

Talking With Children About Death

1. Be honest. Gather all the information you can and determine how much and in what manner you need to share the facts. Children may use fantasy to fill in gaps of knowledge; what they tell themselves may be far more frightening than what you have to tell them. Inform honestly and allow time for children to express their feelings and thoughts and to ask questions.
2. Answer only the questions, not statements or expressions of feelings. Expressed feelings need to be listened to. Listening means letting the child lead in discussing what is important to him/her. By listening carefully, it is possible to relate to some of these feelings and better understand them.
3. Offer warmth, affection, and the assurance of your physical presence.
4. Watch for signs of distress, i.e., loss of appetite, aggression, withdrawal, insomnia, and other behavior changes. If these signs persist for several weeks, do not hesitate to refer for professional help.
5. Accept all emotions and reactions expressed by the child. Do not tell the child how he/she "should" feel, and do not offer empty reassurances. Try to identify the feelings behind reactions. Look especially for anger and fear.
6. Leave the child's desk and possessions undisturbed for a period of time to give children time to adjust to the loss.
7. Keep the school routine in place as much as possible. The routine can provide a feeling of stability and safety. Do not, however, act as if nothing has happened. Do not be afraid to make mistakes when answering questions.
8. When talking to a grieving child use a normal tone of voice and use the words, "dead", "dying", and "death". Avoid using phrases that soften the blow such as "went away" or "God took him/her". These phrases can be confusing and scary. Be simple and straightforward. Say things like, "I'm sad too. I am concerned and would like to help you."
9. Do not say things like, "I know just how you feel." It is possible to relate to the child's feelings and situation, but do not take over those feelings.
10. Do not interfere when children reenact the circumstances of the death in play. Play is the language of childhood and this is one way children grieve.

*Information obtained from the following resources:

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