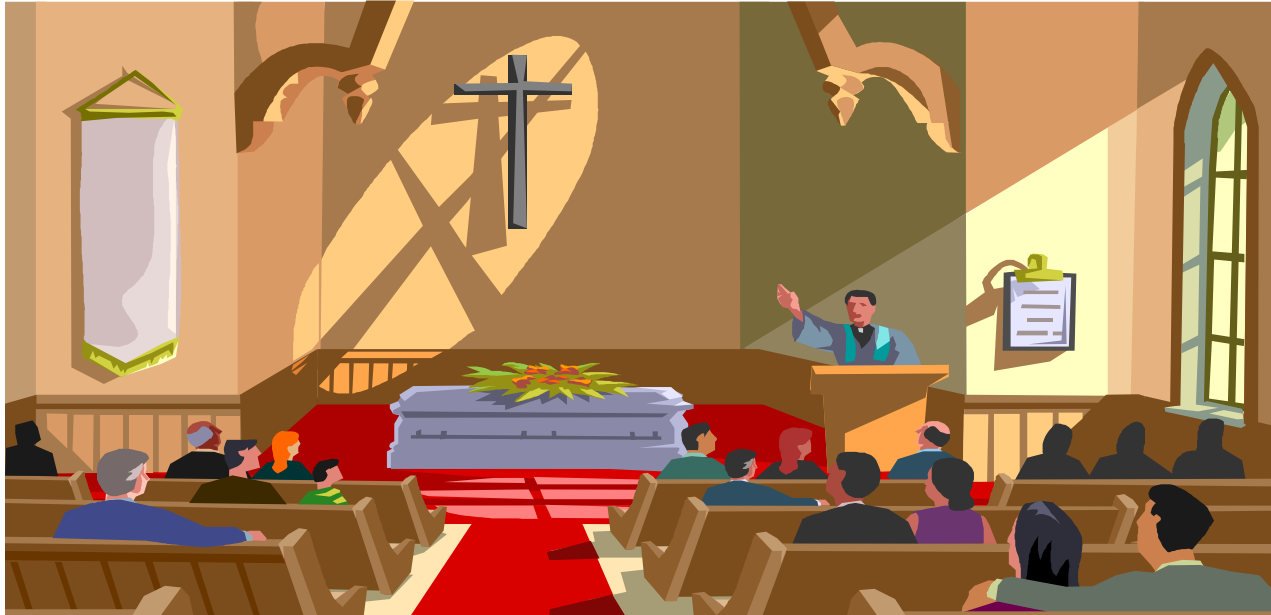


Explaining Death To A Child



When a loved one dies, your children experience some of the same emotions that adults feel. You can help along the grieving process by confronting death and giving your child a little extra understanding during this difficult time.

Be aware of Behavior

While children feel many of the same things adults do, they may express their emotions very differently. Sometimes radical behavior changes occur. If your young child is angry at the loss, he or she may become more antagonistic or physically abusive to other children. If the child is feeling depressed and helpless, he or she may regress a little and revert to something like wanting a bottle again. You can help your child cope with these emotions in several ways.

First of all, face your child's behavior and uncritically accept it for the time being. If the child is behaving badly, deal with the behavior as you would normally, but be understanding of the underlying causes.

Talking About Death

Talk about feelings and the deceased. Share your feelings of sadness, anger, or guilt with your child. Help your child understand that these emotions are normal and expected. Also, encourage family members to talk about the person who has passed away—the fond memories, the fun times, and how much the deceased will be missed.

What To Say

If your child asks about death in general, answer the questions directly. This may be a good time to reaffirm religious or other beliefs about life and death. It may also be helpful to use analogies that can readily be identified with—like the changing seasons—to remember that death is a natural part of the life cycle. Many children will not understand or accept that the deceased will never come back, so be patient if your child asks when grandpa is coming over.

- Read appropriate books about death together. Check with your librarian or your favorite children's bookstore for recommendations and then spend some time reading and discussing the books with your child.
- Expect to get questions about your own eventual death. For younger children especially, focus on your being there for them and always loving them.
- You can also expect many "off-the-wall" questions as the child tries to understand what has happened. They will try to relate death to pets, television characters, and morbid jokes they've heard. Treat each question seriously, because the child is serious.
- Children will ask serious questions at inopportune or embarrassing times. In front of a grieving grandmother your son may ask when Grandpa Joe is coming back. Your child doesn't

understand your embarrassment or Grandma's possibly hurt feelings. Don't discount the question—answer it. Reassure him that you and Grandma are there for him and you will talk later. Then answer other questions out of earshot of others.

Getting to the Funeral

If you want to take your child to the funeral, explain exactly what will be happening. You don't want your child to have surprises. Death can be very frightening to a child, so you may want to think twice before having a child view the body. It may be good to look at home movies or pictures afterwards so the child can remember the deceased in a more natural setting. Remember that the loss often brings families closer together. Use this time to reaffirm your love for each other, as well as for the loved one who is gone.

Sensitize Others

If your child is in school or child care, make sure that the appropriate people know of the death. You may want to discuss your approach with them for handling questions and certain behavior.