Helping children understand death.

Written for the Ontario Funeral Service Association by Vernon F. Gunckel, Ph.D., with a foreword by Mr. Dressup.

Foreword

Many years ago my son Chris, then four years old, came up to me as I was talking on the telephone and tearfully put this question to me. "Why did he die so little?" It wasn't until I had finished my "important business" on the phone that I learned what Chris' question was about.

One of his newly acquired young guinea pigs had suddenly died. To a four year old's mind, a young animal should not die. As I tried to comfort Chris, I began to realize how inadequate my explanations were. This was his first direct experience with death, human or animal, and it was important that I give him answers. Yet it seemed that I raised more questions than I answered. Experienced as I was in entertaining and educating children through television, when it came to dealing with a tough subject like death face to face with my son, my ratings were pretty low.

I found myself wondering why this was so difficult. As an adult, I had experienced many situations involving death. Surely I could draw on the reactions of myself and others to these situations and find some sensible and satisfactory answers to my son's questions. Of course I could—but these were adult reactions. What makes sense to an adult can be nonsense to a youngster; just another example of the mystifying grown-up world to the mind of a child.

Things would have been much harder if it had been a friend or family member who had died, and not a pet. Still, my experience showed me that discussing death with children is not a simple matter, nor do one's previous experiences as a parent automatically prepare one for an event like this.

When the time comes for us to talk to our children about death, we may find that the concern about it will vary considerably from child to child, and certainly from one occasion to another. We still want to know not only what to say, but how much to say and when is the best time. Some of us may have the instinctive wisdom to deal readily with the situation. For others, it will be helpful to find guidance and information from an outside source. Certainly, if we ourselves are grieving, it will ease our stress if we are assured that we are communicating with our children in the best way.

Death is a difficult, distressing subject, but one we all must be concerned with from time to time. The purpose of this booklet is to inform and support you when the subject of death needs to be explained. If it eases the process for you, it will surely greatly benefit your child.

Ernie Coombs

"Mr. Dressup"

This booklet has been dedicated in memory of Ernie Coombs, “Mr. Dressup”.

(November 26, 1927 To September 18, 2001)

One thing a young child becomes good at is a proficiency in asking questions. Almost as soon as a child is able to talk, "Why?" and "How come?" are among the most common inquiries. Many of these questions don't present a problem in giving answers. However, there are those that can give us trouble. When it comes to explaining death to a child, what can and should be said?

In the past, such questions were ignored with the belief that, among others, children should be protected from the harsh realities of death. Today, we are beginning to recognize that talking about death with a young child is a skill that we, as adults, need to learn. As we explain the beginning of life, so too must we be able to discuss its end.

In response to what children ask about death, we also have our own questions. In addressing those QUESTIONS MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED ABOUT CHILDREN AND DEATH, this guide is written with the hope that it will help you when a child wants to talk about death.

What do young children understand about death?

Many of our attitudes about death are shaped during the formative years. In understanding what children perceive about death, we can help them develop and maintain a healthy perspective as a foundation for growth.

A child's first IDEA of death may be linked to sleep and a fear of separation.

A child's first EXPERIENCE of death usually comes from the death of an animal, whether it be a pet, a dead bird found on the ground, or a cat or dog hit by a car.

Among the first QUESTIONS a child may ask about death are generally:

WHAT IS DEAD?
WHY DO PEOPLE DIE?
WHERE DO DEAD PEOPLE GO?
WHAT DO DEAD PEOPLE DO?

In the preschool years, a child's concept is centred on the idea that death and life are interchangeable—that they are reversible. Dead people can come back. This belief is often supported not only through the games they play with one another, but from television where a person is killed in one program but is found alive and well in the next.

Dead people only go away for a while—take a trip—and come back. Young children attribute life and consciousness to the dead. Dead people eat. They play. They do much that we do.

Death can be avoided. Death is usually associated with accidents or getting killed through violence. If you are careful, you can keep from being dead.

Grown-ups can choose whether they live or die. At this age, a parent is seen as all-powerful. They can do just about anything. Therefore, being in command of all things, adults choose their coming and going. A parent's death may be viewed as rejection or punishment. A child may think that the reason their father died was because they did something wrong or that he didn't love them anymore. A child may exhibit exemplary behaviour hoping that the dead parent will forgive them and return.

