

When You Don't Get the Chance to Say Good-Bye

Children, teens and adults often feel guilty when they don't have the opportunity to say good-bye to a loved one. *"I didn't get a chance to tell her how much I loved her,"* is a common response heard from all ages. Assure children that the person knew how much they loved them. Follow with an example such as; *"Your mommy knew how much you loved her, remember the time..."*

Younger children may want to draw a picture and narrate their good-bye message to be written down by someone else. Older children may want to write a more private letter to the deceased. Good-bye messages can then be placed near their loved one in the casket, before cremation or buried later on at the grave-site.

It's never too late to say good-bye to a loved one that has died. Good-bye messages can be made at any time and can even be followed by a special good-bye ceremony. This may be a nice time to share your family's special good-bye traditions or religious beliefs.

Souls, Spirit and/or Heaven

Many people believe that some part of their loved one lives on after death. Adults are often puzzled as to how they should explain such complicated concepts to children. It's okay to say to a child, *"No-one knows for sure what happens after a person dies, but in our family we believe..."* Children may want to know specifically what happens to a person's soul or spirit after they die. Keep in mind that younger children often have a difficult time understanding abstract ideas that rely on faith and more life-experience. They may be confused if they are first told that when someone dies their body stops working and then are later told that their loved one is looking down on them from heaven.

A gentle way to explain soul or spirit to children is to use an example such as; *"Imagine that mommy's body is like a hand in a glove...the fingers in a glove are warm and they can move because they are alive. The fingers inside are special because, why, what can fingers do?... What happens when you take off a glove? The glove can't move, it's not alive and it's not as warm as when there are fingers inside of it. The glove was the outside— just like mommy's body was her outside. Nana doesn't need her body anymore, because it doesn't work. Can you think of some things that made mommy special on the inside?"* Remind children that when the body doesn't work it does not feel pain. The lungs cannot breath, the heart does not beat and the person cannot see or hear, walk, talk or eat.

Dealing with Death by Accident Ages 3-6

Suppose you have to tell a four-year-old that someone died in a car accident. You may say, *"Auntie was in a bad car accident last night, her body got so hurt that the doctors could not fix her to make her better and she died. Do you know what it means when someone dies?"* Clarify that the body stops working when someone dies and ask if they have any questions. Don't be surprised if children are anxious to go play and seem unconcerned. This is normal. Three-six year olds can only take in so much information at a time. A short while later you could briefly explain ways to say good-bye. You could even reassure them how you will always do your best to drive safely.

Dealing with Death by Accident Ages 7–9

“I have something very sad to tell you. This morning there was an accident by the train and your uncle was killed.” A child of this age may ask you what happened. You may respond, *“I am not sure exactly what happened, but when I find out more information I will let you know”*. Or you may say, *“Your uncle didn’t hear the train coming and couldn’t get out of the way fast enough so the train hit him.”* If the accident was a suicide, you may say, *“Your uncle had a lot of problems that he wasn’t able to figure out on his own. Instead of asking for help, he thought the best way to solve his problems was to make his life end.”* These are some different scenarios that some people unfortunately must face. You know your child the best and how much information he can tolerate. Keep in mind that children are curious and will naturally seek ways to fill-in the blanks when they are looking for more information. Be aware of times when you think your child is not listening, especially when talking on the telephone. Children may seem like they don’t have questions, but they may just feel uncomfortable asking them.

Dealing with Death by Accident Ages 10-12

Children of this age often pick-up on what is happening around them. It is not unusual that they may anticipate what you are going to say simply by assessing their environment, your tone and body language. It is normal for children of this age to feel shock and denial almost immediately after receiving bad news.

They may also be in such a state of shock that requires a few minutes to process information. For example, you may say, *“I have some bad news. Your dad had an accident at work and he got very badly hurt. The doctors tried everything they could to fix his body, but they weren’t able to make him better... and he died.”* Children ages ten-twelve years may require immediate consoling after hearing bad news.

Death by Accident– Teenagers

Teenagers are full of raging hormones and tend to be the most naturally dramatic of all ages when it comes to coping with death. When dealing with an accident especially of a peer, it is not uncommon that a teen will receive the information directly or know about the accident before you do. Teens often express deep feelings of pain, anguish and shock in very dramatic ways. They may be quick to seek physical comfort from peers such as hugs and are more likely to push adults hastily aside. You can best support teens by giving them some space and helping them connect with peers. Offer to let their friends sleep-over. Nighttime is often extremely difficult for this age.