Because of their own emotions and experiences, adults often find it difficult to talk about death with children. However, at some time all of us will come in contact with death, and it is wise for adults to think through what they might do so that children do not become overly confused or distressed.

There are no simple answers or ways to deal with death because all adults differ as do children. First of all, adults must be able to face death realistically themselves and understand their own feelings of fear, confusion, or acceptance. Trying to hide feelings from children serves no purpose and may only lead to more problems or disturbances for children.

What are children’s ideas about death?

The noted Swiss psychologist, J. Piaget, has looked at the development of the concept of life. He has used his methods of questioning and observing to discover children’s ideas of what is living. Young children’s tendency to attribute inanimate objects with life, consciousness, and a will is known as animism. In understanding children’s concept of death adults need to know what children think is life or alive. Piaget (1933) found children’s responses to what is life could be grouped into four stages. Piaget’s stages are

**Stage I**—Everything is regarded as living which has activity or a function or a use of any sort. (Button, candle, sun are alive because they move or are useful.)

For example:
Adult: Is a watch alive? Child: Yes.
Adult: Why? Child: Because it goes and gives us the time.

**Stage II**—Life is still limited to objects that move or can be moved. (A bicycle or river would be alive because they move.)

For example:

**Stage III**—Children can distinguish between objects that are moved. Now those that require an outside agent to move are not alive. For example:
Adult: Why not? Child: Because it’s we who make it go.

**Stage IV**—Children attribute life only to animals and plants. For example:
Adult: Why not? Child: It’s an object not an animal or plant.

If this is children’s ideas about life or what is alive, then what is their understanding of death? M. Nagy (1948) interviewed 3 to 10 year old children and identified three stages for all children before they arrived at a realistic understanding of death. These three stages are

**Stage I (3-5 years old)**—Children felt that death was not entirely different from being alive. Death was by gradual steps (“You get old and then die”) or death was temporary (“You can come back”). At this age children did not understand that at some time everyone will die nor could they understand that they would die some time.

**Stage II (5-9)**—Children thought of death as having human qualities or powers. Death was seen as something outside that could catch people. If children are clever enough, they could escape death.
Experience and Concept of Death

In another study, Bolduc (1972) investigated life experiences and possible influences on children’s concept of death. It was found that there was a relationship between death experiences and children’s level of understanding of death. That is, those children who had experienced a death in the family or with a friend understood better what death is.

As adults, it is important to understand how children develop their concept of death so that they are not upset by children’s questions or their simplistic, realistic, and sometimes frank statements about death. If a young child says, “I wish you were dead,” this may mean that the child just wishes you were gone, not necessarily the adult’s concept about the finality of life.

Sometimes adults read into children’s questions much more than what is asked. It is important that adults listen carefully and consider the age of the child. For some children, the question, “Why did my dog die?” could be answered simply, “He was hit by a car.” Other questions, “What if I get sick, will I die?” and “Will my heart get sick and quit beating?” will require more understanding by the adult. As children grow and have many experiences, their questions will become more open and direct, and at times, even morbid and gloomy. But children need adults who will listen and answer questions carefully. Young children will play out their developing concepts of life and death. Preschoolers act as though the dead person will return or is simply “less alive.” Not until eight or nine years of age is there understanding of the irreversibility, universality, and inevitability of death.

What are some suggestions for explaining death to children?

Earl Grollman (1971) in his book Talking About Death presents some ideas that will help.

1. Acknowledge death frankly. Help children to see death as an inevitable fact of human experience, not in a frightening way. This may involve explaining the immediate cause of death such as accident, illness, or old age. But watch the language you use with children—“Grandpa went to sleep” or “Grandma is going away”—may create fears and anxieties for children. They may fear going to bed because they fear they might die in their sleep.

2. Do not tell the child that someday the loved one will return. Although there are many religious beliefs, we still do not have all the answers, and future time is difficult for a young child to understand. For example, they may be disappointed if Grandpa doesn’t return for their birthday party.

