

parenting matters

Talking to Children About Death



Lea Gardner Elkin

Each article that I reviewed while researching this topic began with a statement about how difficult it is for parents to talk to children about death. I want, instead, to begin with an acknowledgment of a death that touched many of us in the Lexington community, and allowed us, as parents, to learn from our children.

Molly Eisenberg, a 2008 graduate of Lexington High School died this fall from ovarian cancer, a rare disease in someone so young. She was captain of the LHS volleyball team and a mentor to many of her teammates, an active student while at LHS, and a lively girl. She was also a very good friend of my son. I watched this close group of our children come together to support their friend, and watched Molly deal with her illness. Their process was something to behold! Molly confronted her fears about death, and her sadness about things she would never get a chance to experience, with openness and candor. Her friends met her need, and did the same. They visited her, cried with her, sent songs to her, and lived life with her. At her memorial service, her friends spoke about, and sang to her, in a packed church, with complete grace, insight and love. What seemed so present for Molly and her friends was a clear decision to face this challenge head on, with realism, honesty, and support.

We, as parents, can follow this example. Death is hard to talk about because it is sad, final, and unknown. Being able to talk to our children about this experience, even at a young age, can prevent early fears, misconceptions or worries. Finding time to talk with children before a loss

occurs can make this topic less difficult. Many of us use examples in nature, explaining what happens to a tree or a leaf from spring (birth) to winter (death). We can also discuss death when we see a funeral procession, or pass a cemetery in the car. (This is a time to ask your children what they think happens when one dies. Children become aware of death at early ages, often in ways we are not aware. Our own experiences with death can also have an unknown influence on our children. Having this conversation in a non-threatening, or non-stressful time allows us to know what they have already learned, or the misperceptions they may have formed.)

What we say to children about death depends on many factors: the child's age and development, our spiritual and religious beliefs, and our own experiences. In all situations, children will benefit from clear information, tailored to their developmental understanding.

Children under six do not understand death as final. They may seem unaffected by the death of a loved one because they think this person will return. They also may feel responsible for the death, because of an action or thought they had prior to the death. Parents must ask questions and give clear reassurance to the child. Explaining why the person (or animal) has died is critical in alleviating this natural developmental thought.

Children six to nine years of age begin to understand that death is permanent, but may think it can only happen to the old or sick. They may struggle with accepting that death can happen to anyone. Children nine to twelve may still take responsibility for the death. They understand that death is "irreversible, that all living things die, and that they ..will die some day." (Hospice) It is a normal task of this age to question life and death, but many parents may worry about their child's preoccupation with this topic.

Teenagers begin to understand death as an adult. They develop more philosophical beliefs about life and death as they form their own identity. They may take more risks to assert their control over their lives. But they, too, will struggle with how to talk, or if to talk, about the death of a loved one.



Children grieve as adults do. But they may not have the words to express their emotions. They may show their related stress in various ways. One may see age regression, a drop in school grades, angry outbursts, nightmares, anxiety, withdrawal, etc. With teens, substance abuse or risky behavior may occur.

Factual information can help children of any age understand this experience. Dr. Earl Grollman in his book suggests explaining death to young children as the "absence of life functions—they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel any more." Information needs to be simple and geared to the child's ability to understand. Try to avoid too many words, and familiar clichés, ie. Granny went to sleep, or Poppy is happy with God in heaven. For some children, these explanations can lead to fear or confusion later, ie. If I go to sleep, will I die? Why is everyone so sad if Poppy is happy? Parents also need to be open and ready for questions, often coming at times that are difficult for us, and coming up at unexpected times? Children process information and experiences at their own pace. They may ask something weeks or months after the death when we are sure they are 'over it'. They may ask the same question repeatedly. Our reassurance, patience, and support are critical.

There are many ways we can support our children through a death, the most important being to listen, and to allow their grief. "Mental health is not the denial of a tragedy, but the frank acknowledgement of it." (E. Grollman) Encourage questions, even if the answer is "I don't know". Children will sense

our doubts and uneasiness if we 'make it up' or tell them a 'fact' we do not believe.. We can allow our children to be more comfortable with their uncertainties if we acknowledge our own.

Include children as much as possible in the aftermath of death. Many parents are uncertain about children attending a funeral, gravesite, or memorial service. Experts agree that children over age seven should decide for themselves, with a clear explanation of what to expect if they go. (This is particularly important if there is a wake, or an open casket at the service. A clear understanding of what they will see and do is important.) They may change their mind several times before they know what is right for them. They may ask many questions, ie. Can I hug Mommy again? Parents need to allow this process and respect their final decisions. We must decide for young children, taking into account the age of the child, what the service will include, and the relation to the deceased. It is helpful to designate someone close to be with the child if he stays home, or needs to leave during a service. During a mourning period, try to maintain a normal routine for the child. Many young children ask to go back to school following the news of a death, even that of a parent. This is the child asking for normalcy and a safe structure, not avoidance of the death.

Children push us forward during our own grieving period. They force us to get up each day, answer their questions, attend to their needs. They encourage us to live. They need our patience, reassurance, and support. They need us to meet this life challenge head on!

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