

A Guide to Helping the Grieving Preschooler

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Introduction

Hello, my name is Becky Stoffel. I am a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh working towards a degree in Advanced Developmental Psychology. For one of my classes, Emotional Disorders in Childhood, I have created a podcast and study guide for talking to young children about death and loss.

Within this guide, you will find a script for my podcast, which is like a short radio program. Additionally, there will be more suggestions in helping children who have suffered a loss, as well as helpful resources, both in print and on the Internet.

Thank you for reading this information. It is my hope that this guide will give you encouragement and ideas in dealing with a difficult topic.

Glossary

Cognitive Development: The process that a young child goes through in which their minds learn to problem solve, and to understand and comprehend the world around them

Egocentrism: The inability to understand a situation from another person's point of view

Grief: The emotions experienced after a loss

Magical Thinking: When a young child believes that he can create a situation or an action by simply wishing it or thinking about it.

Regress: A method of dealing with emotional stress and pain by acting in ways that are associated with those who are younger.

Podcast Script

Hello. My name is Becky Stoffel. Thank you for listening to this podcast for adults who are helping a grieving preschooler. The goal of this podcast is to provide helpful information for anyone dealing with young children who have experienced a loss due to death. It will provide basic information about how young children understand their world, what children understand about death, and how they grieve. Additionally, this podcast will provide practical information about talking to children about death as well as recommended guidelines for funerals and other rituals. Lastly, frequently asked questions and community resources will be explored.

Death is a painfully difficult subject to talk about at any age. Losing the presence of someone we love is hard for adults, but can be even more difficult for young children who don't yet have a clear grasp on the world and how it works. This makes it even harder for young children to understand abstract concepts like death and grief. Furthermore, the common traditions and rituals that take place when someone has died may be frightening and confusing for young children.

Knowing what to say to a child who has experienced the death of a loved one is an uncomfortable situation. Friends, relatives and teachers may wonder if they should say anything at all or how to respond if a child asks them a question. It is vitally important that a grieving child have some adult who can listen and can answer their questions thoughtfully. With just a little knowledge, loving kindness and patience, you can give much needed support to a child who is hurting.

First, let's talk about the way preschoolers think.

Preschool children have a natural curiosity about life. They are full of questions as they try to understand the world around them and the events and emotions they experience. Preschool children also start to develop their own ideas about what others are thinking, or why other people behave the way they do. These ideas come from the child's own mind and their own point of

view. It is difficult for them, at this age, to understand the perspectives of other people, or to realize that other people don't automatically know what they are thinking or what they are feeling. This is known as **egocentrism**. Egocentrism is most common during the preschool years, but tends to fade as the child's brain grows and develops, and as they have more life experiences. By the time a child is in grade school, they have developed an ability to see things from another's point of view, and they understand that each person's thoughts and feelings are unknown and private unless they are shared.

During the preschool years, and until around the age of 7, children have many ideas about death that are wrong. According to Speece and Brent, most children believe, at one time or another, that death is reversible: that once someone has died, it is possible for them to come back to life. (Speece and Brent, 1984). Another common misbelief is that people who are dead are still able to think and feel. However, Essa reports that children under the age of 7 who have had experience with death, or who have been talked with about death tend to have fewer misconceptions. (Essa, Murray and Everetts, 1989). This means that talking to children can improve their understanding of this difficult topic, even at a young age.

So, how do you talk to a young child about death?

Talking about death and dying is difficult at any age. It is especially difficult when talking to a young child. We may worry that we will confuse or upset them. We may struggle to find words to explain such an abstract concept. Often, getting started is the most difficult part. Sometimes, once we start, the child will contribute to the process by asking questions, but the questions may be difficult or impossible to answer.

Because of the painful emotions involved when we lose someone we love, it is a good idea to begin talking to children about death before there is a traumatic experience. The death of a pet fish, or seeing a dead animal can be a natural opening for a meaningful conversation. (*Talking with Young Children About Death from Fred Rogers*, 2005). However, a death may occur that will impact the life of a preschooler without any prior conversation having taken place. In this circumstance, it is important to talk to the child as soon as possible, and make explanations as clear and simple as possible. Talking to the child immediately may guard against a child coming

up with their own explanations and ideas about why someone has died. It will also provide an opportunity to reassure the child about their own safety and security. Children, in the absence of information, may blame themselves for the death of a loved one. This is called **magical thinking**, where a child believes that their thoughts and words have power; that just because they were angry with someone, or wished they would go away, that they may have caused the death. Talking with a child about death can alleviate their guilt, fears and confusion. It may be helpful, depending on the situation, to clearly state why the person died, and emphasize that nothing the child said or did caused the death.