3. Do not link sin and punishment with suffering and death. The death of a loved one or a friend should not be linked with children’s behavior. A child should not feel that daddy died because of the child’s disobedience. Or, a child should not feel a friend died because something bad about the dead child was said. Children should not feel guilty. Children should not feel that they have caused someone to die. They may have wished a brother or sister to die when a favorite toy was broken but if the brother or sister actually dies, it is not the wish that made it happen.

4. Do not discourage expressions of grief. These expressions can provide a healthy outlet for any feelings adults and children may have. Children may cry if they feel sad that someone has died. That’s healthy.

5. Realize that children may have three phases in their grieving process; protest; pain, despair, and disorganization; and finally hope for the future.

6. Let children know that you don’t have all the answers. In some situations, the simple acknowledgement of the uncertain aspects of death can be the only answer.
Adulds do have the opportunity to take advantage of events which happen around children. For instance, a dead bug, driving past a funeral procession, visiting a cemetery, death as they may see it on television are all experiences adults may share with children and talk with them to help make clear their understanding of death. Adults can also create a caring atmosphere to talk about feeling sad, angry, lonely, missing others, and remembering those who have died. Children need to have a past, and as they develop, they understand that parents and grandparents were once children too. This will enable them to better understand themselves, create reality, and provide the concept of continuity of life.

Summary

Help children before and after death by
- Including them in the circle of grief, help them talk about their feelings of loss.
- Recognize fear or guilt as perceived by children, and help them deal with them.
- Talk about the sick or dead person, include happy and unhappy things.
- Try not to be shocked by the children’s questions.
- Share your feelings of wonder, faith, hope, unknown.
- Give a realistic view of what death means.

And remember do all in gentle, loving ways.

References


Suggested Resources

Fiction for the Young Child:

The Dead Bird, Margaret Wise Brown, Addison, 1958 (4-6 years old)—A group of children find a dead bird and hold a funeral for it.

First Snow, Helen Coutant, Knopf, 1974 (7-9)—A Vietnamese family’s first New England winter is saddened by the grandmother’s dying.

Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs, Tomie DePaola, Putnam, 1973 (4-6)—Memories of a grandmother and a great-grandmother as seen by a small child.

When Violet Died, Mildred Kantrowitz, Parent’s Magazine, 1973 (4-8)—When Violet, an elderly parakeet dies, Amy and Eva hold a funeral for her. Eva, worrying about Amy’s statement that nothing lasts forever figures a way to make it last a long time.

Annie and the Old One, Miska Miles, Little, 1971 (5-10)—A young Indian girl tries to hold back death by unraveling the rug her grandmother says will be her last one.

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, Judith Viorst, Atheneum, 1972 (4-6)—A small child remembers her dead cat by thinking up ten good things about him.

My Grandson Lew, Charlotte Zolotow, Harper, 1974 (4-8)—Young Lew wasn’t told of his grandfather’s death and years later still misses him, hoping he will show up.


About Dying, Sara Stein, Walker and Company, 720 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, 10019—This book was written to be a shared experience for child and adult. The child’s part of the book is a simple story about the death of a bird and a child’s grandfather. The adult text serves as a resource to help guide the handling of the child’s spontaneous questions.

Older Children’s Fiction:

Admission to the Feast, Gunnel Beckman, Holt, 1972 (12-16 years old)—A young woman reacts to the knowledge that she will die of leukemia.

Grover, Vera and Bill Cleaver, Lippincott, 1970 (10-14)—Young Grover and his father are shaken by his mother’s choice of suicide over a death by cancer.

Where the Lilies Bloom, Vera and Bill Cleaver, Lippincott, 1969 (12+)—A hill family copes after only remaining parent dies.

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, Eleanor Coerr, Putnam, 1977 (9-12)—Sadako, stricken with radiation-caused leukemia, believes if she can fold 1000 paper cranes she will live.

Thank You, Jackie Robinson, Barbara Cohen, Lot-
hrop, 1974 (9-12)—A young boy gets an autographed baseball to give to the only father figure he has known.

May I Cross Your Golden River, Paige Dixon, Atheneum, 1975 (12+)—Coping with a fatally ill sibling is the problem presented.

