# A LINE ON LIFE

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# Helping Children to Deal with Death

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Last week's column dealt with the changing views of death as we grow from childhood to adulthood. This article will give parents some hints to help their children deal with death. In the process, it may also help the parents to deal with their own feelings about death.

**1. Listen to your children.** It helps if parents watch for questions that children ask about death in ordinary circumstances and take the time to answer these questions. For example, around four years of age, children may be puzzled about a dead bug and how it is different from another one crawling nearby. Also, when children enter school, they are almost certain to hear about a classmate's relative who has died.

Children hear casual statements and use their own logic to elaborate from what they hear. For example, one child heard her mother say that children must not be allowed to see her grandmother in her coffin, because it would be "harmful" to them. Since people had cried when they came from grandmother's room (where the coffin was), perhaps she had hurt them. Since nobody visits the coffin at night, maybe dead people hurt others seriously only at night. If parents listen carefully to their children's speculations about death, they can help the children to understand it better.

**2. Tell children the truth.** Children ask questions to find out about the world and themselves. If they find out that they have been misled, they will quit asking or seek another source of information. The truth helps children to sort out fantasy from reality.

Give answers that children can understand. Use simple and direct answers. If children feel it is "*okay*" to ask questions, they will continue to ask until they are satisfied with the information.

When adults talk about death, they are less than honest with each other. We talk about the deceased without ever mentioning death. We may say, "*He fell asleep,*" "*God took her away,*" or "*She passed away*." If children overhear these conversations and accept them, they may fear sleep, God or separation. (Imagine what a young child may think after overhearing the statement, "*He kicked the bucket*.")

**3. Accept children's feelings and help them to express their feelings.** What you tell your child depends on what you feel and believe about death. But words are of little help, if we do not take the sorrow of children seriously.

If a pet dies, we are often too eager to replace the animal with a prettier one. (As a parent who has lost a child, if someone said, "*But you still have (or can have) other children,*" how would you feel?) Some adults may tell the child, "*Don't be silly, it was only an animal*." In contrast, children need to believe that we accept *their* grief and support them in *their* sorrow. Too often, when death strikes in our immediate families, we are too absorbed in our grief to try to understand how our children feel. Learning to express their grief, anger, and anxiety will help children to cope with similar crises when they are adults.

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**Rather than being isolated or forced to attend a funeral, children can be allowed to choose how much they want to participate in the grieving process.**

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**4. Include the child in the grieving.** Children know when something is wrong. While mourning, it is generally preferable to allow – but not to force – children to remain with the family. When taking part in the family's grief, children can feel that they are not alone in their feelings of sadness or loss. One example involves a 5-year-old girl whose baby brother died. She was told of the death moments after it had occurred. Asking to touch the baby, her father held her, while she held the baby's hand and felt no responding grasp. She was there when friends and relatives talked and grieved. She attended the funeral. She accepted the death in a calm, matter-of-fact way, saying, "*Daddy, I know Billy is dead, because I saw him*."

**5. Assure the children of love.** If old enough to have some understanding of death, children (and adults) can feel threatened by the thought that they may be the next to die. In addition, children who lose their parents feel isolated and alone. Telling a child to "*act like a man,*" "*Take mother's place,*" or "*Be the Daddy now*" can be overwhelming to the child. Being asked to assume these awesome responsibilities may make children more fearful and insecure. On the other hand, letting children know they are loved and giving them plenty of touching and holding – along with a stable routine – can give them the assurance that these children need.

**6. Encourage the children back to a regular way of life.** Like adults, children need time to work through their feelings. Listen to the children's remembrances. Remembering is a useful way for both adults and children to grieve. It helps us to gradually put some emotional distance between us and the person who died. However – so they won't get "*bogged down*" by their feelings – they can be gradually encouraged to concentrate more on the present and the future.

Finally, it is important to help children to see death as part of the total life cycle that must be dealt with by everyone. Whether merely curious or facing an actual loss, both children and adults need to learn to cope with their feelings. With care and guidance, children can begin to understand that death is natural and – in spite of the pain – bearable.

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