An element of magic also plays a major role in the world of the young child. Who has not heard, "I wish you were dead!" When it actually happens, a child may believe that he or she had caused the death.

The death of a parent is associated with security, stability and dependability. "Who is going to take care of us now that Mommy is dead?" "Daddy, are you going to die?" These are common concerns for a child when a parent has died. The routine of everyday life has been interrupted, thus creating

worries about survival. It is not unusual for a child to check the remaining parent's bedroom at night to see if the surviving parent is still there. There is a fear that the other parent may also die.

Abstract concepts such as final, permanent, distance, time, cannot be understood in the same way that we as adults know them. For the young child, "NOW" is the most important moment in his or her life—never mind tomorrow.

By the age of five, a child's concept of death changes considerably. Death is no longer something that can be controlled. Death now comes from outside sources such as disease, from growing older among other things. This is the age of fantasy and monsters. New anxieties come to the fore. Ideas about the world greatly change.

With this understanding of a child's concept of death, we can become more sensitive and accepting of his or her feelings and actions. This understanding enables us to give comfort and support to a child in his or her expressions about death.

What should young children be told about death?

No matter how hard we may try, we cannot protect a child from an awareness of death. When riding in a car, we may pass a cemetery which prompts a question or two. The evening news, television, drama and film, often portray death. Children themselves are sometimes caught up in "death games" in which fantasies are enacted where the object is survival.

When children ask questions about death, we may experience a sinking feeling and do everything possible to change the subject or gloss it over. In part, our first reaction may come from a general sense of personal inadequacy in being unable to answer many of the questions for ourselves. As one person put it, "Before I can teach my children about death,

someone has to set me straight."

Talking about death is necessary. It is a vital part of every child's development. A child's natural curiosity will provide an opportunity for child and adult to explore together the meaning of death AND life.

The age of a child will determine the content and direction of any discussion about death. However, it is wise not to precisely fit a child's perceptions about death into a fixed category, as all children do not develop in the same way at the same time.

An experience in their own life will usually be the basis for questions. These questions may be raised at an unusual moment or inopportune time. If possible, it is best to deal with a question at the time it is asked.

In giving answer, be as honest and direct as you can in language that a child can understand. Keep in mind children do not see things as we do. While it may sound beautiful to say grandmother will become a star in the heavens, the child will believe grandmother has actually become a star. A young child interprets things literally. An answer such as this, can present problems, as he or she grows older.

To tell a child grandfather has died from old age may be true, but to a child, anyone who is over 20 appears to be old, thus creating a fear in growing older. Likewise, to say Aunt Maude has died because she was ill may make a child fearful of getting sick.

This does not mean you try to cover the fact that Aunt Maude has indeed died from illness. But it is important for a child to understand that not all illness results in death.

Do not give more information than is required at the given moment. Children have a very short attention span as well as a limit in retaining information. There is only so much they can absorb and understand.

Most of all be a good listener. Pay attention. Be actively involved in what is being said rather than passive. Be patient—especially when the same questions are asked again and again. It may be one way in which the child is testing what has been previously discussed.

Any discussion about death should contain a strong affirmation about life. We are fortunate to have available today excellent material in helping children understand death. Reading some of the suggested stories listed at the back of this pamphlet WITH them demonstrates that it is all right to ask questions.

Do children mourn?

YES, children do mourn.

As adults we only need to go back to some of our earliest memories to recall the separation from something or someone to which or to whom we had become attached. It may have been a pet, a favourite toy, a move from one neighbourhood to another, or the loss of a significant person in our world at the time. Can you remember how you felt? Many of those feelings we experienced can now be identified with the normal process of grief.

We have come to recognize we cannot measure a child's grief in the same ways in which we might identify grief patterns in adults, although we might see some similarities.

Not only do children mourn, but also we must permit them to do so. We must let them know it is okay to grieve. However, we must be careful not to impose our ideas on them as to how we think they SHOULD feel, but rather accept their expressions as they experience them.

Since many of our attitudes about death are formed at an early age, it is imperative we provide children with support and understanding in working through their own grief.

How can children be helped to cope with grief?

Children are often left alone in their grief with the belief that they are too young to comprehend loss. We may overlook their feelings because of our occupation with our own sorrow. Children need to grieve. They need our attention and care. We can help them in several ways.

