Talking with children about death

By LSU Health Sciences Center – New Orleans

Common myths about infant/toddler grief
- Crying or displays of grief in front of the child will make it harder for them.
- Talking to the child about the death will remind the child of it.
- Infants are unaffected by loss

Young children are most affected by:
- The reactions of adults around them particularly if they are not explained
- Changes in their normal routines
- Separation from a primary caregiver

Infants and toddlers
- Do not understand what causes death
- Do not understand that death is final
- React to separation from a significant person
- React to the changes in their immediate world.

Preschoolers and young children
- Ask questions, often repeatedly.
- Focus on the details of death
- Magical thinking = believing they caused the death with bad behavior or thoughts
- Believe death is reversible.
- May think of death as punishment.
- Equate being dead with being able to move or that the body no longer works

Rules of thumb

**DO:**
- Maintain routines
- Tell child when you are leaving, where you are going and when you will return.
- Respond to questions with a question to clarify the concern. Often their concern is more basic than adults assume.
- Correct any misconceptions.
- Answer the child’s questions promptly and simply. And be prepared: Children’s questions may be brutally direct.
- Explain what is happening in age-appropriate terms. Don’t think they are not aware.
- It’s ok to say “I don’t know” if you don’t.

**DON’Ts**
- Don’t use common cliché’s like “Grandma is asleep.” or “Nana went on a trip.” This confuses the child and may cause fears of these activities.
- Don’t avoid talking about the deceased. Children want to talk about their loved one too and look to you to help them.
- Don’t give children too much information. They will often accept simple but truthful answers to their questions.
- Don’t ignore your own need to grieve. Take time out for you.

Take care of yourself. Remember you may be:
- struggling with your own grief.
- preoccupied with survival issues
- emotionally drained/unavailable
- overwhelmed by the child’s needs
- The child’s process can exacerbate caregiver’s grief if not understood.
- Identify a trusted adult who the child is comfortable with to help out when needed.

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