How to TALK ABOUT DEATH with Your Child

DO...

Be truthful about the death as soon as possible. This helps explain your own tears and pain and can model for your child how to mourn.

Make sure to choose the correct words. Research has shown that using the words, “death or died” is more helpful to the grieving process than words like, “sleeping or in Heaven.” Children may become fearful of sleeping and may find heaven a difficult concept to understand. If a child is told a person got sick and died, they may become scared of germs or be afraid of dying if they become ill.

Share information in small doses. Start an explanation with simple statements, such as, “Your sister was in an accident, her body stopped working and she died.” That may be enough information for a child to take in at one time. They may need comfort at that point, not more information. If they inquire further, explain again that their body stopped working and it cannot be fixed and when that happens, they have died. This means she will not be coming home, and we have to say goodbye.

Gauge how much information your child can handle by relating small bits at a time. You will know what more to do by the questions your child asks or does not ask.

Be comfortable saying, "I don’t know." There will be unanswerable questions.

Cry together. It is healthy and healing.

Let your child participate in rituals if they show an interest. This helps a child feel a sense of control over their loss.

Allow your child to grieve in their own way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Make time to talk about thoughts and feelings often. Check-in and be available for on-going discussions since mourning is a process.

Prepare your child for a future without your loved one. Acknowledge that upcoming holidays and special moments may feel different. Welcome your child’s input about how to celebrate.

Take care of yourself. Children learn what they see; modeling self-care is important.

See reverse side for additional information.
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DON'T...

Don't hide your grief from your child. It's normal and healthy to feel sad and cry after a significant loss.

Don't be afraid to share memories. Research has shown that the pain of re-living memories, even painful ones, helps healing and closure.

Don't change your daily routine. Children need consistency. Try to be sure your child continues with their usual activities.

Don't think death means no joy. Laughter is a great healing tool.

Don't put a time limit on your child's grief. Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time.

Be comfortable saying, "I don’t know." There will be unanswerable questions.

Don’t hesitate to reach out to a professional if your child exhibits persistent regressive behaviors, nightmares, refusal to go to school or activities. You know your child best. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to JCS at 410-466-9200.

For more information on grief support, contact Donna Kane Grief Clinician Jewish COMMUNITY SERVICES at dkane@jcsbaltimore.org or 410-843-7394.

To learn more about grief support and resources or to access video programs for children, visit bit.ly/JCS-Grief-Videos

See reverse side for additional information.
Finding the strength to support others while coping with grief and loss can be difficult. When a grandparent dies, telling their grandchildren can leave anyone feeling helpless and at a loss for words. There are ways to talk with a child about the death of a grandparent. The death of a grandparent is often the first encounter with the loss of someone important to a child or teen.

Here are some suggestions for navigating this challenging and sensitive conversation:

Some children may become anxious or clingy as they begin to understand that death is a part of life. Children look to adults for behavior cues. Their first encounter with grief and loss will influence how they respond to future losses.

Be honest with your child and tell the truth about what happened as soon as possible. This helps explain your own tears and pain and can model for your child how to mourn.

Cry together. Let them see your emotions and how you may feel different things at different times. It is healthy and healing.

Children will feel less anxious about you if they understand you are behaving differently because your parent has died. Explaining your behavior gives your child permission to express sadness. Acknowledge that all feelings are okay, and everyone may have different feelings about the loss.

The closer the relationship, the more painful the loss will be. For many children and teens, the death of a grandparent can feel like losing a parent.

The death of a grandparent is an opportunity for a family to grieve together and support each other. It illustrates that each person will experience the death in their own way.

This experience with death can be very hard. As children learn to reconcile their loss, they begin to understand that they can handle sad and painful losses and face challenges with greater resilience.

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