

Helping Parents Talk About Grieving and Death with Their Children and Teens

Compiled by Debbie Gline Allen, C.M.C.F.

Helping Children with Death and Grief as well as other key topics by Fred Rogers
www.fredrogers.org

Good Grief, Inc. (Helping Children Cope with Loss)
<http://www.good-grief.org>

Talking To Children About Death (from Hospice)
<http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/cgi-bin/extlink.pl?l=http://www.hospicenet.org/html/talking.html>

Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief: Tips for Teachers and Parents (from the National Association of School Psychologists)
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/griefwar.pdf

Explaining Death in a Child's Terms (from Kids Health)
<http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/death.html#>

Centering Corporation and Grief Digest Magazine
<http://www.centering.org>

Resources for Bereaved Families
<http://www.griefwatch.com>

Helping Teens Cope with Grief (from Hospice)
<http://www.hospicenet.org/html/teenager.html>

Helping Teens Cope With Grief (from the Center for Loss and Life Transition)
<http://www.centerforloss.com/articles.php?file=helping25.php>

Helpful Quotes from an out-of-print booklet, "Talking With Young Children About Death" by Hedda Bluestone Sharapan, M.S., the assistant producer of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood:

"There are several books that I would like to recommend...but they can only be used as supplements to something else. Death is an emotionally-charged subject for us and for children; books by themselves, cannot dispel fears and sadness. What books need to supplement is the everyday closeness -- the caring and sharing that each family does in its own unique way..."

"Sometimes the words came out wrong and sometimes they didn't come out at all. Looking back now, I can see it didn't matter. For me, the closeness and love and trust I felt with my [family] and my friends are what helped most, and I think that atmosphere is what helped our children most. This is not to say that those were times without resentment, irritability, and even anger. But all the same, no one tried to talk anyone out of his or her feelings, no one denied them. We supported each other as best we could, doing whatever seemed most comfortable at the moment, and together we came through a time that was hard for us all. I learned more from that experience than I could ever have learned from conferences or from books. In retrospect, I see that it was often my children who were my best teachers. When I was open to them, by sharing some of my feelings and encouraging them to communicate their thoughts, they helped me know what they needed..."

“We need to remember that when there are unanswered questions (or even unspoken ones), children will find their own fantasy explanations. Often these fantasies are scarier than reality...”

“...one of the best kinds of “protection” we can give children is to provide them with simple and straightforward answers to their questions and ample opportunities to let us know what questions they have. It is precisely because young children don’t understand what death is all about that they especially need us to talk about it with them.”

“Children tend to take what we say literally. ...here’s one example of children’s literalism I came across recently that taught me the importance of trying to find out whether a child has correctly understood what we’ve said. In this instance a family was trying to prepare their young son for a visit to a funeral home where the boy’s grandfather was awaiting burial. They explained that Grandpa’s body would be lying in an open coffin. The boy was very anxious -- until he saw his grandfather in one piece. He had expected his head to be missing and only his body to be there...”

“Sometimes we can be more helpful by answering a child’s questions with ‘No one knows for sure, but I believe...’ For some people, saying, ‘You know, I wonder about that, too’ is a special kind of honesty and a kind that their children can understand...”

“...there will be times, too, when we need to grieve alone in our own unique ways. For a child it may be withdrawing or misbehaving or shouting. Nor should we be surprised to find children running out to play as usual. Most children find it hard to tolerate prolonged exposure to grieving, and that’s an important reason for letting them know that sadness isn’t forever and that little by little the sadness will go away...”

This updated booklet, and other good resources on helping families talk about death, is available through Family Communications, an organization founded by Fred Rogers:

<http://www.fci.org/viewproject.asp?ID=%7B751E1851-E87F-43D6-B338-20E29C62BF4F%7D>

