

Supporting Children

Explaining death

Early on for a child, how a person died is usually less important than it is for adults. No means or cause of death is better or worse than another for a grieving child. They are all overwhelming.

If a death is expected (for example, through cancer or other illness), the family may have had time to prepare for the loss. They may have begun to adjust to the future without the person, to make sure that photographs have been taken, letters to open in the future have been written, goodbyes said. It is very likely that the family will have received help – and will continue to receive help – from a hospice-based service or other support service (such as Macmillan nurses).

However, the family may also have suffered through a prolonged period of stress in which the children felt unable to undertake normal activities or to rebel or have fun; a period when the family focused on the person who was dying in a way that the children found very hard.

If a death is sudden (for example, through a heart attack or road accident) there is no chance for goodbyes and no chance for preparations or adjustment. The last conversations linger in the memory. There is no professional whose role it is to support these bereaved families (although police family liaison officers and hospital-based bereavement services make valuable contributions). However, for some people, a sudden death may be seen more positively (for example, of a frail grandmother).

If a death is through suicide, there are particular difficulties for the families left behind. It has been estimated that for every suicide, six people will experience intense grief – and many more will be deeply affected. Those bereaved through suicide face especially intense feelings and thoughts, ask themselves more agonising questions and face more public scrutiny. For both children and adults, it can take a long time to dare to trust others again.

Children and young people attending the funeral

If you are prepared to let your child make the choice of whether to attend the funeral, some things may help them decide:

- Talk to them about what is involved.
- Let them know that they can change their minds about being there – at any time.
- Check that they are happy with the choice they've made – but not too often, because children want to please and may say what they think you want them to say.
- Have someone with whom the child feels secure to act as their supporter for the funeral. This may be an aunt or uncle or one of your best friends. This allows you to be fully present at the funeral for your own sake.

- Give them clear and detailed information about what will happen; this will involve explanations about the difference between, for example, burials and cremations. If it fits with your own beliefs, it will help if the child has had some preparation about the difference between the body of the person and the part that made them who they were. Some people call this a soul, or a spirit, or love, or 'what was special about daddy' or 'what we will remember about daddy'.
- Reassure them that it is all of the body of the person who has died that is being buried or cremated. Some younger children are confused and wonder what happens to the head, arms and legs.
- Give reassurance that the person who has died can no longer feel anything, so they will not feel the flames nor will they be scared at being buried.
- Offer clear and detailed explanations of what to expect from people at the funeral. Some children can be shocked that people seem to have a party after someone has died; others are upset when people say: 'How lovely to see you'. Explain that this doesn't mean that these people are happy that the person has died – they're just the sort of things that adults say. Equally, seeing adults in deep distress may alarm children but preparation beforehand will help them understand that this is a reasonable response to the huge thing that has happened.
- Prepare them for some of the things that adults may say to them. For example, boys may be told that they are the 'man of the house now' and they will need to know that they are not.
- Create opportunities to be involved. This may be in the planning of the funeral service. It may be through saying or reading or writing something about the person who has died. It may be through choosing a particular piece of music. They may wish for something special to be put in the coffin, for example, a picture or something linked to a memory.
- Give plenty of reassurance that they can still be involved and participate in saying 'goodbye' even if they choose not to attend and that they won't be criticised if they don't go to the funeral.

How age can affect a child's understanding of death and dying

Our understanding about death and dying increases with age. Broadly speaking, it follows this sort of pattern over the years from 3 or 4 to around 10:

The hamster's not moving but he'll play with me tomorrow.

The hamster won't ever play again.

Old people die and we can never play with them again.

Grandpa may die one day in the future.

Mummy and daddy will die when they're old.

I will die when I'm old.

Not only old people die. Mummy and daddy could die tomorrow if something happened.

I could die tomorrow.

Under 5 or 6, a child may not be able to understand that death is permanent nor that it happens to every living thing. A 4-year-old may be able to tell others confidently that 'my daddy's dead' and may even be

able to explain how 'he was hit by a car and he died'. However, the next sentence may be: 'I hope he'll be back before my birthday' or 'He's picking me up tonight'.

Slightly older children may still have this hope and belief that the death will not be permanent but are beginning to understand 'forever'. Children bereaved when they are 5 to 8 years old may feel that they can in some way reverse what has happened (*'Dad will come back if I'm very good and eat my broccoli'*).

They may also feel – as may older children and young people – that they in some way caused the death. (*'I was angry with him and shouted at him when he left for work because he wouldn't fix my bike. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's all my fault.'*) It is so common for a young person to feel they may have contributed to the death that it's worth saying something like: *'You do know, don't you, that nothing you said or didn't say and nothing you did or didn't do made this happen?'*

When first told of the death, younger children may be mainly concerned with the 'when' and 'where' of the death. Slightly older ones may also want to know the 'how' and older children and young people will also explore the 'why'.

Younger children will express their concerns about their own future; don't be surprised if a child asks you: *'What will happen to me? Who will meet me after school? Will I still go to Cubs?'* Whatever reassurance is possible about continuing everyday activities and arrangements will be appreciated, or clear explanations given about alternative arrangements. *'At the moment, we're working all this out. What I do know is that we will still be living in this house at least until Christmas and that granny Jane will meet you from school on the days I can't. You can still have Bethany to tea whenever you want.'*

As children begin to understand more about death and dying, a death in the family may make them anxious about the health and safety of surviving members of the family. Don't be surprised if the children become more clingy or more reluctant to see you leave. They may feel that they need to stick close to protect you from the mysterious occurrence that made their dad disappear or at least to be with you if it happens again. Older children may feel very responsible for you and younger siblings and feel the need to keep a close eye on your safety.

By the age of 10, children will usually have all of the bits of the jigsaw puzzle of understanding. They will even understand that they are able to cause their own death. They will appreciate clear and detailed information – beyond 'when', 'where' and 'how' the death happened, they will be interested in 'why'.