Talking With Young Children
About Death and Dying

What Children Need

• Honesty and simplicity. It is not so important to give each detail of the illness as it is to prepare and educate children for the change that will take place in the dying person and your family. Remember, what children think up in their own minds is often much worse than the reality of the situation.

• Do not be afraid to tell your children that you do not have the answer to their question. Let them know you will try to find out the answer, but that sometimes no one has the answers.

• When talking about someone who is dying of a disease, be sure to tell them that the person is very, very, very, very sick. Young children will interpret “sick” in many ways, including having a cold or the flu. They may assume because they are sick, they too will die.

• Share your own feelings as well. Adults and children will often mask their own feelings from one another as a protective measure, in an effort to prevent any upset feelings. However, both young children and adults can sense a family member’s sadness or anger. Give your children opportunities to talk about their feelings by discussing your own feelings of anger, sadness, or confusion. This will help reassure your children that those feelings are natural and normal.

• Reassurance of who will care for them. Even if the dying person is an extended family member and not a primary caregiver, children will wonder who will be the next person to become sick or die, which causes them anxiety.

How to Explain Death and Dying

Sometimes it is helpful to ask your children what they believe the words “death” or “dying” mean. Sometimes children are more educated than their parents imagine. Depending upon the age of the child, some have already learned about death and dying in science class, through plants and animals, and already have a good grasp of the idea. Once your children have explained what they believe the words “death” or “dying” mean, explain that this is what you know about the meaning of death and dying.
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Explain there are a lot of ways people can die, but usually people die because they are:

- “very, very, very, very, very” old
  (use the word “very” many times because young children tend to view ALL adults as “old”)

- “very, very, very, very, very” sick
  (i.e., cancer, AIDS, brain tumor, heart disease, terminal disease)

- “very, very, very, very, very” hurt
  (i.e. car, boat, plane, train accident, gun shooting).

Discuss death and dying as a life cycle, such as larva to a butterfly or the seasons of leaves on a tree, for it is easier for young children to understand the similarities in nature. Developmentally, young children think concretely. Therefore they typically believe only what they can feel, see, taste, touch, or smell. So it is helpful to take young children outside to look at the leaves on the trees and to talk to them about the living things in your own yard.

Explain that when people or animals die, the heart stops beating and all the organs stop working too. It means they stop breathing, eating, and sleeping.

Death is often a very difficult subject for parents or caregivers to explain to children because they are amid their own anticipatory grief. Therefore, do not hesitate to seek out trained healthcare professionals to talk about death and dying with your family. The professional may ask you to be present during the discussion to answer specific questions about the person who is ill, but they are specially trained to talk with children and adults about death and dying. They can help open the dialogue of death and dying between all family members, adults as well as children.