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TIPS FOR TEACHING KIDS ABOUT DEATH

Death is a part of life. Kids know more about it than you might think. Talking openly about death does not negatively impact a child. Rather, it provides opportunities to share, explore, learn, and understand this normal part of the human condition. Teaching children about death gives them the tools they need to navigate the subject when it comes up at school, on TV, on social media, or elsewhere, and prepares them for when a death inevitably happens in their life.

1 TALK ABOUT IT BIOLOGICALLY

Death can be boiled down to biology. It is not a metaphor, cliché, or abstract concept. Explaining death needs a foundation in biology. All living things will die. So, start with describing what makes us alive.

- a. Ask a child: what do living things do in order to stay alive
 - i. Eat
 - ii. Drink
 - iii. Sleep
 - iv. Shower
 - v. Text
 - vi. Tweet
 - vii. Burp
 - viii. Stay warm
 - ix. Brush teeth, etc.

- b. Tell the child that when we die we no longer need to:
 - i. Eat
 - ii. Drink
 - iii. Sleep
 - iv. Shower
 - v. Text
 - vi. Tweet
 - vii. Burp
 - viii. Stay warm
 - ix. Brush teeth, etc.

2 TALK ABOUT DEATH IN MECHANICAL TERMS

Young children, in particular, are very mechanical in their processing. Think about their toys. They learn that a cube won't fit into the circle-shaped hole. They learn to piece puzzles together. So, provide a similar context when talking about death.

- a. Tell the child to put their hand on their heart

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- b. Ask them what they feel
 - a. Thump, thump, thump of the heart
- c. Ask them to take a deep breath, and then another
- d. Tell them that the heart and lungs are teammates. They work with other organs like our brain where we think, and our belly that we feed (provide other organ descriptors as needed).
- e. When one of these organs stops working properly or breaks then the organs are no longer able to work together.
- f. Every organ is important and we need all of them to work in order to stay alive.
- g. Example: mommy's heart stopped working because she had something called a heart attack. Because mommy's heart no longer works none of her others organs can do their job. So, she died.

3 LOOK TO THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN NATURE

Nature is an easy and accessible tool for teaching children about death. Depending on their age, they have seen flowers bloom, trees grow and shed their leaves, the change of seasons, and ants get squashed. While using nature to discuss death doesn't effectively address the emotional counterpart of the death of a loved one, it is a strong foundation for helping a child understand that living things die.

4 UTILIZE LIFE EVENTS

Life is fertile with opportunities to talk about, normalize, and explore death. When a gold fish dies, use it as a learning opportunity. The same is true for any pet. When children hear about death in the news of a celebrity or a public tragedy, don't sweep it under the rug and pretend like it didn't happen. Death and grief are a part of life. If we help children understand and process this fundamental fact it won't ruin their childhood, make them lose their innocence, or cause damage. Instead, it gives provides opportunity to learn, explore, discover, ask, and develop coping skills *before* someone they know dies. Talking about the dead deer on the side of the road equips a child to **be** healthier, better informed, and better prepared.

5 ASK WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW

Children are exposed to death all the time. Disney loves to produce movies with orphans like Cinderella, The Lion King, The Little Mermaid, Bambi, and others. Many superheroes lost a parent, including Spiderman, Batman, and many more. The concept of dead people is not new to children. Unfortunately, adults seldom talk about it or engage it in meaningful or productive way with kids. Ask a child what they think about death, what they know, and what they've heard. And then be prepared to answer honestly without clichés or abstract metaphors. Concrete and honest facts are best for children.