ASSURE A CHILD THAT IT IS OK TO GRIEVE.

Let children know that it is natural to feel sad and different at such a time. Don't hide your tears. By example, you are saying it is acceptable and normal to grieve. However, explain the reasons for your tears with the added assurance that even though things have changed, he or she is still loved and secure. Children need to have confirmed their world is still

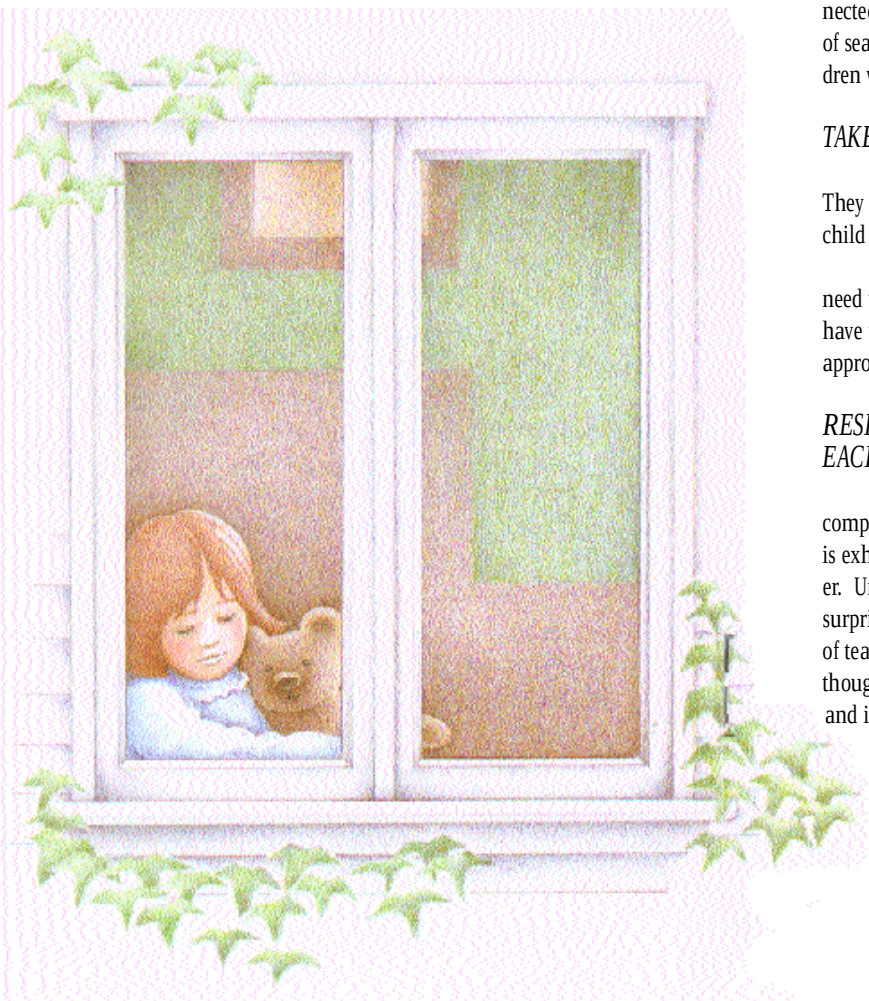
together and they will be cared for. Demonstrate this in word and touch.

USE APPROPRIATE WORDS.

Use language the child can understand. Don't fear the words "death" and "dead." Don't say, "Grandma has gone away or is sleeping." DO say, "Grandma has died."

While you may have a firm personal religious belief about life after death, be careful in the use of such terms as "heaven" and "angels" or phrases like, "Daddy has gone to be with God" or "Daddy has gone to a better place." Adults may speak using these abstractions, but a young child thinks in terms of the concrete.

This is not to say you cannot share your faith with a child. It does mean that it must be explained within the limitation of a child's ability to comprehend. If, on the other hand, you do not adhere to a religious belief, don't pretend to have one.



GIVE AN HONEST EXPLANATION AS TO THE CAUSE OF DEATH.

It has been said, "Don't tell a child what they will need to unlearn later." This is good advice. It has also been said, "Don't use 'beautiful lies' to shield children from death." This is another good rule to follow. Our intent may be well meaning, but we will surely add to the confusion of a child as he or she grows older if we are less than honest.