The Garden is Doing Fine, Carol Farley, Atheneum, 1975 (12+)—A daughter and mother report about a cherished garden as they watch their father/husband die.

Beat the Turtle Drum, Constance Greene, Viking, 1976 (8-12)—A moving tale of the accidental death of an 11-year-old and her remaining family.

Of Love and Death and Other Journeys, Isabelle Holland, Lippincott, 1975 (12-16)—Meg’s life changes when her happy-go-lucky mother dies of cancer and she goes to live with a minister father she has never known.

Confessions of an Only Child, Norma Klein, Pantheon, 1974, (8-12)—A girl, not wanting another child in the family, is filled with remorse when the baby dies.

Fog, Mildred Lee, Seabury, 1972 (12-16)—Growing up after the death of one’s father.

The Rock and the Willow, Mildred Lee, Lothrop, 1963 (12-16)—Enie’s faint hopes for college die when her mother dies soon after her graduation and she is left to care for her young brothers and sisters and a taciturn father.

The Magic Moth, Virginia Lee, Seabury, 1972 (7-11)—A young girl’s death from heart trouble affects the whole family.

Home From Far, Jean Little, Little, 1965 (8-12)—After a brother is killed in a car accident, Jenny’s parents take in two foster children.

A Sound of Chariots, Maureen McLwraith, Harper, 1972 (10-14)—Bridie’s happy childhood was shattered by her father’s death but a desire to write poetry helps her to deal with it.


A Taste of Blackberries, Doris Smith, Crowell, 1973 (8-12)—No one knew he was allergic to bee stings until it was too late.

By the Highway Home, Mary Stolz, Harper, 1971 (11-14)—A family changes when they lose their son in Vietnam.

The Edge of Next Year, Mary Stolz, Harper, 1974 (12-14)—Orin and Vic have to put their life together after their mother is killed in an auto accident and their father starts to drink.

Charlotte’s Web, E. B. White, Harper, 1952 (all ages)—Charlotte the spider does great things in her life but no spider lives forever.

Hang Tough, Paul Mathers, Alfred Slate, Lippincott, 1973—A young boy athlete is afflicted with an incurable blood disease. He and his family cope with the conflicts and heartaches very realistically in this story told from the young boy’s point of view.

Non-fiction and Books for the Parent to Use With the child:

What to Tell Your Child About Birth, Death, Illness, Divorce and Other Family Crises, Helene S. Arstein, Bobbs, 1962—Common sense answers to questions raised in explaining death to children.

Loss and How to Cope With It, Joanne Bernstein, Seaburg, 1977 (ages 12 and up)—An exploration of how the death of a loved one affects the survivors with a practical discussion of how to handle the many emotional and physical reactions we may encounter in bereavement.

Talking About Death: A dialogue between parent and child with a parent’s guide and recommended resources, Earl A. Grollman, Beacon, 1976 (5+)—Openings for a parent-child discussion about death.

Telling a Child About Death, Edgar Jackson, Channel, 1965—Advising you to study your own philosophy of death before you try to explain it to a child.


Eric, Doris Lund, Lippincott, 1974 (12 and up)—The story of a teenager’s death of leukemia movingly told by his mother.

About Dying, Sarah Stein, Walker, 1974 (4-9)—Dual narratives explain death on the child and parent’s level.

Life and Death, Herbert Zim and Sonia Bleecker, Morrow, 1970 (8-12)—A calm scientific explanation of the cycle of life and death.

Explaining Death to Children, edited by Earl A. Grollman, Beacon Press, 1967—A good resource on death that blends information from the field of psychology, religion, biology, and psychiatry. Chapter five is particularly helpful for teachers in handling the subject of death with affected students.

Facing Death, Robert Kavanaugh, Penguin Books—A teacher, psychologist, and former priest uses his own experience and understanding to explain about the experiences surrounding death. This book is well worth reading.

The Child’s Attitude to Death, Marjorie Mitchell, Schocken Books, 1967—The author analyzes the various sources of the child’s knowledge of death: social environment, science, and religion. She then interprets how children often reveal their anxieties and the fantasies they produce to resolve them.


(Numbers in parenthesis indicate suitable ages.)