

# Advice with Children

The time of death can be mystifying and troubling to a young person. We at G & P MELAS Funeral Directors, help children understand the processes of dying, death and bereavement and how it affects their lives. As in all situations, honesty is the best way to deal with children. We encourage children to be part of the funeral by putting pictures, letters or other meaningful items in the coffin.

## Caring for a Surviving Child

As in all situations, honesty is the best way to deal with children. Talk to the child in a language that they can understand. Remember to listen to the child and try to understand what the child is saying and just as importantly, what they are not saying. Children need to feel that the death is an open subject and that they can express their thoughts or questions as they arise. Below are just a few ways adults can help children face the death of someone close to them.

The child's first concern may be "Who is going to take care of me now?"

- Maintain usual routines as much as possible.
- Show affection, and assure the child that those who love him or her still do and that they will take care of him or her.

The child will probably have many questions and may need to ask them again and again.

- Encourage the child to ask questions and give honest, simple answers that can be understood. Repeated questions require patience and continued expression of caring.
- Answers should be based on the needs the child seems to be expressing, not necessarily on the exact words used.

The child will not know appropriate behaviour for the situation.

- Encourage the child to talk about their feelings and share with them how you feel. You are a model for how one expresses feelings. It is helpful to cry. It is not helpful to be told how one should or should not feel.
- Allow the child to express their caring for you. Loving is giving and taking.

The child may fear that they also may die, or that they somehow caused the death.

- Reassure the child about the cause of the death and explain that any thoughts they may have had about the person who died did not cause the death.
- Reassure him or her that this does not mean someone else he or she loves is likely to die soon. The child may wish to be a part of the family rituals.
- Explain these to them and include them in deciding how they will participate. Remember that they should be prepared beforehand, told what to expect, and have a supporting adult with them. Do not force them to do anything they don't feel comfortable doing.

The child may show regressive behaviour.

- A common reaction to stress is reverting to an earlier stage of development. (For example, child may begin thumb sucking, or bed-wetting; or, may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for a time). Support the child in this and keep in mind that these regressions are temporary.

Adults can help prepare a child deal with future losses of those who are significant by helping the

child handle smaller losses through sharing their feelings when a pet dies or when death is discussed in a story or on television.

In helping children understand and cope with death, remember four key concepts: Be Loving, Be Accepting, Be Truthful and Be Consistent.

## **Explanations That May Not Help**

Outlined below are explanations that adults may give to a child to explain why the person they loved died. Unfortunately, simple but dishonest answers can only serve to increase the fear and uncertainty that the child is feeling. Children tend to be very literal if an adult says that "Grandpa/Grandma died because they were old and tired," the child may wonder when they too will be too old and they certainly get tired. How tired is tired enough to die?

- "Grandpa/Grandma will sleep in peace forever." This explanation may result in child's fear of going to bed or to sleep.
- "It is God's will". The child will not understand a God who takes a loved one because He needs that person Himself, or "God took him because he was so good." The child may decide to be bad so God won't take him too.
- "Daddy/Mommy went on a long trip and won't be back for a long time." The child may wonder why the person left without saying goodbye. Eventually they will realize Daddy/Mommy isn't coming back and feel that something they did caused Daddy/Mommy to leave.
- "John was sick and went to the hospital where he died." The child will need an explanation about "little" and "big" sicknesses. Otherwise, they may be extremely fearful if they or someone they love has to go to the hospital in the future.

## **How to Help a Child Deal with Loss**

- As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk to the child.
- Give the child the facts in a simple manner, and be careful not to go into too much detail. The child will ask more questions as they come up in their mind.
- If you can't answer his/her questions, it's OK to say, "I don't know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone to help us."
- Use the correct language — say the words "dead" and "die". Do not use phrases such as, "He's sleeping," or "God took her," or "He went away."
- Ask questions like, "What are you feeling?" "What have you heard from your friends?" "What do you think has happened?" etc.
- Explain your feelings to your children, especially if you are crying. Give them permission to cry too. We are their role models: it is good for children to see our sadness and to share our feelings with them.
- Understand the age and level of comprehension of your child and speak to that level.
- Talk about feelings, such as angry, sad feeling responsible, scared, tearful, depressed, wishing to die too, etc.
- Read a book on childhood grief so you have a better understanding of what they may be experiencing.
- Talk about the visitation period and funeral. Explain what happens there and find out if your child wants to attend with the rest of your family.
- Think about ways that a child can say goodbye to the deceased, such as writing a letter, poem, drawing a picture, etc.
- Talk to your child about your religious beliefs, if appropriate, and what happens to people after they die.
- Invite your child to come back to you if they have more questions or have heard rumours so that

you can help them receive the correct information.

- Talk about memories, good ones and ones that may not be so good.
- Watch for behaviour changes in your child - if they are cause for concern, seek professional help.
- Watch out for "bad dreams" - are they occurring often? Talk about the dreams: they are a way to discharge stress.
- Friends, family and school mates frequently find solace and comfort in doing something special in the name of the person who has died.
- Sudden death, violent death and the death of a young person are especially hard to grieve. Disruption of sleep, appetite, and daily activities may be normal responses to an abnormal or unusual event.

## **Where do children fit in?**

- Many parents never stop to think about what they will do with the children when a loved one dies. Probably most wonder who they will get to baby-sit the children while they attend the funeral. Excluding children from the funeral will delay their grieving and hinder their ability to deal with death and loss later in life. Here are some practical ideas that have worked well.
- Give children the opportunity to draw a picture of a happy memory they have of the person who has died. This picture can be placed in the casket or with the urn.
- Have a child write a letter to the person who has died. This gives the child the opportunity to say, "I love you" one more time and to say goodbye. Put the letter in the casket or with the urn.
- A child can either pick flowers from the garden at home or buy flowers and place them either in or on the casket or by the urn.
- Older children can act as honorary pallbearers or can read a selection at the funeral. They could also act as ushers at the funeral.
- You will find it very helpful to spend time explaining to the children what a funeral is about and what will happen. Taking them to the funeral home for the visitation or wake is helpful in making them feel comfortable in those surroundings. The day of the funeral will be much easier for them if this happens.