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How Children Understand Death

FOUR BASIC CONCEPTS ABOUT DEATH

Some discussions about children's understanding of death draw upon an ages and stages model. However, there is wide variation in the ways children of the same age understand death based on what they have experienced and what they already know about it. In general, most children will learn the four basic concepts discussed here by 5–7 years of age;^{1,2} however, when personal experience is supported by thoughtful explanations and knowledge provided by teachers, children several years younger often come to understand these concepts as well.³

Everyone, including children, must understand the Four Concepts About Death to fully grieve and come to terms with a death.^{4,5,6,7} Similar to young children, teens and adults often struggle with accepting the reality of a death. Intellectually, they may have a full and rational understanding, but emotionally they often find it difficult to accept what they know to be true. Children who do not yet understand these basic concepts are at a marked disadvantage. They cannot begin to accept something they do not yet understand.

It is best not to assume that children know certain things about death based on their age. Instead, teachers can ask them to talk about their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. As they explain what they already understand about death, what they still need to learn becomes evident.

Concept 1: Death Is Irreversible

In cartoons, television shows, and movies, children may see characters “die” and then come back to life. In real life, this is not going to happen. Children who do

not fully understand this concept may view death as a kind of temporary separation. They often think of people who have died as being far away, perhaps on a trip. Sometimes adults reinforce this misunderstanding by talking about the person who died as having “gone on a long journey.” Children who have had a family member or friend die may feel angry when the person does not call or return for important occasions.

If children do not think of a death as permanent, they have little reason to begin to mourn. Mourning is a painful process that requires people to adjust their ties to the person who has died. An essential first step in this process is understanding and, at some level, accepting that the loss is permanent.

Concept 2: All Life Functions End Completely at the Time of Death

Very young children view all things as living—their sister, a toy, the mean rock that just “tripped” them. In daily conversations, adults may add to this confusion by talking about the child’s doll being hungry or saying they got home late because the car “died.” Yet, whereas adults understand that there is a difference between pretending a doll is hungry and believing the doll is hungry, this difference may not be clear to a young child.

Young children are sometimes encouraged to talk to a family member who has died. They may be told that their loved one is “watching over them” from heaven. Sometimes children are asked to draw a picture or write a note to the person who died so that it can be placed in the coffin. These requests and comments can be confusing and even frightening to some children who do not yet understand the finality of death. In a young child’s mind, if the person who has died could read a note, does it mean he or she will be aware of being in the coffin? Will the person realize he or she has been buried?

Children may know that people cannot move after they have died, but may believe this is because the coffin is too small. They may know people cannot see after death, but may believe this is because it is dark underground. These children may become preoccupied with what they perceive as the physical suffering of the deceased.

When children can correctly identify what living functions are, they can also understand that these functions end completely at the time of death. For example, only the living can think, be afraid, feel hunger, or feel pain. Only the living have a beating heart or need air to breathe.

Older Children and Adults Wonder, Too

Think about the horror films about zombies, vampires, or other characters that are dead but still retain some life functions. Many are doomed to suffer through eternity. These films are frightening to both children and adults. They are also quite popular. Why? They speak to concerns all of us have experienced about this basic concept of death.

Concept 3: Everything That Is Alive Eventually Dies

Children may believe that they and others close to them will never die. Parents often reassure children that they will always be there to take care of them. They tell them not to worry about dying themselves. This wish to shield children from death is understandable, but when a death directly affects a child, this reality can no longer be hidden. When a parent or other significant person dies, children usually fear that others close to them—perhaps everyone they care about—will also die.

Children, just like adults, struggle to make sense of a death. If they do not understand that death is an inevitable part of life, they will have misunderstandings while trying to figure out why this particular death occurred. They may assume it happened because of something bad they did or something they failed to do. They may think it happened because of bad thoughts they had. This leads to guilt. Children may also assume the person who died did or thought bad things or did not do something that should have been done. This leads to shame. These reactions make it difficult for children to adjust to a loss. Many children do not want to talk about the death because it will expose these terrible feelings of guilt and shame.

When teachers talk to children about how everyone eventually dies, children may raise concerns about the health and safety of their own family members. If individual children are particularly concerned about the well-being of their parents, teachers can ask students if they can talk with their parents. They can suggest that parents reassure their children that they are doing everything they can to stay healthy, and that they hope and expect to live a long life. For example, if a child's father died of a heart attack, the child may benefit from knowing that his or her mother has seen her doctor and had a physical exam. This shows the child that family members are taking steps to stay healthy and safe. This is different from telling children that they or their parents will never die.

Concept 4: Death Is Caused by Physical Reasons

When children experience the death of a family member or friend, they must understand why the person died. If children do not understand the real reason their family member has died, they are more likely to come up with explanations that cause guilt or shame.

The goal is to help children understand what has happened. When explaining a death to children, teachers should aim for a brief explanation that uses simple and direct language. They can watch for cues from the children and allow them to ask for further explanations. Graphic details are not necessary and should be avoided, especially if the death was violent.

Although it would be unusual for a teacher to be the first to tell an individual child of the death of a family member,⁸ teachers may need to make a class announcement about someone in the school or community who has died, a classmate who has lost a parent or other family member, or another death that affects

students in a classroom or school. Parents may also ask teachers for guidance about how to tell their child about death.

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