

Learning to Cope with Death

*To everything there is a season,
And a time for every purpose—
A time to be born, a time to die;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance.*

—Ecclesiastes



Death is a part of life.

It is as much a part of the human experience as birth. Yet death has become a taboo subject in this culture. Perhaps this is because death does not take place in the home as often as it once did. When people died at home, death was shared by all family members. Today, death usually occurs in a hospital, far away from the family circle.

As we come to see less of death, we also begin to talk less about it. We don't even like to use the word "dead." Instead, we say someone "went away" or "departed" or "passed on" or "expired." Maybe we think that by avoiding the subject, death will go away.

It won't, of course.

We are especially reluctant to talk about death with our children. Perhaps we think that children aren't able to understand and talk about death. Or we want to shield them from this experience for as long as possible. Maybe we think we can do this by not mentioning the subject, by ignoring children's questions, or by "beating around the bush."

We can't, of course.

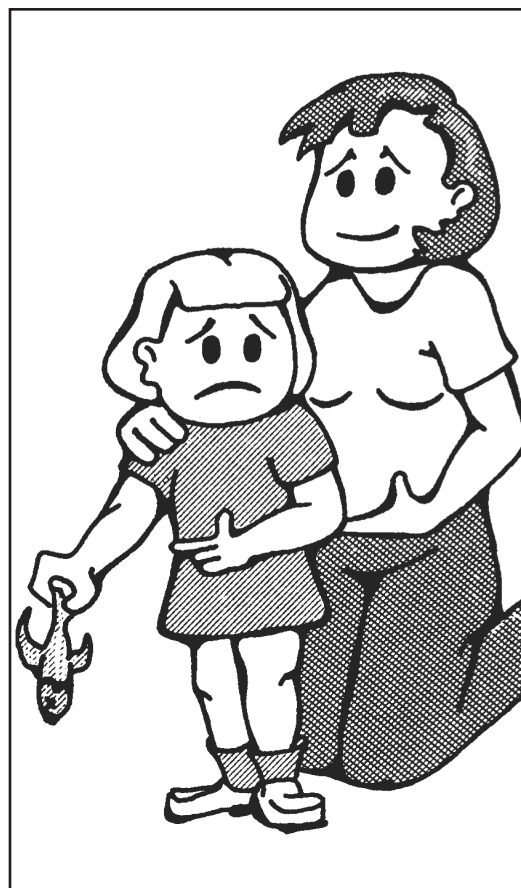
Death cannot be concealed



We can't hide death from children, for death is always around us. One day grandpa may not return from the hospital, or a favorite pet may be hit by a car. A funeral procession may pass by, or a public figure may be assassinated. And, of course, every day TV newscasters report death in "living" color on the family television set.

EC 1300-E

Reprinted February 2006



Children are aware of death from an early age. And they want to talk about it. They know when something is wrong and they need to understand what's going on. When we ignore their questions or mislead them, we make them confused and leave them to find their own explanation for what has happened.

This can make death very frightening to children. A child who is told that Aunt Sally "just went to sleep" may become afraid of going to sleep. Left with the explanation that grandpa "went away," a child may worry he or she did something to make grandpa leave, and feel rejected because grandpa never said goodbye.

When we try to shield children from death, we deprive them of their right to mourn. Like love and joy, sorrow needs to be expressed. Mourning the death of a relative or pet gives children a chance to grow and come to terms with pain and death. These are important experiences no parent should deny his or her children.

HELPING • CHILDREN • GROW

Living with death

Instead of trying to protect your children from death, help them prepare for it. Death is not an easy thing to understand or accept. Nothing you can say will ever make death painless. But you can make it easier for your children to cope with death.

Exactly what you say to your children about death will depend on many things. Your own feelings about death, your religious beliefs, and the developmental level of your children will influence what you tell them. There are, however, a few guidelines that others have found useful in talking to children about death:

- Introduce children to the idea of death at an early age.
- Be honest in your explanations.
- Encourage children to express their feelings about death.

You may find at first that very young children don't understand that death is final. This doesn't mean you shouldn't talk about death with them. They will take in what information they can, and gradually their understanding will increase.

Death is a fact of life that children, like all of us, can learn to live with.

The time to tell



One good idea is to introduce children to the idea of death before someone they know dies. Many ordinary events—the death of a plant or pet—can help you teach your children that some things can't be changed. When children learn about death through such experiences, they are better able to cope with a person's death later on.

Here is how one mother used this kind of event to help her 4-year-old daughter understand the death of her dog:

"Mommy, Fido won't get up."

"Fido is dead, Jennifer. He died. He won't ever get up again."

"Dead?"

"Yes, that's right. Dead."

"What's dead?"

"Dead means that Fido has stopped breathing and his heart has stopped beating. See how he's not moving? He'll never be able to move again."

"How come?"

"Because sooner or later everything that lives has to die."

"Will I die?"

"Yes, but that shouldn't be for a very long time."

"Will you die?"

"Yes I'll die, too, but not for many years, I hope."

"Will Daddy die?"

"Yes, everybody dies, but we expect Daddy will be around for quite a while yet."

"Oh. (Pause) Now make Fido better."

"I'm sorry, honey, I can't make Fido better. This isn't like when your scooter broke and I fixed it. Or like when you had a stomach ache and daddy gave you medicine to make you feel better. This is different. When you're dead you can't be fixed."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way things are. Remember how we planted seeds in the garden last spring?"

"Yes."

"And remember how they grew and became beautiful flowers?"

"Yes."

"And then after a while all the flowers fell off and never came back. Remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's what this is like. Fido used to be a little puppy. Then he grew up to be a big dog and had lots of fun with us for a while. Then he got old, and now he's dead."

"I don't like dead."

"I don't either. Nobody does. It makes us sad when someone we love dies. Sometimes it makes us feel a little better to talk about how we feel. Sometimes we cry. That's all right, too. Do you feel sad?"

"Yes."

"I'm sad too, honey. Come here on my lap and we'll be sad together."

Reprinted from a University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service publication and adapted for use in Oregon by Cindee M. Bailey, former Extension child development specialist, Oregon State University.

This publication may be photocopied or reprinted in its entirety for noncommercial purposes.

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties. Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—without discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

Published January 1988; Reprinted February 2006