

time. If a child asks whether a parent is going to die, they should be told that all people die eventually, but that their parent will not die for a long time.

Children ask questions in a very direct way. They may not talk about feelings as much as about more concrete circumstances.

Perhaps they will ask what a coffin looks like on the inside, whether lying in the ground is scary and lonely, or whether it is cold and dark down there. It is important to be prepared for these questions. When the child notices that a parent is uncomfortable, they may stop asking questions. A child will watch to see whether they are allowed these kinds of questions and what reactions are created.



Bear in mind that children do not sit down and discuss a subject for hours on end. They may suddenly ask you some of the hardest questions in the world and give you little time to think answers through. After a couple of minutes, they might want to go back to their playing. Seizing the moment is important. Talk about the subject when they want to. It is natural for them to change the subject and then return to it later.

When telling a child that someone has died, make sure the word “died” is used. Children do not understand indirect statements. Some children have waited years for a grandparent to return because they had been told she or he had “passed away.” These roundabout ways of describing death may help an adult feel better, but they won't help a child understand what has happened. Also, statements like “God took your friend to heaven” are not helpful.

When you are mourning, let your child know it.



It's okay to let your child see that you are truly sad. If grief is hidden, the child will think that grief is not an acceptable feeling. A child may ask a question that a parent cannot answer. It is also okay to be honest and reply, “I don't know.”

When children go to funerals:

A funeral is a ceremony that helps people accept death. The child is a part of the family and it is natural for them to take part in the funeral along with everyone else. Prepare them for what might happen at the funeral. Tell them exactly what is going to take place and why. Tell them that some people attending may be upset, withdrawn, or crying, and these are normal reactions.

If a parent's own grief prevents them from talking to the child to prepare them for the funeral, another close relative or friend can do it.

Whether or not to take part in the funeral should be the child's choice. If they don't want to go, ask them why not and let them talk about their feelings. It is not helpful to try to force a child to go.

Helping a child to remember:

It is always good for us to remember our loved ones who have died. Through memories, the person is kept alive in our minds. It is helpful to leave a photo album out for the child to look at pictures of the loved one whenever they like. You can help children hold on to happy memories by asking, “Do you remember...?” or noting “That was how he wanted it” or “This was her favorite food.” A child will know that it is good to remember.



Adapted from a text by Christel Bech, RN, *Facts for Families* from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and *Healing the Bereaved Child: Grief Gardening, growth through grief and other touchdowns for caregivers,* by Alan D. Wolfelt.

Provided by Gerard's House, a grief support center for children, teenagers and their families in Santa Fe, New Mexico. For more information please contact us at (505) 424-1800 or gerardshouse.org.

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