suggestions for talking to even very young children:

- Look into the child's eyes and touch the child gently on the shoulder when discussing a death.
- Shorten time away from the child. Be sure he knows where you are and how to reach you.
- Avoid words such as sleeping, resting, lost, passed away, or taking a long trip.
- Talk about what it means to be dead in concrete terms such as someone doesn't talk, breathe, eat, go to the bathroom or grow.
- Repeat simple, honest explanations as often as the child asks.
- Reassure the child of his own safety and your plan for continued presence. Share that most people die when they are older.
- Reassure the child the death was not her fault. Allow them to talk about their feelings. Children often respond to the loss of a loved one with feelings of guilt.
- Give the child a chance to express his/her grief creatively. Allow expressions of feelings such as drawing pictures, reading and telling stories about death or the loved on or reenacting the funeral service. Writing, pictures or clay work can help.
- Do not avoid discussion of death if the child brings it up.
- Be willing to share your feelings of grief with the child. Some adults try to hide feelings for the benefit of the child.
- Be honest in answering any questions the child may have. Keep explanations simple.
- Allow the child to be silent. The moment may not be right for them to open up.
- Be patient and loving. Children may express their grief in tantrums, dependency or regression to an earlier age.
- Be prepared. A child may ask more questions about death as they grow older.
- Remember that sometimes all a child needs is a touch or a hug.
- Be a good listener. Correct any confusing ideas the child may have.
- Provide play opportunities and routine.
- Provide opportunities to open discussion with a quiet child by reading stories related to death.
- A child who chooses not to talk about the death may be comfortable writing or drawing thoughts in a journal.
- Seek medical assistance if the child becomes depressed, withdrawn for an extended period of time, or makes any type of suicidal statements.