In talking about death, a child does not need to know every detail. Give only that information asked for or required.

Since children believe in magic, it may be necessary to assure them nothing they said or did caused the death. Like adults, children also experience guilt. They may have the idea that their thoughts, feelings or behaviour somehow were connected with the death. Examples from nature and the changes of season have been helpful in explaining death to younger children when death has been natural.

TAKE TIME TO LISTEN.

Children need someone who will listen to them. They need someone they can trust. It is often comforting for a child just to be heard.

When questions are asked, don't feel that you always need to have an answer. If you don't have one, say so. "I have wondered about that, too. What do you think?" is an appropriate response.

RESPECT THE INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY OF EACH CHILD.

No two children will grieve in the same way. Don't compare one child with another. Don't be concerned if what is exhibited in one child may or may not be observable in another. Unlike adults, children will grieve intermittently. Don't be surprised or upset if after having shared a serious talk with lots of tears, a child suddenly asks, "Can I go out and play?" as though nothing has happened. Such behaviour can be expected and is not uncommon.

GIVE CHILDREN THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK OUT THEIR GRIEF.

Most of a young child's grief will be expressed through play. Play is one way a child has to vent his or her feelings. Another way is through drawing pictures. Children like to draw pictures and often these pictures graphically express their thoughts and feelings. This expression should be encouraged and supported.

Some families have found it helpful to remember the person who has died by making a scrapbook about that individual's life. The sharing of memories can often be meaningful for both adult and child together.

Talking about the death aids in accepting the fact the person is dead; however, such a discussion must not be forced.

Should children attend the funeral?

If a child asks to attend the funeral, they should be permitted to do so. Children should be encouraged to come to the funeral home and/or church during the hours of visiting and to attend the funeral service. If they decide they don't want to go, they will nevertheless appreciate they had been asked. The decision must be theirs.

Never force a child to do anything he or she doesn't want to do. When asking a child if they wish to attend the funeral, be careful that you don't influence their decision by

phrasing the question in such a way that they will feel obligated to do as they feel YOU would have them do. Be honest.

Giving children the choice of involvement in the rituals of visiting and the funeral, indicates that their role as a member of the family is valued and respected. If they are excluded from this choice, you may raise fears in their minds that you are hiding something from them or that they really are not included in the mourning process.

There is nothing to fear in these rituals. While they will not know the full significance of all that is said and done, they will remember that they were included in the family circle.

You cannot protect a child from the reality of death. Every person, at some point in life, will have to deal with grief. This is a good time when the child has you present and has your support.

If they decide to view the body and/or attend the funeral service, prepare them in advance. Arrive at the funeral home before the visiting begins so that you can explain what will happen.

If they want to touch the body, let them do so. They need to see that life is no more. If you are concerned that this may create problems, keep in mind that children need to understand death on their own terms. In the long run, despite some bad dreams which might occur, they will have taken a first step in developing their own comprehension of death. With you at their side, death can be made less fearful.

If they wish to remain with you as you greet visitors, let them stay. Don't push them aside for convenience sake. Make them feel they are welcome. They will probably tire however, and go off with a friend, brother or sister, or other family member to the coffee lounge or elsewhere; but let them make that choice.

As with the visitation, explain what will take place during the funeral service. If you are uncertain what to say about particular situations, ask for guidance from your clergy and/or funeral director who have had experience in these matters.

In facing sadness early in life, with family support, children will be better prepared to cope with loss and death. As they grow older, they will have a greater understanding and reassurance about life—its meaning and purpose.

Should children be told if the death has been by suicide?

While the media has made us more aware and increased our understanding of suicide, there are still many unanswered questions about this type of death. A certain stigma remains making it difficult for many people to discuss it openly.

A concern as to how others may see us, our own personal guilt in thinking that somehow we should have been able to have prevented the death, and a myriad of emotions, may cause us to mask the reality of what has actually happened. In hiding it from ourselves, we do all we can to keep our children from knowing the truth about the death of a parent, brother or sister. Even if we have accepted the nature of the death, the intense pain that is experienced is difficult enough for us to bear without assuming the responsibility for involving children in this special kind of grief.

You will find that you cannot hide your grief. Children are observant. They know that something is very wrong. We have all heard the expression, "Little pitchers have big ears." How true that old adage is. Children not only hear things but see things as well.

