



## Parenting during pandemic

### Day 20: How to talk to children about death during the pandemic

It's the thing a lot of us don't want to think about or talk about; it's the thing lots of us are worried about; it's reported daily and the numbers are increasing; it's a difficult topic for us even when there isn't a pandemic; and when you're a parent it's not just about your own understanding and processing, you also have to consider how to talk to children about death and dying.

Children's concept of death changes as they mature. Very young children, in pre-school years, don't know what death is but they can still notice and be upset that they are not seeing someone significant in their lives. In early school age years, children start to develop an understanding of what death means but they still lack the understanding of the permanence of death. An understanding of the permanence comes later and in adolescence the ability to think more abstractly is developed whereby there may be more of a sense of personal beliefs about death.

One of the reasons it's important to think about how children understand death is because their understanding has effects on their reaction. Sometimes when children are told that someone close to them has died, they can seem to have very little reaction. This can be due to their understanding, or lack of understanding, of what has happened. Sometimes children will think about what they have been told and come back with questions or be asking for repetition of what they have been told already. Again, this can be about their processing of the information so their reactions can look delayed.

With regard to how to talk to children about death, it is helpful if they are given very clear information. Adults use lots of words and phrases about death, such as "gone", "passed away", "not here anymore". These can be unclear for children so it can be helpful for them to be told that the person has died. They may ask questions about this and it's important for their understanding and processing that they are allowed to do this. Don't worry if you don't have the answers, just be honest and say you don't know. You can say you will find out the answers together if possible or you can talk about your beliefs and ask what they think. Don't worry if you are upset while telling a child that someone has died. You can simply explain that you feel sad that the person has died and explain that it is ok to feel sad

sometimes. You can ask about how they feel too and let them know that it's ok to talk about how they feel. At the end of the conversation, it is helpful to let them know that this is something they can talk to you about over time.

Grief is a natural reaction but people have their own ways of coping with it. In children, they may show how they are coping emotionally or behaviourally so it's helpful to look for changes and let them know you are there to support them. Regardless of their reaction, it can be helpful to be clear with them in, the period after telling them about the death, about practical things that may be happening. For example, if you have to go out to sort out some funeral arrangements, it can be helpful for them to know that you are going out, who will look after them while you're away and when you will be back. They will be reassured to know who will be there for them and when even if they are not aware that they need this reassurance.

One of the particularly difficult things about the pandemic and associated lockdown is limitations in who can be with people when they die and ability to follow traditions, customs, rituals and religious rules. Children are likely to have less familiarity with these things simply due to less experience so their reactions may be different to the adults around them. They are likely to be looking at the behaviour of significant adults though, to guide their processing of what is happening for everyone. Again, it can be helpful for children to be given simple age appropriate information on what is happening after someone has died particularly at this time when things may be different to what they (and others) might expect.

We hope these tips are helpful. Well done on managing another day off school and we hope you will join us again on Monday.

**Monday's topic: When one adult says "no", ask another! Consistent parenting during pandemic.**

Please contact us with questions, comments or topics you'd like to see covered. We'd love to hear your feedback.

Wishing you a safe and healthy path through this pandemic.