

TINY BITS (BETTER INFORMED TOGETHER) FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/A/DP
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Helping Children Cope with Grief and Death

It can be difficult and painful to talk to children about the death of a loved one. Although having these discussions can make our own grieving process harder, it is an important part of your child's understanding of the world. It is important to remember that children under the age of three need simple, straightforward, and truthful explanations when it comes to the topic of death. In this edition of Tiny BITS we discuss ways to talk to your child about death, answer questions they may ask, and discuss how to deal with behavior changes you may witness because of their loss.

How do you explain death to a young child?

Children under three will likely be confused if you use expressions such as "Grandma passed" or "We lost Grandma." It is better to say something like "Grandma got sick. She had trouble breathing. The doctors tried to help her, but she died. When someone dies it means they cannot talk or play anymore. We cannot see or hug them. Dying means their body has stopped working." It is best to start with a simple explanation such as this and allow your child to ask questions following to avoid confusion.

Questions to anticipate

Will you die?

Parents can acknowledge this fear but offer reassurance "I can see why you are worried about that, but we are strong and healthy. We will be here to take care of you for a very long time."

Does everyone die?

Parents can say "Everyone dies eventually, but most people die when they are very old."

What if I get sick?

An answer such as "Everyone gets sick sometimes. We will take care of you and the doctors will take care of you too. You will be okay even if you get sick" can provide your child with reassurance.

Can I die so I can be with grandma?

A way to answer a question like this would be to say something such as "I understand that you may want to be with Grandma. I miss her too. When you die, you can't play with your toys or eat ice cream anymore. Grandma would want you to do those things, and I do too."

What is Dying?

Children are not capable of fully understanding death so explanations should be simple and concrete. "Grandma's body stopped working. She cannot eat, play, or move her body anymore like we do."

How to deal with behavior changes

Parents may notice behavior changes in their children after loss. Even if children do not fully understand death, they do know that something important has happened. You may notice that your child has become clingy or has separation anxiety. These changes are usually temporary and will disappear over time. It is important that you respond with patience and kindness as this will likely lead to quicker resolution of these behaviors. Parents may also notice young children playing "dying" games where they may pretend a stuffed animal or toy "dies." This is normal and focus on these activities will disappear over time. Children may also ask the same questions repeatedly. As hard it can be to answer the same questions about the death of loved one, it's important to remember that this is helping your child make sense of this experience.