Schuler-Lefebvre
FUNERAL CHAPEL
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Caring Connections:

Talking With Young Children About Death

Parents often ask me for a book about death to read to their young children.

There are several books that I would like to recommend but they can only be **aids**. That means they are best used as supplements to something else. Death is an emotionally-charged subject for us and for children; books, be themselves, cannot dispel fears and sadness. What books need to supplement is everyday closeness – the caring and sharing that each family does in its own unique way.
How each of us reacts to death is affected by the accumulation of loss-related experiences we have had in our lifetime. Some of these may have involved death itself. Others, while seemingly minor, nonetheless resulted in real grieving – "little deaths" as some people call them. The patterns of coping that we established in these situations influence our feelings and behavior at times of serious loss. Can you remember your first day at school or how you felt when you had to leave an old home for a new one? Were you ever lost at an amusement park or in a department store, and can you remember feeling that you might never see your parents again? Most of us can recall losing a favorite toy or growing out of favorite clothes – the sadness and finality of leaving behind something we cherished. And many of us, too, have had to cope with the death of a beloved pet. It may help us understand our feeling about the death of a family member when we reflect on how we felt about these past experiences. For many of us they were so poignant and painful that we find it difficult to recall them even as adults. Yet it's often that early poignancy and pain which can color our present feeling about death.

Each of us also has a different way of expressing our thoughts and feelings with our children – different words and actions that seem to suit us best. There are times, too, when we all feel inadequate. There are no easy answers especially when it comes to death talk, even for professionals. My own father died just over a year ago. At the time, my two daughters were four and seven.

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I had already begun working professionally on the subject of talking with young children about death, but it was still painful and difficult for me because it was my father's death and my children. I remember many moments when I was uncertain about how to answer their questions or when I wondered what was the wise way to include them in the funeral rites. How often I wished for magic words that would make everything all right for them, that would make them smile again! Sometimes the words came out wrong and sometimes they didn't come out at all. Looking back now, I can see it didn't matter. For me, the closeness and love and trust I felt with my husband, m mother, my sister and my friends are what helped most, and I think that atmosphere is what helped our children most. This is not to say that those were times without resentment, irritability and even anger. But all the same, no one tried to talk anyone out of his or her feelings, no one denied them. We supported each other as best we could, doing whatever seemed most comfortable at the moment, and together we came through a time that was hard for us all. I learned more from that experience than I could ever have learned from conferences or from books. In retrospect I see that it was often my children who were my best teachers. When I was open to them by sharing some of my feelings and encouraging them to communicate their thoughts, they helped me know what they needed.

It can be difficult to know much about what our children are feeling, especially the younger ones who are not very verbal or the pensive ones who may not be so willing to share their troubles openly. And it is easy to misread children's often seemingly callous responses to a death in the family. Each child in the family is different and is coping with grief in his or her own unique way. Sometimes in trying to anticipate their pain and sadness, we tend to want to protect them, even to the point of not wanting to tell them about a death in the family. "Jeffrey's only two-and-a-half," one mother explained. "He really wouldn't understand what it's all about." Another mother felt that her daughter would be overwhelmed by the news of a grandparent's death. "Cheryl loved her grandmother so much," she told me. "It would crush her to know that she died." Though the decision not to tell a child is understandable, we do have to ask whether it is really in the child's best interests. Children's sensitivity to "vibes" is extremely keen. At a time of sadness in a family there are so many facial cues, so many disrupted schedules, new people coming and going, lots of conversations to overhear, and a general aura that clearly states something important is going on. Even if a young child is sent off to stay with a friend or neighbor, the chances are that he or she will know that this sudden visit is because something important has happened at home. Feelings of exclusion can be much harder for children than feelings of sadness. Not only does exclusion bring a sense of rejection but it can also result in children misinterpreting what is going on. Uncertainty can arouse anxiety. We need to remember that when there are unanswered questions (or even unspoken ones), children will find their own fantasy explanations. Often these fantasies are scarier than reality. For example, children, as they struggle to understand the finality of death, may worry that a dead person will need food and have no way to get it. One child who did not understand about burial decided that her grandfather's body had been placed in the attic, and that was why the attic was a forbidden place to play. It may well be, then, that one of the best kinds of "protection" we can give children is to provide them with simple and straightforward answers to their questions and ample opportunities to let us know what questions they have. It is precisely because young children don't understand what death is all about that they especially need us to talk about it with them. **Continued...**

Most children want to know what death is like. They may equate death with stillness, but may ask if you can see when you are dead, if you can get hungry, feel cold, make a "bm" or "pee-pee". These questions may catch us off guard, but they are all part of a natural curiosity about the physical aspects of death. "What position are you in when you die?" children have asked or "if we sat Grandma up, what would happen?" It's not unusual for a child to ask the same kinds of questions again and again before the answers become real to them. This can be especially true in a child's attempt to understand the finality of death. The young son of our neighbor helped bury a pet fish not long ago. Several days later, he peered closely at the remaining fish in the tank and asked: "Which is the one that died?" Asking the same question again and again allows the child to test the answer and gradually understand.

