



## DEMPS EY™ C E N T E R

### Helping Children Prepare for a Loved One's Death

By Tookie Bright, LCSW

Anticipating death is a confusing and overwhelming experience for people at any age. Just as adults benefit from the period leading up to end-of-life, so can children. This unique process of grieving is referred to as “anticipatory grief” and can be a pivotal period of adjustment that can ease the transition into bereavement. Here are a few thoughts to help you support a child as they grieve:

**Meet your child where they are, trust in their capacity to understand.**

Children’s development is individual and vary across a spectrum, discussions of what is developmentally appropriate for a certain age are generalizations based upon a bell curve. No matter where your child is in their comprehension of death, there are different resources to assist you as you prepare your child for the loss of a loved one. Our youth and family counselor is available to support you throughout this cancer experience and can give you specific information to help you with your specific concerns.

**Be as concrete with your explanations as you can.**

Euphemisms used to explain death tend to confuse children. As an adult, it may feel uncomfortable or blunt to use concrete language, but your child will be comforted by your simple honesty.

**Tip:** Use words like: “death,” “dying”, “dead” instead of “passing-on” “sleeping” or “going to heaven (or other spiritual place).”

**Allow your child to choose what they are exposed to.**

As much as possible, provide information about what your child can expect and ask the child how involved they want to be along the way (for example: do they want to visit the sick loved one in the hospital? Do they want to be with the person when they die? Do they want to attend a funeral if there is an open-casket? etc.). Allowing your child to make informed choices about what they are exposed to will help them to feel empowered and capable.

**Tip:** be prepared for your child to change their mind at the last minute and plan for flexibility or alternative child-care.

**Address your child’s questions honestly.**

Children are often more aware of what is happening than adults sometimes give them credit for. Children who believe their parents are withholding information or not being honest with them will seek answers on their own. This can result in greater anxiety and damage to the important trust relationship you have. Keep your child involved and up to date. It is ok to acknowledge uncertainty.

**Tip:** After updating a child, finish with something like: “This is what I know right now. When something changes, I promise I will tell you.” and then encourage them to ask questions.

## Understanding Death

As Children develop a complete understanding of death (usually developed around the age of 7), they may struggle with certain concepts. It is important to address their questions honestly with concrete responses.

**Irreversibility:** A person cannot come back to life after they have died.

Tip: To help explain this, draw upon previous exposures to death, such as a relative, pet or other living creature that had died. This can be helpful for the child to think back to even if at the time the child didn't fully comprehend what was happening.

**Non-functionality:** After a person dies, their body no longer works. It cannot eat, drink, poop, pee or feel (i.e. no pain, fear, hunger, etc.).

Tip: Certain spiritual beliefs can confuse this concept, be clear to differentiate between the physical body and our beliefs regarding the soul.

**Causality:** A body stops working for a specific reason. Like a machine, if something breaks it can prevent the body from working and then the body dies.

Example: in the case of cancer, the body is a complicated system with many working pieces that functions really well normally but when cancer is in the way it can mess up how the body is supposed to work. Kind of like a traffic jam. You can then be specific about the particular health issue that will cause death, if known.

**Universality:** Every living thing dies. This is how life is supposed to work. We are born, we live, and then we die. Plants, animals, and bugs are all living things that will also die.

Tip: a natural question that will arise is "are you going to die?" Answer this question as honestly as you can and do not make any promises you cannot keep. "One day I will die too. I am not planning on dying anytime soon though and I hope to be old and wise before that ever happens!" A common concern children have which sometimes is not spoken, is who would take care of them if you were to die.

**Spirituality:** Many people believe that humans and other living things have souls that exist regardless of whether their body is alive. Although comforting, these concepts are abstract and are usually the last to be fully comprehended. Communicating spiritual beliefs as facts to children can complicate or contradict the previous concepts of death.

Tip: to avoid confusion, reinforce the previous concepts first. Explain that there are many different ideas about what happens when someone one dies and no one knows what happens for sure. Then introduce what your family believes happens. Ask your child to tell you what they would like to believe.

**For More Information or support, please contact the Healing Tree Program at the Dempsey Center:  
877-336-7287**