When talking with young children about death, it is best to use very simple explanations and clear language; you must not leave any room for confusion. Common phrases that we have for death, such as: passed away, loss, and sleeping should not be used with preschoolers; they should be told simply that someone has died. An age appropriate explanation for what death means will be helpful for the child. For example, you might say “Grandpa has died. That means that he won’t be here anymore. He won’t eat or sleep or move around. He also won’t be sick and hurting like he used to”. These explanations may have to be given several times. Children often repeat questions as a way of gradually incorporating the information into their understanding of a subject. According to Rogers, if you do not have the answer to a child’s question, it is best to just acknowledge that you don’t know or you aren’t sure. There are many things that a preschooler doesn’t understand, so they will be able to relate to an adult saying that they are confused, or that there are many things in life that we just don’t know. (Rogers and Head, 2009).

An important part of talking about a loved one who has died is sharing your emotional reactions with the child. Again, the explanation should be kept simple and clear. For example: “Mommy is sad that grandpa has died. I love him very much and I will miss him”. This helps the child to understand that adults get sad, that the feelings they have are natural and acceptable, and it may even help a young child label their feelings. It is also okay for an adult to cry in front of a child. It gives the child permission to cry and be sad too. During this time, the family can grow closer by comforting each other. Fred Rogers, of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, believed that “Feeling excluded can be much harder for children than feeling sad.” (*Talking with Young Children About*

Death from Fred Rogers, p. 3, 2005). Sharing our grief with children allows them to experience the security of emotional closeness with the people they love. Of course, a child, just like an adult, may experience many emotions when someone they love has died. Guilt, fear and anger can be a natural reaction to grief and these emotions should also be acknowledged and talked about.

Now, let's look at how young children grieve.

Young children grieve differently than adults. Although they cry and mourn, they are often not able to sustain such intense feelings for an extended period of time. So, children may play and go about their routine. It does not mean that they are not sad or sorry; they just might feel the need to escape the sadness through play. Some young children may not be able to express their feelings in words, so they may express it through their behavior. It is not uncommon for preschoolers to regress, or act like they did when they were much younger. According to Hospice, some examples of behavior that might be common for a preschooler who is grieving are: thumb-sucking, wetting the bed, clinging, whining, temper tantrums, and excessive fearfulness. (*Children's Understanding of Death, n.d.*) These behaviors will most likely pass as the child learns to live with the sadness and the loss. It is important to continue to talk about the person who has died, and to acknowledge the feelings that the child has. Also, remember that the child will continue to ask questions about death, and may even want to know when the person who has died is coming back. It may take multiple occasions of explaining about death before a preschooler understands the finality of it. Additionally, it is important to let a young child know that they will not feel sad forever and that the bad feelings will go away little by little. (*Talking with Young Children About Death from Fred Rogers, 2005*)

Now, what about funerals and other rituals?

Many parents wonder if children should attend funerals or a visitation at a funeral home. Although this is a personal decision that each parent will make for their child, it is important to remember the purpose of the funeral. Duncan reports that funerals allow the reality of death to sink in and funerals provide an opportunity to say "goodbye". (Duncan, 1992). Children need these rituals just as much as adults. According to The Caring Place brochure, *Saying Goodbye*, a preschooler who has suffered a loss will often prefer to stay close to their parents, regardless of

where their parents are. If a child is old enough, they should have a voice in deciding whether or not to attend a funeral or a viewing. Often, this decision is easier if a child knows what to expect. A preschooler must be prepared for what will happen during a funeral. A parent or trusted adult should explain that a funeral is a way to remember the person who has died. A child should also be prepared for what they might encounter: an open casket, the smell of the flowers, and all of the people and how they might be reacting—crying, telling stories, and so forth. (*Saying Goodbye*, 2007). It would not be unusual for a child to be curious about the body and what it might feel like. They should be told that the skin will feel cold and hard and very different from what they are used to. (*Saying Goodbye*, 2007). A child can also be told that the gravesite can be a special place to visit to remember their loved one.

Children can be involved in the funeral service in age appropriate ways. Preschoolers can draw a picture to be displayed or placed in the casket, they can help pick out flowers, and they can help assemble a picture collage.

Once the services are over, it would be common for a child to continue to have questions about the experience. According to Duncan, continuing to talk about the funeral, and continuing to share memories about the person who has died will help the preschooler to better understand and accept their loss. (Duncan, 1992).

Next, let's talk about tools and techniques that encourage communication.

Books are a common tool parents use to talk to their children about death. There is a wide variety of books written for many different age groups that cover many possibilities and situations: losing a pet, losing a parent or a grandparent, losing a sibling, and losing a friend. The study guide that accompanies this podcast will list several recommended books that might be helpful in starting a conversation about death and loss. However, it is important to heed the advice of Hedda Sharapan, a long-time consultant for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. She says, [quote] "Books, by themselves, can't lessen fears and sadness. What books need to supplement is everyday closeness—the caring and sharing that each family does in its own unique way" [end quote]. (*Talking with Young Children About Death from Fred Rogers*, p. 1, 2005)

Other tools that encourage communication are dolls, especially families of dolls; any type of dramatic play or pretending about the loved one, the death, or the funeral; and art supplies allow the expression of emotions and concerns that may be difficult to put into words.

