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Answering Children's Questions About Death

Many children have questions about death and dying. Caring adults can help by making it acceptable to talk about these difficult issues, and by answering children's questions carefully and honestly. This discussion may arise naturally when the subject comes up in books, television shows, and movies, or it may be related to a loss in the child's life.

Children's understanding of death changes a great deal as they grow through childhood. Finding out what a child already thinks about death will make it possible to correct any misunderstandings. Simply asking what the child believes before answering any questions can make the discussion much more productive.

Many people are concerned that they will say the wrong thing. The best guide is to keep answers simple, honest, and aimed at the child's own age and developmental level. However, here are some general ideas for answering common questions.

What is death?

Death is when a body completely stops working. It becomes broken in a way that can not be fixed. The body no longer sees, feels, hears, or thinks. The force that brings a body to life is gone, like a toy with no more batteries. Death is nothing at all like sleeping. When a body is sleeping, it is resting and preparing for another day. When a body dies, it will never be alive again.

Usually when people are sick or hurt, doctors can help them get better. People go to hospitals to get healthy if they are very sick. Sometimes, though, people are too sick for doctors to heal. Then doctors and nurses try to help the dying person by keeping him or her from hurting while he or she dies.

Why do people die?

All living things die. People can die when their bodies become too sick to be healed, when they have an accident that injures their body in a way that doctors can't fix, or when they get very old and their body wears out. All life on earth is part of a continuing cycle. Every life begins, grows, and ends. Usually people live long and healthy lives, dying when they become very old and their body parts can no longer work correctly. Sometimes people do die young. It does not happen often. It is usually very sad for the people who loved them. But even someone who died very young could have had a very special and important life while they are alive.

People do not die because they are good or bad. Being angry at someone does not make them die. Even wishing someone would die doesn't make it happen.

Dying happens because the body can't work any more. It is not a punishment. Death sometimes doesn't seem fair to those people who are left grieving. It hurts not to be able to see someone we love, not to be able to be with them and share time. Remembering the special times shared with that person and what their life meant to you can help bring meaning to the loss. It can help you to find a way to keep the person in your heart and keep loving.

Does dying hurt?

Usually death itself is not painful. When people die from an illness, doctors try to help them by giving them medicine to ease their pain. When people die from old age, their dying is usually very peaceful. Often, when people die in accidents they die too quickly to feel much pain. No matter how someone dies, once he or she is dead the body can no longer feel anything at all.

Where do dead people go?

The body of the dead person must be taken care of because it will change after life has left it. Sometimes people choose to bury the body. When a body is buried it is put deep in the ground. Usually a stone or marker is put at the grave to show whose body is buried there. This gives the family and friends of the person who died a place to visit to remember the loved one. Sometimes the body is cremated. This is a special process that turns the body to ashes which are sometimes kept and sometimes released into nature. In either case, the person who died no longer needs the body or feels anything that happens to it.

The part of us that feels and thinks is no longer in the body when the body dies. Many people believe that this part of us, our spirit, continues on after the body dies. Different people believe different things about where our spirits go after we die. No one knows for sure; it is a mystery. Talking to family members and others about their beliefs can help each person decide for themselves what happens to our spirits.

What is grief?

Grief (or grieving) is a word that describes the thoughts and feelings people go through when someone they care about has died. Grief is the heart and mind's way of getting used to the loss of that person. It includes feelings such as sadness and anger. It can also include feelings of relief or happiness. These feelings may seem stuck in our bodies, giving us stomach aches, head aches, or other pains. Grief is also the thoughts we have about the person who has died and our missing them.

What can I do with my feelings while I am grieving?

Going to a funeral brings you together with other people who are grieving your special person who died. Funerals are ceremonies that help people think about and celebrate the life of the deceased. It may also help to talk about the person who has died, to write letters full of the things you wished you had said to them, or to draw pictures about your feelings. Hitting your pillow, pounding on clay, running, or doing other physical activities may help your feelings not seem so stuck in your body. It is okay to cry! It is natural to be upset and to feel angry. It is important not to do anything that will harm yourself or anyone else. Sometimes, it may help to be with other children who have had a loss or to talk to a counselor. Most of all, remember that feelings of grief will change over time. You can not make them go away completely. They are part of loving the person who has died.