

Grief and Loss

Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss

A Resource for Parents

Questions Children May ask at time of Death or Loss

Introduction

For many people, death is an infrequent experience and when children are involved parents are often nervous as to how best to deal with the grief associated with a loss that affects our children. This booklet is meant to be a guide to be adapted but is based on the experience of many school communities as well as recognised theories.

As Christians, we do not believe that death is the end of life but when we die we enter a different life, a life that we do not fully understand or can explain. While we cannot answer all the questions about heaven and God, we do know that when we die, we go to heaven, with God, and heaven is a place where "there is no more suffering, no more tears".

What Do I Say?

"What does DEAD mean?"

Primary school children tend to concentrate on what happens to the body.

Say: does not feel or think as you do because he/she is dead and that means he/she does not have feelings anymore. They do not breathe anymore. Their heart has stopped, all parts of their body have stopped working and their body is cold and will not move again. They cannot feel hot or cold, or that they are hurting or sick or well. They cannot think anymore, either about nice things or scary things, or good or bad things. They do not need to be held or hugged or fed or played with anymore because being dead means that their body has stopped working and is of no use to them anymore. This happens to everything that is alive.

"Is a dead person sleeping?"

Say: When we sleep, we are resting our bodies. Our heart and other parts of our bodies do not work as hard. But they keep working. Sleep gives us strength for another day at school or play. When a person dies, the body parts stop working all together. There will be no waking up. The body's work is finished. So sleep and death are different.

"What happen to the dead body?"

Explain that there are two aspects of death: (i) the body and (ii) the spiritual.

Say: In our country, there are two things we can choose to do with the dead body. We can have it put in a special box called a coffin and, often after a special prayer service, bury it in the ground in a place called a cemetery, which is a special place set aside for burying people.

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Another way is to turn the body into ashes, which is called cremation and that happens at a special place called a crematorium. The body is put into its special box and after a special service, it is put into a very small room which contains a very hot fire and this changes the body into ashes. Then, the ashes can be scattered in a special place, or buried in the ground, or kept in a special container called an urn.

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People called funeral directors arrange for these things to happen.

"But what happens to them once their body dies?"

There are three viewpoints for the Spiritual aspect:

Say: Nobody really fully understands what happens to people after death, but many people believe that life continues in a different way. (To concretise this different way, images such as chrysalis-to-butterfly and the story book Waterbugs and Dragonflies are used). The story of Jesus being different post-resurrection reaffirms this difference.

Say: Many people believe and all religions teach that humans have a spirit or soul and that the spirit or soul of the person lives on after death and either goes to another place or returns as the spirit of another being on earth.

Say: Some people believe that the death of the body is also the end of life for that person- that their spirit dies too.

"What is it like in heaven?"

Say: We do not know what heaven looks like. We cannot tell you where heaven is. We know our bodies on earth wear out and die. Because we believe it is our spirits that live on, we believe that we shall not be sad again, or experience troubles or difficulties we have on earth. We believe heaven is the place where God is. Because God is love, heaven will be a place full of love.

"Why do babies and some people die young and others live to be very old?"

Say: We often don't know for certain why this happens. It does seem unfair. We do know that the bodies of some people, even babies, wear out very quickly or sometimes things go wrong with parts of their bodies that causes the whole body to stop working. Most people live to old age. We can only try to take care of our own bodies and never act to cause hurt to another person to help our body to work as long as possible. Sometimes things happen to people and they have no way of stopping it. Everything that is born will die sometime.

"Why do people die?"

Dying is a natural part of life. All living things-plants, animals, even people are special parts of God's natural world. Nature almost always gives us long, healthy lives. Like all other living things, though, people grow old and reach the end of life. This is called death or dying.

"Does death hurt?"

Doctors tell us that death is not usually painful. Especially with old people, dying is almost always quiet. When someone dies in a accident, they often feel no pain at all since death comes so quickly. Even when someone is sick or hurt for a long time before death, special medicines and treatments take away much of the pain.

"When someone dies, are they being punished?"

Death is never a punishment. It is almost always natural. Time wears out important parts of our bodies. After many, many years these parts cannot work anymore. People die when these parts, the heart, for example, stop working. God gave us wonderfully strong bodies that usually last a long time. Sometimes sickness makes them stop working before a person becomes old. This is not a punishment though. No one dies because God is angry with them. A person dies when an important part of their body wears out and stops working.

"Why can't doctors or hospitals stop someone from dying?"

