

TALKING WITH A CHILD ABOUT DEATH

- Speak simply and honestly. Tell the truth, using words the child can understand. Avoid using abstract ideas.
- Show your understanding and caring.
- Do not assume that a child is too young to understand, and don't worry that the child will be "scarred for life" by what you say.
- Use play, books and videos: children often work through grief by behavior, not verbalization.
- Pick up cues from the child. Follow the lead of the child. Talk about the illness/death as the child indicates.
- Answer what the child asks. Let the child be in charge of what he/she is ready to hear.
- The child may not want to talk about death. Children process information as they are able and what they do not understand at this time can be brought up later.
- "I don't know" is an OK answer to a child's question. Children appreciate and learn honesty.
- Make sure the child understands he/she did not cause the death by his/her angry thoughts or wishes.
- Reassure the child that one death does not mean another is on the way.
- Be aware that regression may occur in the child's behavior—this is normal.
- Let the child know that crying is OK. Crying can help us adjust to the hurt we feel. Don't be afraid to show your tears—your tears can give the child permission to cry when he/she needs to cry.
- Explain that death means the person will not come back to life, although dreams of the person are normal.
- Remember that before and/or after a death the normal home routine is disrupted. Attempts by adults in the home to maintain some structure, rules and limits can provide a sense of security for the child.
- If you are unable to talk about illness/death with the child when he/she is ready, it is advisable to create an outlet for the child. Talking with someone who feels comfortable responding to the child's questions may help; a friend, social worker, minister, support group, school counselor, nurse or physician may fill this need.
- Create an environment that allows the child to express feelings and thoughts: a quiet place with play materials appropriate to age may help.
- Children have radar. They usually sense how their parents are feeling. Don't be afraid to address your feelings with the child, i.e., "I'm sad because you are sick," or "I'm sad because _____ has died."
- Do seek professional intervention (social worker, psychologist, support group) if you or your child are not coping well. Sometimes it takes the help of a professional or the help of other bereaved parents to help you through this difficult time.
- Through anger or silence, a dying child may seek to establish distance from family members. A child may direct his/her anger at someone else in order to release some sadness.
- People experience loss throughout life; classmates move, parents divorce, pets dies, events scheduled to happen are cancelled. Losses, in addition to the loss of death, require the learned skills of processing and working through times of sadness.
- As adults experience the shock of death, so children experience a time of shock associated with death.
- A child needs special attention to protect him/her from feelings such as abandonment, guilt and fear.
- A child needs constant reassurance: hugs, love, and warmth.