



# Parent Pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

Vol. 12 No. 8 April 2013

## Talking about Death with Your Children

When a family experiences death, a child's world is flooded with new concepts, experiences and emotions. Parents may avoid a needed discussion with their children either because they are absorbed in their own grief or because they are not sure what to say. This is a challenging situation in which to be a parent, but it is too important to ignore or dismiss. Children need to grieve and process the death of a loved one; parents are an important part of this process.

Each child has his own way of reacting to grief. Personality, experience and the developmental stage all have an influence. Very young children see death as a reversible process, so at first they may seem unaffected. Instead, they will notice emotional changes in adult caregivers and may react to this with changes in eating, sleeping and toilet habits.

School-age children are growing in cognitive understanding of death and typically recognize that death is final; however, they may think they can cheat death by being smart. A child this age also may feel guilty about the death of a loved one, incorrectly thinking she may have caused it through bad behavior. Children this age can develop nightmares about death because they turn death into a skeleton, an angel or a monster. It is good to be clear and direct when discussing death. Take care to avoid euphemisms such as "falling asleep" or "didn't wake up," since children this age can understand this literally and may think they need to stay awake to avoid the same outcome. For this age, it is best to describe death by what the body can no longer do: breathe, eat, talk and so on.

Adolescent children will understand that death is both final and universal. Because they are abstract thinkers, they may begin to wonder about the meaning of life. They also may tempt death with risky behavior or see death as a punishment. They appreciate complete information about the circumstances of the death, since they can handle more complicated information than younger children can.

Children may show their grief in unexpected ways. It is not unusual for young children to role-play death as a means



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of understanding it. This can be uncomfortable for adults, but it may be an important part of the process for the child. Some children transfer sadness over the death of a loved one to something that is easier to accept, such as the death of a pet. It may seem that your child is not bothered by the death until he suffers from separation anxiety in a seemingly unrelated situation. No matter the age, we can all find ourselves reacting to death with anger. It is important to be aware of this, as anger has a tendency to creep into unexpected situations. Acting out in anger because of the death of a loved one does not excuse the behavior, but it can help to explain it, which, in turn, will help in dealing with the situation in an appropriate fashion.

Regardless of age or personality, all children need parents to listen to them and respond patiently, consistently and considerately as they work through their understanding of death and grief. Find out what your child knows and what she is thinking so you can craft a response that helps her to make a small step of progress. This will help you avoid overwhelming your child with information. Children may need several conversations to process this information and may bring it up for months or even years as their ability to process information develops. Even if you are uncomfortable with such conversations, it is important to encourage this

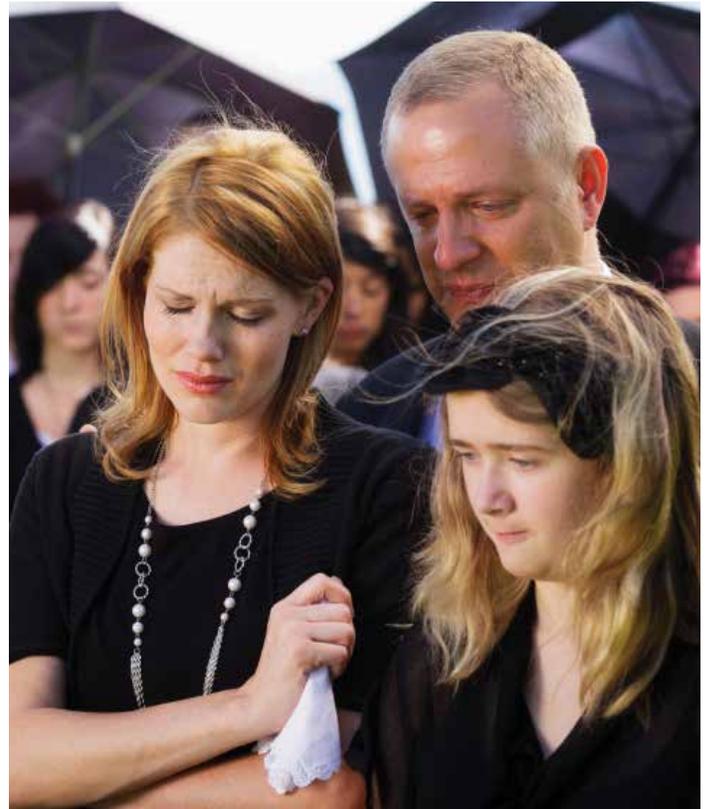
kind of discussion with honest, direct and simple responses. In doing this, you are teaching your child to accept and deal positively with strong emotions. Be sure to discuss feelings and beliefs with your spouse and other family members so that you present a united message.

It also may help your child, as well as your whole family, to participate in a memory activity beyond the funeral. A yearly routine of decorating the gravesite is a common memory activity. Children also may benefit from creating a banner or scrapbook of memories of the loved one. These kinds of activities offer comfort at each stage of the grieving process.

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39).

Working through the process of grief is an important time for faith teaching. Be sure your child understands that our sinful nature and the sinful world in which we live are responsible for death and that it is not God’s will for us to die. Even though we all eventually die, God has a plan for us to live forever with Him in heaven. Because of the death and resurrection of His Son, a room has been prepared for each one of us.

Remember to pray with your child, to read Scripture and to seek comfort from worship and your church family. As you work through your own grief and labor to help your child to understand, you will be living the hope that God gives us through His unconditional love for us.



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### For Further Study

Two books from Concordia Publishing House offer important insights: *When Someone Dies: Find Comfort in Jesus* by Julie Stiegemeyer and *What Happened When Grandma Died* by Peggy Barker.

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Vol. 12 • No. 8  
April 2013

*Parent Pages* is published by LCMS School Ministry (Office of National Mission)  
1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295  
314-965-9000 • [www.lcms.org](http://www.lcms.org)

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