Many times they do. Yet sometimes, even though they have tried their best, someone dies. Doctors help people live long, healthy lives. Because of what doctors have learned, people live much longer now than they did when your grandparents were children. Hospitals help people too. Doctors and nurses work in hospitals to make sick and injured people better. People go to hospitals to become healthy, not to die.

"Why did someone I love have to die and not someone else?"

Sometimes death doesn't seem fair. Of all the people in the whole world, why did this one special person have to die? Almost everyone, no matter who they are or where they live, is loved by others. Almost everyone will be missed by others when they die. Right now someone just like you somewhere else in the world is asking the same question. Maybe if you were with that other person you could help them understand that we all will someday lose someone we love.

"Is death like sleeping?"

Dying is nothing at all like sleep. People, animals too, sleep to rest and stay healthy. Sleep gives hard working parts of our bodies' time to store up strength. Think of how good you feel after sleeping. You feel good because your body is rested and ready for another day. When someone dies, their body stops working. It is not resting. Its job is over.

"Why do some people die when they are very young?"

Sometimes, but not very often, death comes to a child. Illness can make this happen. So can a very bad accident. A young person's death makes us especially unhappy. We feel that it isn't fair. We feel that everyone should live a long, happy life. We know that we will miss a young friend, or sister, or brother more than we might miss anyone else. We may even feel sad because we sometimes argued or fought with that child. All of these feelings are normal. Every young person has them, just as you do. But you must leave room for other feelings also. Remember that you often made that child happy. Even though that child's life was not as long as yours will be, it was a mostly happy life, because of loving friends like you.

"Why do grown-ups die before they get old?"

Most grown-ups are strong and healthy. They will live until they are very old. Sometimes, though, a grown-up's heart or other important part of their body stops working. Being big and strong doesn't always help. It is not the person's fault. It is not God's fault. It is not your fault.

"Do people die because they are unhappy?"

Unhappiness can sometimes make us feel sick for awhile. But almost no one dies because they are unhappy. Remember the times when you have been unhappy. Sooner or later you feel better again. You are able to smile and laugh again. Everyone goes thru times like this. It has nothing to do with dying.

"Will I ever see that person again who died?"

When someone dies they do not come back to life again. This is why people become so sad when someone they love dies. They miss the person who is gone. Right now you may miss someone who has died. Maybe you will always miss them. But you will not always feel sad about it. You will understand after a while that the person may have gone to Heaven. Someday, a long, long time from now, you may be with that person in Heaven.

"How can I stop feeling sad?"

It is natural to feel sad when someone you love dies. You miss them. You may feel lonely. You may feel confused too. Most people - not just children - feel the same way when someone they love dies. Sadness is something like the pain you feel when you hurt yourself. At first it hurts very much, but it will hurt less each day. Sooner than you think, the sadness will be gone. Then you will be able to think about the person who has died without feeling sad. Right now you are trying to understand more about death. This will take some of your sadness away. It helps to ask questions. It also helps very much to tell your family and friends how you feel. It helps most not to pretend. If you are sad, don't pretend you are not.

"Why are people buried when they die?"

After people die, we place their bodies in cemeteries. This is a gentle way to say good-bye to someone we love. A cemetery give us a quiet, pretty place to come and think about that person. A visit to a cemetery can bring back pleasant memories.

"What are funerals for?"

One of the nicest things about being a person is that we are able to feel love for another person. This does not end when that person dies. Funerals are for sharing loving feelings about someone who has died. They give us the chance to remember with others the goodness and joy that person brought to our lives. This takes away some of the sadness that we all feel. It also helps us understand how much others care too.

Support for You and your Child

The family – The family is the best support structure for your child. Take time to talk and pray together. Talk about the person who has died. Children may ask for details that you have already given them but this is their way of checking.

The Parish – The Parish Priest will be able to help your family with many of the questions about death, God's will and life after death. Masses can be offered especially for loved ones.

Noosa District Parish Details

Parish Priest: Fr Mark Franklin

Contact Phone Number: 54471188

The School – Alerting the school to the death of a loved one, especially your child's class teacher will allow the class teacher to include this person in their daily prayers. Our school a counsellor, Nicole Fraine, who is

at the school Monday and Thursday and every second Tuesday is available if you have any concerns or need advice. By contacting the school office an appointment can be made.

Other Support Structures

If your child fixates on one of the stages of grief then the following maybe also be of assistance.

- Private Counsellors or Psychologist
- CentreCare Catholic Family and Community Services
- Ph: 07 5330 9300
- Your GP