Finally, let's discuss some community resources.

In Western Pennsylvania, the Caring Place is a non-profit organization that provides counseling and support to children who have experienced the death of a loved one. Nationally, Hospice provides grief counseling and many churches and funeral homes can provide referrals to organizations and individuals who can provide help and support. Comfort Zone Camps, which can be accessed at (www.comfortzonecamp.org) provide a residential camping experience for children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or a primary caregiver. They are located in Virginia, Texas, California, New Jersey and Massachusetts and offered free of charge year-round.

In conclusion, you might worry that you won't have the right words to explain death and to comfort children during a time of grief, what helps children the most is the sense of security they get from the presence and attention of a loved adult. At the time of a loss, children need to be having their questions heard and answered. For quite some time after a loss, children need to tell their story. The loving presence of an adult can make both of these happen.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to this podcast. I hope that the information that I have shared with you today will be helpful.

Helpful Suggestions

Things to do

- If possible, look for opportunities to discuss death as part of the natural cycle of life
- Use clear, simple language
- Talk to a child as soon as possible
- Allow a child to process the information and to grieve in his own way
- Allow a child to ask questions and answer them as honestly as possible
- Get down to eye level with the child when speaking to him/her
- Keep to regular routines, as much as possible
- Share your feelings and emotional reactions
- Don't be afraid to let your children see you cry
- Reassure a child that he will not be abandon and that he will continue to be taken care of

Things to avoid

- Using words like sleeping or loss to describe death
- Lengthy, complicated explanations.
- Making promises that can't be kept
- Trying to distract or "cheer up" a child who is grieving
- Spending too much time away from your child; they will need the support and security of your physical presence

Additional Resources

Books for Children

Clifton, L. (1983). *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*. New York: Harper and Row.

Cohn, Janice (1987). *I Had A Friend Named Peter*. New York: William Morrow and Company

Cohn, Janice (1994) *Molly's Rosebush*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company

DePaola, T. (1973). *Nana upstairs and Nana downstairs*. New York: Putnam.

Durant, Alan and Gliori, Debi. (2003). *Always and Forever*. San Diego: Harcourt Children's Books.

Plourde, Lynn. (2003). *Thank You Grandpa*. New York: Dutton Juvenile.

Schotter, Roni (2003). *In The Piney Woods*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR).

Stenson, Lila, and Stenson, Anna. (2002). *Daddy Up and Down*. Colorado: Peaceful Village Publishing.

Vigna, Judith. (1991). *Saying Goodbye to Daddy*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company

Books for Adults Helping Children

Emswiler, James P. & Emswiler, Mary Ann. *Guiding Your Child Through Grief*. New York: Bantam Books.

Grollman, E.A. (1976) *Talking about death: A dialogue between parent and child*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Kroen, William C. (1996). *Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

Lewis, Paddy Greenwall & Lippman, Jessica G. *Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Parent: A Guide for the First Year*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Schaefer, D. & Lyons, C. (1986). *How do we tell the children?* New York: Newmarket.

Silverman, Janis. (1999). *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies*. Minneapolis: Fairview Press.

Wass, H. and Corr, C.A. (1984). *Helping children cope with death: Guidelines and resources (2nd ed)*. New York: Hemisphere Publishing.

Internet Resources

The Caring Place—www.highmarkcaringplace.com

Comfort Zone Camp—www.comfortzonecamp.org

Family Communications (Mr. Roger's Neighborhood)—www.fci.org

www.familyeducation.com

Hospice—www.hospicenet.org

National Network for Childcare—www.nncc.org

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- Rogers, Fred and Head, Barry. (2009). Insights into Childhood: Helping Children With Death. Retrieved from Family Communications, Inc. Web Site: <http://www.fci.org/printproject.asp?ID={CDB42A83-05F4-4EFD-8250-C86987ECE579}&>
- Saying Goodbye: Preparing a Child For a Funeral or Cremation* [Pamphlet]. (2007). n.p.: The Caring Foundation.
- Sharapan, Hedda. (1977). "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood": Dealing with Death on a Children's Television Series. *Death Education, 1*, 131-136.
- Sharapan, Hedda (2005). *Talking With Young Children About Death from Fred Rogers*[Pamphlet]. Pittsburgh, PA: Family Communications, Inc.
- Shriner, Joyce A. (2007). *Young Children's Understanding of Death* [Pamphlet]. n.p.: The Ohio State University.
- Smith, Harold Ivan. (2002). *When You Don't Know What To Say*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City.
- Speece, Mark W. and Brent, Sandor B. (1984). Children's Understanding of Death: A Review of Three Components of a Death Concept. *Child Development, 55*, 1671-1686.