Telling a Child about the Death of a Loved One

Sharing the news that there has been a death of someone important to a child can feel overwhelming. In a desire to protect the child, adults often share too little or too much; this can cause confusion and overwhelm the child. There are ways to have this difficult conversation with young children that meets their developmental stage, and fosters hope and healing in difficult times.

Young Children (3-7 years old): The brains of young children haven't developed the ability to understand the permanence of death. It is common for children to ask a lot of questions and frequently repeat questions. Children on the younger side of this age group are focused on safety and concrete needs (Who will pick me up? Who will read me stories? Who will take care of me?) Children on the older end of this age group may have similar concerns and may have questions about death itself: "Did it hurt? What does it look like? What happens to the body?" These reactions and questions are a natural developmental process and need simple concrete answers which are often repeated.

Explaining death: Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away", "lost", "left us", or "died in their sleep." These are confusing for children who think very simply and concretely. Provide simple and straightforward language, for example:

> *"Something sad happened. Grandma died. That means that something happened that made her body stop working. She can't eat, drink, hug, poop and she won't ever be able to. It's sad because we all love her and will miss playing with her."*

You may need to provide reminders that the death occurred, such as:

> *"Remember, today we are going to Auntie's house for family dinner because Grandma died and isn't here anymore."*

Common emotional expressions: Behavior and play are the ways that a young child communicates; you may see shifts in their behavior and play as they try to make sense of this information and adjust to a world without their person.

Ways to support:

- Provide reassurances of safety and details about how concrete needs will be met
- Physical reminders of safety and physical comfort (hugs, handholding, sitting together)
- Tolerate regression of behaviors: toileting accidents, separation anxiety, sleep challenges. While frustrating for adults, these behaviors need to be met with compassion and understanding. If you have concerns about regression, see your pediatrician and be sure to share about the recent death.
- Talk with your child about people they can share their feelings with – a teacher, friend, other trusted adult.

- To the best extent possible, model healthy expression of feelings. It is useful for children to see their trusted adults expressing their feelings in a healthy way. *"I'm feeling sad right now because I miss grandma. I'm going to give myself a hug to feel a bit better."*
- Talk about the person who died. Children are often afraid they will forget their person. Share memories, pictures, and even favorite foods/music/traditions to help your child feel connected to the person who died. Your family's spiritual beliefs may play a role here as well.

School-aged Children (8-11 years old): Children at this age have a wavering understanding of death—they are starting to understand that death is permanent. Younger children in this age group may ask many repeated questions and older children in this age group may feel overwhelmed by the permanence of death. School-aged children often have concerns that someone else will die, that somehow the death was their fault, or that they will forget their person.

Explaining death: Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away," "lost," or "left us." These can still be confusing for children in this age group. Provide simple and straightforward language, for

> *"Something sad happened, Grandma died. Remember she had lung cancer, which is a disease that affected her lungs and other organs and eventually caused her body to stop working. It isn't contagious and the doctors tried very hard with different treatments, but the cancer was very strong and the medicine couldn't stop it."* (By naming the lung cancer and the treatments, we reduce potential fear that all sickness or all cancer leads to death).

example:

After you offer the information, stop talking and see if they have questions. This is not a one-time conversation; be prepared to repeat the information and answer questions.

Common emotional expressions: Worry, confusion, sadness, anger. Behavior and play continue to be the way that children express themselves and try to make sense of the world.

Ways to support:

- Provide reassurance of safety without promising: "Right now we are all healthy—we eat healthy foods, exercise, and go to the doctor regularly."
- Reassure they did nothing to cause the death: "Some kids think they could have prevented their person from dying, do you ever have that thought?"
- Provide space for the child to express their grief and remember their person:
  "I was just thinking about how much grandma loved strawberries."
  "I think grandma would have been really proud of your presentation. I am sad that she died and can't be here to see it AND I am really happy that I got to see it."
- Help your child think of friends and other trusted adults that they can share their feelings with and talk about their loved one.
- Look at pictures or visit the graveside of your loved one. Your family's spiritual beliefs may play a role here as well.

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