

# FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

## Guidelines on how to talk to grieving children about death

**T**hrough the years, I have learned a great deal from many grieving children and their families. They have taught me which words work best when talking to children about death. Here are some general concepts I suggest companions use when talking with children about death, dying, grief and mourning.

### Talk openly about death

The child's journey through grief depends on you being honest and open about the death. You may feel if you are quiet and don't talk about it, you are helping the child forget about the death and not reminding them of the pain it brings. This kind of protection doesn't help for too long. Of course, you mean well, but by not talking about the death, which is foremost on everyone's minds, you only cause the youngster to feel confused and alone in grief. It might even make the child feel more afraid.

When talking with children, use simple, concrete language. Until they become teenagers, children are quite literal. Try not to use abstract or complex descriptions for death. It's OK to use the "d" word (death or dying). Explain death in a straightforward manner, without the use of metaphors or analogies such as "passed away," "taking a long sleep," "left us" or "in a better place." Be open to discussing the death and his or her thoughts and feelings about it again and again. Healing is a process, not an event.

### Share your feelings

A natural part of healing is seeing that others feel the same way that you do. Let the child see you grieving and mourning. Don't be afraid of scaring him or her by letting them see you cry. Remember, crying is really an act of strength, not weakness. Crying together is healing. It allows you to express your grief in a raw and honest way. By grieving together, you send the strong message the child is not alone in grief.

### Be honest and direct

Answer questions simply and directly. Adults may think they need to explain everything, but young children are often satisfied with an honest, short answer. For example, just the first two sentences of this explanation would suffice: "I think it is sad that Grandpa died. What do you think? Yet Grandpa had a long and happy life. Some people are not ready to die because they haven't done enough, but Grandpa did so much. Did you know he was in the Second World War? Anyway, he was blessed with so much. Much more than most people, so in a way I think he was ready to die...."

### Avoid euphemisms

Saying a dead person is "asleep," for example, will not only mislead a child, it may also cause him or her to believe the dead person might "wake up" again. Or if you say, "It was God's will," they might feel angry at God for taking his or her mother, sister or friend away. Children might also believe God is punishing them. Remember, young children take things literally, so such abstractions are often confusing. Also, keep in mind that children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don't know or have been "protected" from knowing.

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### **Give inviting, loving, non-verbal cues**

For children, the language of comfort is often physical – through holding, hugging, snuggling and affection. Spend time simply sitting next to or holding the child. Your close physical presence is a conversation in itself.

When talking about the death or the child's grief, stay aware of your tone and make eye contact. With warmth, sincerity and a relaxed open face, send the message that whatever they say is OK, allowing him or her to express fears and wishes freely. Allow long pauses after questions or gaps in talking for the child to fill or not.

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It's also important to honour how children best express themselves – and sometimes that's not through talking. Maybe it's drawing, writing in a journal, singing loudly, roughhousing, dancing, doing crafts, watching videos or looking through pictures to remember the person who died. Tune in to the child's personality and create opportunities to express grief in various ways.

### **Attend to your own grief**

If you are a parent or family member, most likely you are also grieving the death of the person who died. When you are overwhelmed by death, it's hard to think of anything else, including the needs of those around you.

It's important for you to carve out time and honour your own grief. If you are responsible for the full-time care of a child, you will have to do the same for him or her – creating

time to grieve with you and separately. Giving attention to another's grief can be challenging when grief has shaken you deeply, but try your best to be available to your child, who feels shocked and confused by the death of a family member or a loved one. If, understandably, you just can't do it right now, find another loving adult who can.

Your child needs full-on love and attention right now – at a time when it might feel the hardest to give. Remember that your grief may look very different. While you may be overwhelmed with sadness, your child may be feeling more muddled and undefined. He or she may be able to digest just a little grief at a time before needing a mental and emotional break, while your grief may be all-consuming.

It's important to ask for help from friends and family. Let them take on some of the responsibility of companioning your child through grief. The task may even be too large for you and your circle of friends and family to handle. If so, that's OK. Enlist a professional counsellor or seek the help of grief support groups as needed. Mostly, be gentle with yourself and know you are doing the best you can.

#### *About the Author*

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's department of family medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner's Book of Hope*, and *Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens About Death, Suicide, Homicide, Funerals, Cremation, and Other End-of-Life Matters*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com) to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.