

DEATH: GUIDELINES TO HELP A CHILD COPE

Children are most frightened by things they do not understand. The following will help lessen your child's misconceptions and fears about death. Remember to adapt these suggestions to your child's age, experience and the situation itself.

- Follow your child's lead. It is more important to provide an accepting home environment where your child feels free to ask questions about death than to overburden your child with information he may not yet comprehend or even wish to hear. Answer questions briefly and as honestly as you can, and look for signs of deeper questions and concerns. Give your child time to digest your answers, and check back to see if your youngster has understood.
- It is often helpful to explain death as the absence of life. Use your own spiritual beliefs and personal views to talk about what you feel happens after death. Avoid telling your child that someone who has died has "gone away" or "gone to sleep." Your child may become unnaturally fearful of separation or of bedtime.
- Look for relatively unemotional opportunities to talk about death. Seeing a dead animal lying on the road or hearing about a death on the nightly news present natural opportunities to become acquainted with death for the first time in a less involved, less devastating way than experiencing a personal crisis.
- Books can be helpful both in comforting a child who has experienced a loss as well as in explaining concepts of death in terms appropriate to a child's age and understanding.
- If someone has died, do not try to protect your child by denying grief. By acknowledging your feelings of sadness and loss, your child will know that it is appropriate to bring feelings out into the open. Talk to your child about how it will take time to get over some of the sadness, and how the person who has died will always be missed. Also, talk about what you would like to remember about the person who has died. Never try to lessen your child's unhappiness by telling your youngster to be brave and not to cry. Children need an outlet for their sad feelings.
- Reassure your child that the death was not his fault in any way. Tell your child that no angry feelings or wishes contributed to the death of a loved one or family pet. While preschoolers are most likely to blame themselves for a death in the family, older children may also feel responsible in some way.
- Involve your child in the funeral process. In most cases, it is preferable not to send your child away from home when you receive the news of a death in the family. Even though you may be experiencing profound grief and attending to funeral preparations, your child needs the security of being with immediate family in a familiar comfortable setting. If appropriate, allow your child to decide whether or not to attend the funeral. If your child chooses to attend, prepare your youngster for what will be experienced. Children between the ages of two and five are often very frightened by what happens at funerals and may do better if they do not attend. A private viewing with a small group of supportive adults to help is a good alternative for the older child. If your child wishes not to

attend, do not pressure. A specific adult should be asked to supervise the child and watch for problems.

- Each child responds differently to the death of someone close to them. Some children express their sorrow openly and directly by crying or talking about their sadness; others may mask emotions and act as if nothing has changed; still others may respond indirectly by becoming more aggressive or withdrawn. Physical symptoms or behavioral problems may also appear.

A child who has lost a parent or sibling especially needs considerable, ongoing reassurance that you will be there to provide love and care for a long, long time. Professional attention may also be needed.

Hunterdon Hospice has bereavement programs for children. 788-6600