

# *Caring Connections:*



## *How do dead people get chocolate cake?*



Chocolate cake! What do you mean, ‘How do dead people get chocolate cake?’ This is a comment often made when an adult picks up this brochure. A young child who was about to pay a visit to Santa was asked, “What are you going to ask Santa for?” Her reply was, “I’m going to ask to bring Grandma back.” For most adults it is difficult to imagine the questions children have when someone they love has died. Many of those questions remain unanswered because children are afraid to ask them. Adults may find it difficult to discuss death with a child because the child’s pain increases their pain. Furthermore, children will have questions adults can’t answer. Their unanswered questions often hinder their grieving process.

### **Reasons why children are hindered in their grieving**

1. Children don’t always understand death or its implications for the family. One young boy told his mother that he wanted to go and be with his grandfather who had died. When she told him that if he went, he wouldn’t come back, he decided to stay here!
2. Young children don’t always have the words in their vocabulary to describe their feelings, thoughts or memories. So their grief remains locked inside.
3. Children tend to take things literally. Therefore, it is important to say what we mean. People “die” they aren’t “lost”. If children are told grandparents die because they are old, then they don’t understand why a playmate dies. “I thought only old people die.”
4. Children don’t have the same control over their lives that adults do. They can’t “get away for a weekend” after the funeral unless their parents take them.
5. Children don’t grieve intensely for long periods of time/ If they don’t show signs of mourning, adults think they have made a quick recovery. Because of this, children are often left to grieve alone.
6. Parents may attempt to protect their children from death, In many cases children are excluded from the funeral. Open discussion about the death is often discouraged. This may hinder their children’s ability to accept the reality of the death.

**Continued...**

7. In many instances, children in the family are not told that a person who is sick is going to die. When the death occurs, the children aren't prepared and for them it is a sudden death. A sudden death may complicate their grief.

8. Finally, children have poor role models. By this I mean, most adults have such a difficult time grieving that they are unable to teach their children by example.

As you can see, there are many factors that hinder children in their grieving and in their eventual recovery. When we understand these factors, we will be better equipped to care for our children when a death occurs in the family.

## **How can we help the children?**

1. Begin to talk to them before the death occurs. This will give children an opportunity to ask questions and to prepare for what lies ahead. A number of books are listed on the back that will help you do this.

2. Provide a safe, secure environment for them. They need to feel involved with the family.

3. Tell them the truth. They will learn the truth eventually.

4. Be simple. Tell them the basics and then answer their questions.

5. Listen to what they are saying. Don't put words into their mouths. Let them lead the discussion.

6. This is an ideal opportunity to encourage children to express their feelings. It is OK to cry.

7. Encourage them, by example, to build a new life without the person who has died.

8. Encourage them to talk about the person who has died. Help them to talk about how they are feeling.

9. Be prepared to discuss the death within the religious, spiritual or philosophical framework of your family. Be willing to admit there are aspects about death and dying you don't know or understand.

10. Explain to the children any changes in responsibilities and routines that may occur in the family as a result of the death. Help them to adjust to these changes.

11. Allow children time to be alone. Solitude is important. During times of quiet, they will be able to formulate their questions. Perhaps they will find answers to some of their questions!

12. Provide extra support in the case of a sudden death. Remember, if a child wasn't told of the pending death of a family member, then in the eyes of the child, it is a sudden death.

13. And finally, encourage children to participate in the funeral. The Funeral: Where do the children fit in?

Many people never stop to think about what they will do with the children when a loved one dies.

Probably most wonder who they will get to baby-sit the children while they attend the funeral.

Excluding children from the funeral will delay their grieving and hinder their ability to deal with death and loss later in life. Here are some practical ideas that have worked well.

**Continued...**

## **Ideas:**

1. Give children the opportunity to draw a picture of a happy memory they have of the person who has died. This picture can be placed in the casket or with the urn.
2. Have a child write a letter to the person who has died. This gives the child the opportunity to say “I love you” one more time and to say goodbye. Put the letter in the casket or with the urn.
3. A child can either pick flowers from the garden at home or buy flowers and place them either in or on the casket or by the urn.
4. Older children can act as honorary pallbearers or can read a selection at the funeral. They could also act as ushers at the funeral.
5. You will find it very helpful to spend time explaining to the children what a funeral is about and what will happen. Taking them to the funeral home for the visitation or wake is helpful in making them feel comfortable in those surroundings. The day of the funeral will be much easier for them if this happens. So, how do dead people get chocolate cake? They don't. That's because dead people don't eat, sleep or breathe. They don't feel pain or get hungry. We have to say goodbye to their physical presence, but remember they will always be with us in our memories. If we help children understand this, it will help them in their grieving and they will have a healthier attitude towards death and dying as they grow older.

## **John Kennedy Saynor**

### **Suggested additional reading for children:**

Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. New York: Slack Inc., 1982.

Hazen, Barbara Shook. *Why Did Grandpa Die?* New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1985.

Vigna, Judith. *Saying Goodbye To Daddy*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Co., 1991.

For Adults

Fitzgerald, Helen. *The Grieving Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Mills, Joyce C. *Gentle Willow*. New York: Magination Press, 1993.

Webb, Nancy Boyd ed. *Helping Bereaved Children*. New York: The Guildford Press, 1993.

*How Do Dead People Get Chocolate Cake?* is one in the “Growing Through Grief” series.

Other titles in this series are:

Good grief!

When Your Parents Die

Anticipatory Grief: What is it?

The Grief That Can't Be Spoken

When Your Spouse Dies

My Child Has Died!

The Grieving Family

I Can't Face The Holidays!