



*Bereavement Support Services*

# BEREAVEMENT FOR CHILDREN

**Beaumont**





*child*  
*is its breath*  
*in every limb*  
*now of death!*  
orth

ended Beginnings;  
g Losses,  
ublishers, Inc.,  
adley, MA 01075

Jeanne M. Harper, Thanatologist, Marinette, WI  
Children are forever asking questions about death – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Yet grownups tend to believe that death is not a proper concern for them. In a study conducted in 1974, Robert Kastenbaum found that three quarters of the respondents felt children seldom, if ever, thought of death, are better off not thinking of death, and should be protected from death-relevant situations. This vision of childhood as a “kingdom where nobody dies” seems to be an adult invention for adult purposes. If you simply listen to children engaged in spontaneous play and conversation you will hear explicit death-talk.

## **INFANCY THROUGH EARLY CHILDHOOD**

At this age, children lack conceptions of death. Certain experiences and behaviors, however, suggest a parallel to the state of non-being or death. “Peek-a-Boo” and other disappearance-and-return games provide early clues as to how children begin to grasp what “all-gone” means. A young child, 18 months old tries to place a dead bird back in the tree, or a leaf on the stem. Each such attempt gives a definite impression that the child is taking a small step or two toward conceptions of separation (e)-4.3 (g)2.4 (in t)6.1 ( (p o)-1.1 (r t)-35 8)6.1 ( 27i)4.2 (1)fy child i2d ieo (p o)-1.1 (r t)-35

## **FROM 6 TO 9**

Six-to-nine year olds see death as final, yet they still believe it won't happen to them. They have a strong tendency to personify death, to give it "person" qualities, to create a boogyman.

Inclined to be "wild" and boisterous, they are impressionable to the violence they see (s)-2.7 1.2 cao8(l) (e)-3.31.1 (e2) 1re



## **ADULTHOOD**

The person who stays alive psychologically continues to modify ideas about death throughout adulthood. As a young person starting a family, as a middle-aged citizen with many deep commitments and obligations, and as an elderly individual moving toward exodus, yesterday's child encounters qualitatively different life situations. Certain basic concepts tend to remain firm – death is inevitable and final – but the full range of implications demands re-examination.

The stages through which an individual moves are at best approximations. While social, economical, and cultural variables play a part, age seems to be the most significant factor in developing a concept of death, as Jean Piaget contended. For the parent, teacher, or counselor working with children/ adolescents/ adults who are grieving or groping toward an understanding of death, familiarity with the developmental sequences is important.

## **HOW THEN DO WE TALK TO OUR CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH?**

As adults, we often have trouble helping children handle their grief or talk about death. Sometimes the difficulty arises from our own unresolved feelings about death, sometimes because we are enmeshed in our own sorrow. Evading discussion with remarks that children are “too young” may bring a degree of false comfort to adults, but refusing to answer a child's questions or failing to deal with their feelings can cause unnecessary pain, if not emotional damage.

One of the most difficult tasks following the death of a loved one is discussing and explaining the death with children in the family. This task is even more distressing when the parents are in the midst of their own grief.

Because many adults have problems dealing with death they assume that children cannot cope with it. They may try to protect children by leaving them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the death. Thus, children may feel anxious, bewildered, and alone. They may be left on their own to seek answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those around them. All children will be affected in some way by a death in the family. Above all, children who are too young for explanations need love from the significant people in their lives to maintain their own security. Young children may not verbalize their feelings about a death in the family. Therefore, by holding back their feelings because they are so overwhelming, they may appear to be unaffected. It is more common for them to express their feelings through behavior and play. Regardless of this ability or inability to express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply.

## **SOME COMMON EXPRESSIONS OF CHILDREN'S GRIEF**

Experts have determined that those in grief pass through four major emotions: fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. It should be remembered that everyone who is touched by a death experiences these emotions to some degree – grandparents, friends, physicians, nurses, and children. Each adult and child's reactions to death are individual in nature. Some common reactions are:

### **Shock**

The child may not believe the death really happened and will act as though it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.

### **Physical Symptoms**

The child may have various complaints such as headache or stomachache and fear that he too will die.

### **Anger**

Being mostly concerned with his own needs, the child



### **Sadness**

The child may show a decrease in activity – being “too quiet.” It is important to remember that all of the reactions outlined above are normal expressions of grief in children. In the grief process, time is an important factor. Experts have said that six months after a significant death in a child’s life, normal routine should be resuming. If the child’s reaction seems to be prolonged, seeking professional advice of those who are familiar with the child (e.g., teachers, pediatricians, clergy) may be helpful.

### **EXPLANATIONS THAT MAY NOT HELP**

Outlined below are explanations that adults may give a child hoping to explain why the person they loved has died. Unfortunately, simple, pat, but dishonest answers can only serve to increase the fear and uncertainty that the child is feeling. Children tend to be very literal – if an adult says that “Grandpa died because he was old” – if



# SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO EXPLAIN DEATH TO CHILDREN

- Sometimes when a baby is just starting to grow, something happens that makes it stop growing.
- Sometimes something makes a baby die before it is born. We're not sure why but it's nothing anybody did or didn't do.
- Sometimes with little babies something makes their bodies stop working. It's nothing anybody did or forgot to do. Doctors are not sure why it happens.
- You know how a watch can stop ticking and nothing can get it to work again, that's what happened with the baby. The baby's body stopped working and so it couldn't live.
- In the spring, mommy plants seeds in the garden and sometimes not all the seeds grow up to be plants/ owers. A baby is like a seed that gets planted inside mommy's stomach. Sometimes something happens that keeps the baby seed from growing.
- Death is like a broken toy and although we would like to x it, it will never work again. The same is true for the baby, as much as we want him/her to be with us we just can't do anything about it.
- Remember when your pet \_\_\_\_\_died and we had to say goodbye to him. We never saw him again but we think of him often. That's what it's going to be like with the baby. We won't ever see him/her again but will think of him/her all the time.
- No one dies because God is angry with them. A person dies when an important part of their body wears out and stops working.

## IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

- Explain honestly
- Predict sadness
- Offer continued nurturance and love
-



# SUGGESTED BOOKS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Bernstein, Joan E. *Loss and How to Cope with Death*. N.Y.: Clarion, 1981. Ages 10 and older. Includes death among other subjects.

Brown, Margaret Wise. *The Dead Bird*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1958. Ages 4-8. A classic. Children dealing with a death and then going on with their lives.

Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*. Holt Rinehart, Winston. All ages.

Corley, Elizabeth Adam. *Tell Me About Death, Tell Me About Funerals*. Santa Clara, CA: Grammatical Sciences, 1973. Ages 6-10.

Dodge, Nancy. *Thumpy's Story: A Story of Love and Grief Shared, by Thumpy the Bunny...* Prairie Lake Press, P.O. Box 699-F Springfield, IL 62705. Age 7-77 or to read with younger children. The story of Thumpy the Bunny, experiencing grief over the loss of sister Bun. This book allows children and parents a situation to talk about and share their grief.

*Thumpy's St.*

Cs Soeve

and Grief Shared, by Thump.



**Beaumont**

[beaumont.org](http://beaumont.org)