Recommended books from the United Church of Christ Partners In Education

- *Badger’s Parting Gifts*, by Susan Varley. Badger’s friends are sad when he dies, but they treasure the legacies he left them.
- *Congregational Trauma: Caring, Coping, and Learning* by Jill Hudson, published by Alban Institute. In the appendix section: Working with youth in crisis; common behaviors of children and youth after a crisis; children, youth, and grief; do’s and don’ts for talking with young people about death; stories about death for elementary school children; coping with grief; books for teens.
- *Everett Anderson’s Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton. This short book describes Everett Anderson moving through the five stages of grief after his father’s deaths.
- *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* by Leo Buscaglia. A story that compares the lifespan of a leaf through the seasons to the journey of the human life cycle from one life to the next.
- *Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss*, by Enid Samuel Traisman. This is a journal that encourages young teens to work through their grief in a creative and healthy way.
- *Good Grief: Helping Groups of Children When a Friend Dies* by Sandra Sutherland Fox. A highly-recommended classic.
- *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When A Special Person Dies*, by Janis Silverman. An art therapy and activity book for children coping with the death of someone they love. Sensitive exercises address all the questions children may have during this emotional and troubling time.

- *I Remember Miss Perry* by Pat Brisson. A story about grieving over the death of a teacher.
- *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst. Specifically written to address children's fear of being apart from the ones they love, through anger, distance, or even death.
- *Lifetimes: The beautiful way to explain death to children* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. Explains to children how everything has a beginning and an end and that life happens in between. Done very simply, making it easier for young children to understand.
- *The 10th Good Thing About Barney*, by Judith Viorst. "My cat Barney died this Friday. I was very sad. My mother said we could have a funeral for him, and I should think of ten things about Barney so I could tell them...." But the small boy who loved Barney can only think of nine. Later, while talking with his father, he discovers the tenth and begins to understand.
- *Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss* by Michaelene Mundy. Loaded with positive, life-affirming advice for coping with loss as a child, this guide tells children what they need to know after a loss – that the world is still safe; life is good; hurting hearts do mend.
- *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing after Loss* by Pat Schwiebert, a nurse working in the area of bereavement for over 30 years. It is a picture book but geared more to older children and adults than to young kids.
- *Waterbugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Children* by Doris Stickney. A story for children which compares the mystery of death with the metamorphosis of the waterbug to a dragonfly, with helpful suggestions for parents from the author.

Recommended DVD

Confronting Death by Walter Wangerin Jr. Death comes to all of us, but there is a difference between the world's view and the Christian perspective. The world looks away and tries to hide, "but we as faithful people have the power and ability to look death straight in the eye and understand it." This compelling teaching explains how Christ is victorious over death. Excellent for Sunday school classes, study groups, equipping caregivers who do visitation ministry, hospice, and working with those who are grieving. A study guide for group discussion is included.

Suggestions from Karen-Marie Yust, Ph.D.,

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In terms of remaining connected and also saying "goodbye," I suggest several possibilities:

- ✓ If your children are accustomed to the Godly Play practice of praying with a lit candle and then snuffing the candle to transform the light into smoke that moves into invisible spaces, you can use this practice as a way of praying for your associate pastor and then letting the smoke carry the prayers invisibly to God and to the associate pastor.
- ✓ Invite children or families to create a memory book full of pages that recall events or images of the associate pastor and send the book to the AP's family to share with her and enjoy themselves. Head the memory book pages, "I will always remember..." which reinforces the message (for children and for the AP's family) that even in death, persons live on in our hearts and minds.
- ✓ Plant a garden plot with "memory" flowers and invite children/families to sit near the plot (or look out a window toward the plot) and think about, remember the past with, and pray for the associate pastor. Send a large photo of the plot to the AP's family and ask them to put it in the AP's hospice room.
- ✓ If the children in your congregation take communion and someone is taking communion to the associate pastor, celebrate with the children and let the children know you are reserving some of the bread and juice/wine to take to the AP. Visibly set aside the elements for the AP as part of the liturgy. In this way, the children and the AP are joined by common bread and cup even if not in person.

- ✓ Gather photos of the associate pastor engaged in church activities and invite children/families to select a photo they would like a copy of for their refrigerator or other place in their home. (Each church school class might also want a photo for their room.) Invite them to touch the photo and think (or say aloud if young), “I’m thinking of you today.” Begin talking now about how our bodies sometimes get too old or too hurt or too sick to continue working, and when that happens, God stays with us and takes care of us, even after we die. Some children may want to look at or touch the photo and say, “God is taking care of you, no matter what.”