

Children and Death: What Do They Need to Know

Children have a built-in tendency to sense when something is wrong. Letting them know (in age appropriate terms) when a close family member is seriously ill or has died, is much better than withholding information and speaking in hushed voices. Keeping children "in the dark" creates an air of mystery and impending doom. Children have vivid imaginations and tend to put the worst possible interpretations on things they don't understand especially when adults are being secretive. Talking to them about the situation will help them to better comprehend what's happening and lessen their anxiety.

- Some pointers to keep in mind when talking to children about death are:
- Keep the conversation brief (children have short attention spans).
- Use simple terminology that's age appropriate.
- Be honest but share only basic information.
- Reassure them that while the situation is sad, the world and their lives will continue.
- Ask them if they have any questions or concerns.
- Tell them they can come to you anytime they want to talk.

Some people have legitimate concerns about allowing children to attend and/or participate in the funeral service of a loved one. My children were in their mid teens when their grandfather passed away. They attended the funeral services along with several cousins of various ages. Among those in attendance were many of dad's friends who came with extended family members including three and four-year-olds. One case that stands out in my memory is the great grandfather that held his grandson (age 4) by the hand as he greeted the mourners. The elderly gentleman extended his hand to each of us and offered his condolences. The little boy followed his grandfather's example and extended his hand as he repeated the same phrase his grand parent had used. The procedure, which was conducted in a natural and respectful manner, served not only to provide an example of appropriate behavior but also implied that death is not something alien and cataclysmic but is in essence a part of life. The funeral service can also be a way for children to see the big picture and acquire a sense of closure they might not otherwise have.

However, the decision whether to allow children to attend funeral services or not, is one that each parent needs to make with their own children in mind. Several factors that need to be taken into consideration are: the child's age, maturity level, relationship to the deceased, current issues in the child's life, etc.

Whatever decision the parents make, the most important thing to keep in mind is the need to provide constant reassurance of your love and willingness to talk to them especially when a close family member dies. This will go a long way toward helping them heal and move forward in their own lives.