

*"Any Child old enough to love is old enough to mourn."*  
Alan Wolfelt PhD.

## **CHILDREN AND DEATH: DO'S AND DON'TS**

### **DO'S:**

- Do prepare your child by exposing her/him to the natural progression of life to death from the earliest possible opportunity.
- Do take every opportunity to use the words "dead" "died" and "death" in their proper context.
- Do remember to use the phrase, *"Dead means that something is all done living."*
- Do remember that death is not morbid to a child. It is the adult who puts it in that context.
- Do be prepared for lots and lots of questions about death after the subject is first raised. If your child is aware of a person who has died, be prepared for many questions about the person who has died for weeks, even months, after the event.
- Do be ready for lots of questions that a child (who is a concrete thinker) will ask: *"Where is Grandpa now?" "What happens to the person after he dies?" "What does he look like?"*
- Be prepared with your answers. A parent who hesitates gives the message that it was not an okay question to ask.
- Do give your child the facts, just a little bit at a time. Learning about death is a process that takes a lifetime to begin to understand.
- Be honest with your child about your own, inevitable death (and her/his), explaining that, *"Everything that is alive eventually dies; but it will not happen for a long long long LONG time."*

If someone has died whom you and your child knew:

- Do let your child know that you are sad, and do not be afraid to cry in front of him/her.
- Do let your child tell you that s/he is sad, and be alert to signs of sadness.
- For children who are five and older, it may be a good idea to include them in the prefuneral discussions with the clergyperson who will conduct the service.
- If a child is old enough to remember having been at the service (or having been excluded), bring her/him to the service. If you feel that your child will be a distraction to you and your grieving, consider either bringing someone to be attentive to your child or not bringing her/him at all.
- Let your child know exactly what will happen at the service (including the burial) and afterwards, as well as who will be there. Be sure to explain that grown ups usually feel very sad at funerals and often cry out loud.
- Tell you child that s/he may or may not feel sad and may or may not feel like crying.

- After the funeral, plant a flower or tree, light a candle, recite Kaddish, display photos, create a collage of photos, write letters, and certainly talk about the person who has died. This is how children learn that people stay alive in our thoughts.
- Teach your child to reach out to others who are grieving before s/he needs to grieve.

## **DON'TS:**

- Don't whisper about death in front of your child, as if s/he will not hear.
- Do not talk in "code" in front of your child, thinking your child will not understand.
- Do not talk about death as being like sleeping. That will surely create a sleep issue.
- Do not use the word "sick" in explaining a death. Children think sick means having a cold. Instead, talk about bodies having a problem that the doctors could not fix (like a toy that can't be fixed).
- Don't keep the child away from elderly people who are dying.
- Don't assume that your child's fears are the same as yours. They are much less and much more basic.
- Don't use too many words in your explanations. Say just a little and wait to hear if your child's question has been answered. Less is more.
- *Remember, dealing with death is a process that unfolds over time for everyone, adults and children alike.*

## **BOOKS FOR CHILDREN:**

Annie and the Old One Miska Miles

Freddy the Leaf Leo Buscaglia

Lifetimes: The Wonderful Way to Explain Death to Children

Badger's Parting Gifts Susan Varley

The 10<sup>th</sup> Good Thing About Barney Judith Viorst

Everett Anderson's Goodbye Lucille Clifton

Jim's Dog Muffin Miram Cohen

Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs Tomie dePaola

So Much to Think About Fred Rogers

(Love You Forever Hans Wilhelm)

## **BOOKS FOR ADULTS:**

The Empty Place: A Child's Guide Through Grief Roberta Temes

The Grieving Child Helen Fitzgerald

Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child Earl A. Grollman

How Do We Tell the Children? Dan Schaefer

Grandad's  
Prayers of  
the Earth  
Douglas Wood