They need to know what is going on. They need to be told by YOU before they learn it from someone else. Even if you are successful in keeping it a secret from them for a time, later in life they may learn the truth, creating a whole set of potential problems and consequences.

What should young children be told about suicide? While not telling a child the truth can create difficulties later in life, it must be said that being too explicit can also present fears and misunderstanding. A young child needs to know the truth, but only within his or her ability to comprehend and tolerate such expression. Don't give more information than is necessary or required in response to a specific question that may be raised.

You will probably be asked, "What is suicide?" "Why did he or she do it?" This may lead to such questions as, " Was it my fault?" "Was I bad?" "Did I do something wrong?" Listen carefully. Answer as honestly as you can in recognition of the child's age and his or her individual level of understanding.

Do not be judgemental about the act, but at the same time be careful not to indicate a justification. Watch what you say around others, as children may pick up on something that was said and interpret it in ways you might not even imagine. Phrases like, "The child is just like his father," "I guess he was crazy," "He never loved us anyway," may be a way in which you express your own personal anger, but such statements may create anxiety within the child, thinking that he too may kill himself when he grows older.

When children are in your care and you have assumed responsibility for their development, the weight of the death may be too heavy for you to carry alone.

Don't hesitate to seek help. In many larger commu nities, we are fortunate to have support groups which can assist

you and your children in resolving your grief. Your funeral director, clergy and other professionals trained in working with the bereaved can also give support.

FOR CHILDREN

(Before selecting a book for your child to read or for you to read with them, you may wish to read it for yourself first to see that it is appropriate for your child and situation.)

BROWN, Mark. WHEN DINOSAURS DIE.
Boston: Little Brown, 1996.

BUSCAGLIA, Leo. THE FALL OF FREDDIE THE LEAF.
New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1982.

DePAOLA, Tomie. NANA UPSTAIRS AND NANA DOWNSTAIRS.
New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973.

MELLONIE, B. and INGPEN, R. LIFETIMES: THE BEAUTIFUL WAY TO EXPLAIN DEATH TO CHILDREN.
New York: Bantam Books, 1983.

MILES, Misha. ANNIE AND THE OLD ONE.
Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1971.

'MUNSCH, Robert. LOVE YOU FOREVER.
Scarborough, Ontario: Firefly Books Ltd., 1986.

O'TOOLE, Donna. AARVY AARDVARK FINDS HOPE.
Burnsville, North Carolina: Rainbow Connection, 1988.

VIORST, Judith. THE TENTH GOOD THING ABOUT BARNEY.
New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1971.

WILLIAMS, Margery. THE VELVETEEN RABBIT.
New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1983.

WOLFELT, Alan Dr. HOW I FEEL: A COLORING BOOK FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN.
US: Companion Press,1996

ABOUT CHILDREN

GROLLMAN, Earl A. TALKING ABOUT DEATH: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD.
Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

KNOWLES, Don & REEVES, Nancy. BUT WON'T GRANNY NEED HER SOCKS?
Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hurt Publishing Co., 1983.

LeSHAN, Eda. LEARNING TO SAY GOODBYE WHEN A PARENT DIES.
New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1976.

O'TOOLE, Donna HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVWE AND GROW.
Burnsville, North Corolina: Rainbow Connection,2000

RUDOLF, Marguerita. SHOULD THE CHILDREN KNOW?
New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

SCHIFF, Harriet Sarnoff. THE BEREAVED PARENT.
New York: Crown Publishers, 1977.

WOLFELT, Alan Dr. HEALING A BEREAVED CHILD
USA: Batesville Management Services, 1996.

HELPFUL BOOKS…

Many books have been written on grief and the funeral. Your OFSA funeral director has an up-to-date list of available books and may have their own resource library.

The following brochures are available
from member firms of the
Ontario Funeral Service Association

Funerals—A Celebration of Life
Funeral Etiquette
Helping Each Other After Suicide
Living Through Grief
Mr. Dressup—Helping Children Understand Death
Multicultural Funeral Practices
Should Children Know About Death?
Talking About It—Cremation
The Time to Plan a Funeral
To Make It Easier
What Every Family Should Know

Additional copies of this brochure are available from
this member firm of the
Ontario Funeral Service Association.

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