While what we do and how we do it is generally more significant than what we actually say when talking about death, there is one consideration that makes words themselves important: Children tend to take what we say literally. If, in an attempt to explain death, a parent has likened it to sleep, then it is not surprising that a child may assume that death is something from which you can awake. Or if, instead of using the word "died," we say that someone has "gone to sleep forever," a child may begin worrying that he or she may never wake up some morning. Our euphemisms can be troublesome for young children! What, for instance, are they supposed to understand when they hear someone has "lost" a father or a daughter? And there's one example of children's literalism I came across recently that really taught me the importance of trying to find our whether a child has correctly understood what we've said. In this instance a family was trying to prepare their young son for a visit to a funeral home where the boy's grandfather was awaiting burial. They explained that Grandpa's body would be lying in an open coffin. The boy was very anxious – until he saw his grandfather in one piece.
He expected his head to be missing and only his body to be there.

Children's literalness can also give them difficulties with the concept of Heaven. We need to be true to our individual beliefs and family traditions but at the same time remain sensitive to our children's real concerns. Many of our words can be frightening or confusing: "If Heaven us up there in the sky," some children have wondered, "Why are they burying Aunt Millie in the ground?" Or "Will the rain bring Mommy down from the sky?" Or "If I go up in an airplane, can I see baby sister?" The explanation that "Daddy is up in Heaven watching over you" is usually meant to be reassuring, but to a child it may raise the image of a spy who knows everything that you're thinking and doing all the time. "Your sister was so good that God took her to live with Him" is usually meant to be a positive statement, but for a child it could cast doubts on the value of being good and the kindness of God in taking away someone we love. Sometimes we can be more helpful by answering a child's questions with "No one knows for sure but I believe ..." For some people saying "You know, I wonder about that, too" is a special kind of honesty and a kind that their children can understand. While Heaven is an important concept for some families, many of children's concerns with death seem to be much more immediate and practical – and need to be dealt with on that level. For instance, death may be closely associated in a child's mind with abandonment. A major worry for children may be who will look after them if one or both of their parents were to die. How would basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing be provided?

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In trying to reassure them, we can help them know that we hope we'll be living as long as they need us and that most people live for a long, long time. If children are asking for more that than, we can enumerate the many people who love them and who help look after them right now. They may even like to know that, in the event of our death, provisions have been made for their continuing care through a will and insurance. Not long ago, my younger daughter gave me insight into her concerns about this. It began when we were talking about a death in another family where there were young children. Laurie asked in a very worried tone: "Mommy, if you died, what if Daddy got someone to take care of us who I was scared to talk to?" I was so grateful that this discussion gave her the opportunity to voice that particular fear! I was able to assure her that because we were the kind of family that really cared about talking, Daddy would certainly find someone she'd be comfortable with. I asked her which babysitters and friends she liked to talk to and then told her these were just the kinds of people Daddy would look for. Talking about a death that is not close is one of the best chances we have to let our children articulate their fears. That's why talking about the death of a plant, a fish or a pet is such an important way to lay the groundwork for talking about a more painful death when it occurs.

Children's concerns do not always reach us through conversation. Sometimes they come less directly – through play. Play is serious business for children and the fundamental way for them to work on their feelings. One child might express anger over a loss by building elaborate block structures and then destroying them again and again and again. Another might play about death by burying dolls in sand or by just lying very, very still. For a child who plays with puppets, dramatic puppet play might be on outlet for a wide range of feelings; for others, like one of my daughter, it might be made-up songs ("Grandpa's buried in the ground, in the ground ...") we need to support this kind of play without interfering with it. Often our most appropriate role is that of the quiet observer, nearby and unobtrusive, available for conversation if the play leads naturally to talk.

Children mourn. They feel sadness just as we do, and we all need to express that sadness in some way that is natural for us. Crying is one way. Many adults are reluctant to cry in front of their children but if we try to hide our over-whelming sadness, children may wonder if we are really sad or not – and whether it's all right for them to be. If crying is not comfortable for us, then we need to find other ways to say "I am hurting" and "I loved Grandma, too." Grieving together gives us the chance to offer each other comfort: "We both feel sad, don't we?" "Even though we loved her in different ways, we can share some of our pain." "You're not alone in how you feel."

But there will be times, too, when we need to grieve alone in our own unique ways. For a child it may be by withdrawing or misbehaving or shouting. Nor should we be surprised to find children running out to play as usual. Most children find it hard to tolerate prolonged exposure to grieving, and that's an important reason for letting them know that sadness isn't forever and that little by little the sadness will go away.

