

Talking to children about a death

Speak to a child gently but also honestly and openly, at their level of developmental understanding. Don't use euphemisms. Say the words "died" and "dead." Explain what that means if the child is very young. Talk just a little, then stop. Give the child a chance to process what you have said and to respond. If the child asks questions, answer them honestly. If the child wants to go off and play or is hungry or distracted, understand that this is normal. Children can only absorb difficult conceptual realities in small doses. They are naturally self-absorbed, but this does not mean they do not care or are acting inappropriately. It just means they are being children.

How children grieve differently

Any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn, but their mourning often looks different than ours. Children tend to grieve in small spurts, showing sadness only occasionally. Their grief might show up as physical complaints, such as headaches or stomachaches. They also use play to express what they're thinking and feeling. In general, their behaviors are a better indication of their grief than their words. Their age and developmental stage determines how much they truly understand about death. They are prone to magical thinking, believing that thoughts can cause actions and that their fantasies can become real.

Ways to help

When they are grieving, children need to feel safe, loved, cared for, and heard. You can help by being a grown-up in their lives who provides such conditions. Spend time being present to the child. You don't need to talk about the death often; just be there to observe their behaviors and answer their questions when they are ready to talk. Model your own grief as well. If you feel like crying, cry. As with everything in life, children need us to teach them how to act. Respond gently if the child misbehaves. Remember that the child's grief will often come out more through behaviors than words.

Talking to teens about a death

Be gentle but honest. Talk a little, then wait for the teen's response and questions. Follow their lead. Try not to get upset if the teen reacts inconsiderately or seems unmoved. Remember that teenagers are still figuring out how to handle challenging social situations in a "grown-up" way. Do model your own grief, though. Cry if you feel like crying. Express your own thoughts and feelings about the death while keeping the conversation focused on the teen. Offer physical comfort if the teen will allow it.

How teens grieve differently

Death for teens is complicated because it falls at a time when they are naturally gaining independence and separating from their parents and family. They still need comfort and companionship through a death, but they might naturally resist the seeming sense of dependence this brings. Teens often turn toward friends, rather than family, for support. But don't assume they are getting their needs met by friends alone. Also, the teen's natural egocentrism can cause them to focus on the effect of the death on them and their future. Grieving teens sometimes act out or pull away from school, friends, family, and activities. Minor stresses seemingly unrelated to the death can trigger dramatic overreactions.

Ways to help

Be present to and patient with grieving teens. They may look like grown-ups on the outside, but they are still very much figuring things out on the inside. If you have a good relationship with the teen, try to spend time with them. This may mean "alongside" activities more than face-to-face conversations. Shoot hoops, go out to dinner, watch a movie together, or just be in the same room (or building!) together, available if and when they want to talk. If you observe dangerous behaviors, then it's time

to be calm but confrontive. Remember that grief and loss are probably contributing to any acting out, so try to be understanding even as you set firm limits.

Above articles are excerpts from-Dr. Alan Wolfelt

*****The faith community of St. Mary of the Annunciation cares about all who are grieving the loss of a loved one. If you would like more information or resources on grief and loss, please contact Diane Mulroe in the parish office.**