

Assisting Children to Live With Death

Adults must play a significant role in assisting children to live with death. The most important thing adults can do is to help children understand and accept their feelings throughout the entire death experience. The following information is intended to assist you in this effort.

1. Children need to learn how to mourn; that is, to go through the process of giving up some of the feelings they have invested in an animal or person and go on with other and new relationships. They need to remember; to be touched by the feelings generated by their memories. They need to struggle with real or imagined guilt over what they could have done. They need to deal with their anger over the loss.
2. Children need to mourn over the small losses, such as animals, in order to deal better with larger, closer losses of people.
3. Children need to be informed about a death. If they aren't told, but see that adults are upset, they may invent their own explanations and even blame themselves.
4. Children need to understand the finality of death. Because abstract thinking is difficult for them, they may misunderstand if adults say that a person or animal "went away" or "went to sleep." If you believe in an after life and want to tell your child about it, it is important to emphasize that they won't see the person or animal again on earth.
5. Children need to say good-bye to the deceased by participating in viewings and/or funerals, if only for a few minutes. No child is too young to participate in these activities.
6. Children need opportunities to work out their feelings and deal with their perceptions of death by talking, dramatic playing, reading books or expressing themselves through the arts.
7. Children need reassurance that the adults in their lives will take care of themselves and probably won't die until after the children are grown. However, children need to know that everybody will die some day.
8. Children need to know that other children die, but only if they are very sick or if there is a bad accident. It is equally important that they understand that almost all children grow and live to be very old.
9. Children need to be allowed to show their feelings; to cry, become angry or even laugh. The best approach is to empathize with their feelings. For example, you might say, "You're sad, You miss Grandma. Tell me about it."
10. Children need to feel confident that their questions will be answered honestly and not avoided. They need to know that adults will give them answers they can understand. Adults should take their cues from the children and answer only what they ask.