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Children can feel angry at death – just as we can.
"How could he do this to me?" or "Didn't she know how much I needed her?" are feelings that children and adults alike can want to scream out loud. People of all ages need the freedom to shake their fists at the sky and shout "Why me?" "Why him?" Help for a child can often come from your helping him or her know that lots of people feel that way when someone close to them dies. It can often come, too, from providing physical outlets for the anger, such as strenuous gardening or hammering.

Children can also feel guilty. They may believe "If only I had behaved better, she wouldn't have died" or "I gave him the cold that started him getting sicker." At an early age, children do tend to think that their thoughts and wishes have magical powers – that wishing someone dead could cause that person to die. Guilt can also come from specific regrets most of us have when a loved one dies, regrets for things we said or did ... or for things we didn't say or do. Children are no different, and we help each other when we talk about these feelings together. A teenager dealing with her mother's death confided to her social worker "Did she know that I loved her? What about the times I said 'I hate you'?" She needed to hear, as we all do, that we often express anger at people we love the most, that loving people understand that and forgive us. We need to be equally as forgiving of ourselves.

Adults and children alike can find comfort and even pleasure in memories. Some children may like to make a "memory book" with notes and pictures about the person who died. Times spent remembering with our children, times spent sharing the laughs and tears that such memories may bring, can be times of special closeness. And memories reaffirm for a child – and for us – that the people we loved go on living in our minds and that they will always be an important part of who we are now and who we grow up to be.

The process of grieving takes a long time. It's not unusual for a child to grieve over a pet for two or three months and now, more than a year after their grandfather's death, our daughters still talk about it sometimes. Holidays or special places or traditional events may revoke old feelings and may lead to yet another round of questions, the same questions, and to still more discussion. These are times for reworking those feelings and for finding fuller understandings. Though the sadness, thankfully, ebbs, the process really continues all our lives.

Many of us have worried about whether our children should attend the funeral services of someone they loved. Are they too young? Will it be traumatic for them? There really are no set answers, but I have come to believe that even a very young child can benefit significantly by sharing in at least some of the rituals that attend death if we have prepared them for what to expect and have been open to their questions.

Funerals provide a structure for the early days of grieving. They provide a time for the sharing of grief, and they bring a sense of closure and finality that, sooner or later we all have to accept. Funerals are a time for venting emotions and bringing relief, and I believe children need that relief, too.

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Letting our children view an open casket may be a particular source of worry for us, but even here, it can turn out that the reality of a dead body is less frightening than a child's fantasies about it. Children may startle us by wanting to see "what dead looks like." They might even ask "What's under the blanket where Grandpa's feet are? What makes it so puffy there?" They might want to know what is inside the hearse. Many funeral directors have become accustomed to children's need to know and can provide helpful answers to such questions.

Though parents are the best judges of how their children should participate in a funeral, we all need to consider whether at least some participation in the rituals may not be healthy for them. A first-grade teacher I know once asked her class: "If you had two wishes, what would you want?" One of her pupils responded: "To go to a funeral and to go to a wedding." This boy, who had been excluded from a family funeral a short time before, clearly felt a real need to see what went on at these two important milestones in life. Another boy, a five-year-old, was not allowed to participate in his grandfather's funeral two years ago. Ever since, whenever he hears an announcement of a funeral at church, he begs his mother to take him – to anyone's funeral. The decisions aren't always easy, and in addition to considering what may be best for our children, we need to stay responsive to what is best for us. When we are under the stress of bereavement, we may feel overtaxed by the constant need to cope with our young children's questions and fears and upsets, not to mention the demands of their daily routines. Although our seven-year-old, Amy, was with us through my father's funeral, we decided that her four- year-old cousin at his house. Although she didn't attend the actual funeral and burial, we did take her with us to the funeral home beforehand, we did explain what would happen at the funeral, and I promised to take her to the cemetery at a later date. I found it easy to postpone that visit, but when we did go together one autumn afternoon, the experience turned out not to be the devastating one I had anticipated. As we walked over to my father's grave site, I explained to Laurie that this is where we had come after the funeral service to bury the casket. She looked up at me and poignantly asked: "Why wasn't I here then?" I explained, as I had before, that funeral services and burial services are long and that there are long speeches and that I thought it might have been boring for her to have to sit through them all.
But perhaps we would have gained a lot by being together then.

It reminded me of the experience a friend of mine had when she had to tell her nursery-school class that one of their classmates had died. She said that she gathered the children around her and felt a compelling need to have one of them sitting on her lap while she explained what had happened. During those difficult moments, she told, me, she could feel herself drawing on the vitality and freshness of the young child she was holding. Our whole family felt the same thing whenever the children were close by at the time of my father's death.

So, there are no books that will do it for us and there are no magic "right" words to say. It's the trying, the sharing, and the caring – the wanting to help and the willingness to listen – that says "I care about you." When we know that we do care about each other, then, together, we can talk about even the most difficult things and cope with even the most difficult times.
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