



by Karen Stephens

## The Firing Line: Telling Kids About Death

Facing death, admitting it is part of life's dance, is unpleasant. Most of us put off discussing death with our children, sometimes far too long. Rather than gradually preparing them in small manageable doses, we opt for a crash-course. We wait until death steals one of life's dancing partners before we garner the nerve to broach mortality.

Death invites unending questions; many we can't answer. Death is still shrouded in mystery; it's hard to explain what we don't completely understand. Supporting kids as they come to grips with death is draining and confusing. We have to quell our own emotions while at the same time comprehending (and juggling!) all the events that piggy-back family death.

It's hard to be at one's "personal best" when facing death. Even when expected, it's a time of crisis. As you grieve yourself, how do you convey information factually and yet compassionately to a confused, grieving child? How do you keep your composure when you're most vulnerable? It's hard, but parents must rise to the challenge.

Though most of us don't have clear memories of how we thought as children, we do understand that children perceive death differently than adults. To help children, we must consider those differences. We'll be helpful to children only if we can see things from their point of view. To be supportive, we must anticipate what they're thinking, fearing, and imagining. If we don't, children will be left amidst a whirling flurry of changes, feeling confused, forlorn, and lost in the shuffle.

Even though it's a tough job, children desperately need parents to help them comprehend life's final dance step. To empathize with, relate to, and support children's grief, reflect on basic child development. By understanding (and remembering!) how children perceive the world and how they interpret their perceptions, we can help them cope with life and all that it deals them.

Here are some tips to help you sensitively help your children. I hope they help you perform your parenting job in a thoughtful and loving manner.

**Children mature in predictable stages** — emotionally, socially, intellectually, and morally. While no two children mature exactly alike or at the same speed they all go through similar stages.

**Tip:** Respond to children based on individual ability to understand information and complex emotions. The younger the child, the simpler explanations should be.

**The younger the child, the shorter the attention span.**

**Tip:** Keep explanations short and base them on children's interest. Their body language will let you know when they've heard enough. When children become bored or overwhelmed take a play break.

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**Young children grasp ideas slowly over time.** Understanding death is achieved one step at a time. Mortality is understood gradually as children mature intellectually and live through varied experiences.

**Tip:** Be patient when children ask the same questions over and over. You'll repeat, re-phrase, and re-explain answers many times. This helps children sort out information for better understanding. Gradually they grasp the basic meaning of death and deal with the feelings that dovetail with new, confusing experiences.

**Young children interpret language literally.** Kids don't understand metaphors or analogies. They take everything at face value. If we shy from using the word "dead" we make understanding death harder, rather than easier.

**Tip:** When someone dies, go ahead and say the word "dead." Explain that death means a heart stops beating. The person no longer breathes, eats, moves, sleeps, talks, or sings. The body no longer works. It never functions again.

I know by avoiding the word "death" we're trying to shield children from pain; but so much confusion can result if we tiptoe around the truth. Saying, "We lost mother last night" could make a child believe mom is still alive, but lost in a store or on the highway, trying to find her way home. Kids find lost teddy bears and toys under the bed all the time; might a "lost" mom turn up there, too?

When we avoid the truth, we risk angering children. Kids may get mad when told God needed daddy and took him to the "other side." It's not hard to imagine a child wondering what the "other side" is and how one gets there. And if God is so loving and powerful, how come he takes the father the child loves and needs?

Saying death is "like sleeping" adds more problems. Bedtime becomes terrifying to children who think Aunt Ellen is taking a long nap from which she can't wake up. Even calling a grave or casket a "final resting place" can cause alarm in nap-wary children.

**Children under 12 years of age often make illogical assumptions.** Children don't clearly understand cause and effect. They observe concurrent events and can consider them related. This is particularly troublesome to children when someone young dies.

**Tip:** Acknowledge that everyone dies, sometimes even children. Make sure children know most people grow old and live a fulfilling life before their body stops working and dies.

**Children have active imaginations.** They often imagine death and events that lead to it as more frightening or gruesome than they usually are (especially children who consume daily doses of violent television, videos, or news).

**Tip:** Be honest and specific about causes of death. Although television frequently portrays death from guns and car accidents, that's not how most people die. It's important to emphasize that people usually have peaceful, quiet deaths. If children worry death was violent or bloody, (and it wasn't) reassure them otherwise.

If illness is the cause of death, use the correct name and simply explain the illness. Emphasize that, in general, only serious illness leads to death. (If we simply say illness causes death, children may develop abnormal fears of colds, flu, and the like.)

**Children have limited vocabularies.** Strange new words make death confusing and mysterious. When using new vocabulary, explain what it means so children aren't left to wonder their own dark and foreboding imaginings.

**Tip:** Words children may need help with include: casket, Shiva, cremation, wake, obituary, funeral, cemetery, crematory, urn, ashes, crypt, vault, grave, pallbearer, tombstone, mausoleum, homicide, suicide, eulogy, critical condition, intensive care unit, and so on.

These are fundamentals for responding to children about death. The Parenting Exchange Library column, "The Great Beyond: Children's Questions about Death" sheds more light on how children try to make sense of death. It can help you be prepared when children ask the unexpected; they always do.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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