

DO'S AND DON'TS WITH GRIEVING CHILDREN

- DO** keep it simple in explaining death to children. “Death is when the body stops working completely.”
- DO** share your faith, but again, “keep it simple.” Let the child ask questions. He/she will let you know if further clarification or embellishment is called for.
- DO** tell the truth and realize that “I don’t know” is an acceptable answer. Children can appreciate the fact that there are limits to adults’ knowledge, and that many “WHY” questions are unanswerable.
- DO** talk about death and the sadness of loss and grief before a significant death touches a child’s life. Visit a cemetery. Use dead animals and insects to instruct about death. Read books on aging and death with your child.
- DO** specify to your child who would care for him/her if you should die.
- DO** give children a choice in attending wakes and funerals. Explain beforehand, as best you can, what he/she will see, touch, smell etc. Never force attendance at a wake or funeral, however.
- DO** have a trusted adult family member or friend on hand to take small children home if they wish to leave the funeral home, church or cemetery. Be sure this is pre-arranged with the adult and child.
- DO** be a good grieving role model for your child. Tears are not just okay – they are helpful. Your expression of sadness gives children permission to grieve as they learn that tears and sadness are appropriate.
- DO** realize that children express emotion physically by: beating, pounding, running, jumping, rolling around. Expressions which may seem inappropriate or annoying to adults are normal and necessary for children. . . .They may become accident prone and make frequent trips to the school nurse.
- DO** maintain structure, rules and limits. These provide security at a time when children may be feeling terribly insecure.
- DO** be prepared for children to regress somewhat: bed-wetting, clinging, baby talk, night fright. Rocking children and night lights are a good idea.
- DO** give your child something to do to combat his/her feelings of helplessness. Draw a picture of what you saw at the funeral and we’ll talk about it; write a story; plant a Memory Tree or make a picture album/scrap book of the deceased, etc.

DO be aware of Magical Thinking in children and be prepared to disabuse the child of the notion that his/her angry thoughts caused another's death, etc.

DO save special items of the deceased to give the child: a watch, rosary, stamp collection, picture, etc.

DO contact school counselors/teachers/coaches/clergy, etc. to alert them to the loss your child is experiencing.

DO remember that tantrums and outbursts are out-of-control behavior and make sure children know they are loved in spite of it.

DO practice the FOUR T's: TALK
 TOUCH
 TIME
 TEARS

DON'T underestimate a child's grief regardless of a paucity of outward manifestations.

DON'T push a child to talk to you, however, or expect children to grieve in the same way or on the same time schedule as adults.

DON'T use abstract language or euphemisms:
(a) Grandpa "passed away" is not as good as "Grandpa died."
(b) "He died because he was old and tired."
(c) "He went to sleep."
(d) "Mommy went on a long trip and won't return for a long, long time!"

DON'T single the grieving child out in such a way as to set him/her apart from peers. Peer support may be the child's most valuable lifeline at this time.

DON'T promise you won't die. "I will probably live to very, very old, but no one knows for sure."

DON'T try to put a "good face" on the death. "Aren't you glad Mommy isn't suffering anymore? It is selfish for us to want her back." Avoid clichés about "God's will," "Time heals all wounds," "It's a blessing."

DON'T replace a dead pet immediately. Allow your child to grieve.

DON'T wait to begin death education. It is a part of life.