

Children and Grief

How to answer your child's questions about death

By Sharon Marshall

The 4- and 5-year-old students in my son Jeff's Sunday school class prayed for a little girl's mother and a little boy's dog. They left confident that Jesus had heard.

The following Sunday at prayer time, the little girl excitedly told the class that her mother was better, but the little boy said, "My dog died. Jesus didn't make him get well." Jeff responded, "My little brother died last year. Jesus didn't make him well, either."

When illness, accidents, and death occur in our families, we want to shield our children from the pain—to plug their ears so they won't hear about it and guard their hearts so they won't feel it. We want them to live their lives untainted by sorrow. But we can't.

What we can do is help our children learn to deal with loss. Whether it's the death of a pet, a grandparent, a sibling, or an acquaintance, children will have plenty of questions. We need to be prepared with answers from both our heads and our hearts.

What happens when you die?

Visitations and funerals bring on many new questions for children. It can be strange and a little frightening for them to see someone they love dressed in unfamiliar clothes and lying in a casket. I know two 4-year-olds who asked the same question at two different funerals: "Does he have any feet?" It sounds funny to us, but to a child who has no idea what this strange bed is for or what happens to a dead person, it's a perfectly logical thing to ask.

Children are concerned about the necessities of life. When the concept of a new life in heaven is introduced, they want to know who is clothing and feeding their loved one. They are curious and they want details: Does it hurt to die? Will Grandma have a garden? Can she hear us talking? Will she always wear that dress?

What to say: Obviously, we don't have all the answers about death and heaven, but we should address their questions with age-appropriate facts: "Uncle Joe's feet are under this lid. Would you like to see them?" or "It hurts to be sick, but it doesn't hurt to be dead."

Analogies or common examples also help children get a better understanding of death. Say something like, "Remember when we moved into our new house? Our body is the house we live in on earth," or "When you die, the part of you that laughs and cries and thinks and feels goes to heaven. Your body stays here and doesn't feel anything anymore."

Use words of comfort like, "Justin is in heaven with Grandma. And the Bible says that in heaven, we won't be afraid or get hurt or feel sad."

Is Mr. Wilson in heaven?

If the deceased person was a Christian, this is a glorious question. But if we know the person wasn't a Christian—or even if we don't know for sure—it's a tough one to answer.

The concept of hell is extremely difficult to grasp. There is a great deal of theological debate on what hell might entail—is it a place, a state of being, the absence of God? If your children seem deeply concerned about hell, ask your pastor to talk with you and your child and answer some of the hard questions.

We must admit to our children that there is a lot we don't know about life after death, but we can share with them what we do know and what the Bible tells us.

What to say: Let your answer reflect God's love, saying, "We know God loves Mr. Wilson very much and wants him to be in heaven." You can also say, "The Bible tells us God wants everyone to experience grace and forgiveness (2 Peter 3:9). I believe Mr. Wilson had a chance to meet Jesus in his lifetime and if he did, then he's in heaven."

Where is heaven?

Most children cry when their balloons soar into the sky, but a little girl named Brooke let hers go on purpose. She would beg for balloons just to watch them fly away. Knowing the balloon wouldn't last long, her family was reluctant to waste money buying balloons, but they did because Brooke was so cute, giggling and squealing with delight as they soared upward.

When Brooke's infant sister, Rose, was stillborn, Brooke told her 3-year-old brother, Carter, "Heaven is way up there (pointing up) high in the sky, where balloons go for angels to play with in the clouds. Baby Rose is up there playing with the angels and when we miss her, we can send her a balloon."

What to say: Children are concrete thinkers. The abstract concept of heaven is difficult for them to grasp. We need to answer their questions concretely. Say, "Heaven is where Jesus is. We think of it as up in the sky," or "We can't travel to heaven from earth until we die. It's in another world."

Children also want to know that heaven is a good and normal place to be, so tell them, "Everyone dies eventually. Jesus loves us and wants us to be with him when we die. When we get to heaven, we'll see Grandma again. She'll be waiting!"

Why is everybody laughing?

Sandra was 9 years old when her grandfather died. After the funeral, the extended family returned to the house to eat dinner. Sandra was appalled when the adults began laughing and enjoying themselves. It felt so wrong to be happy when Grandpa had just died, and Sandra lashed out at her family.

Sandra's Aunt Loreta ushered her into a bedroom and asked what was wrong. After Sandra explained her confusion, Aunt Loreta told her that it helps people grieve when they eat together and share happy and funny memories about the person who died. She assured Sandra that Grandpa would approve of this loving celebration of his life.

Death, funerals, and the grieving process are unfamiliar to children. Young children don't typically have an emotional response to death because they really don't understand what death is.

So when they ask questions about why people are acting the way they are, it's usually because they are seeking information—something isn't adding up for them.

What to say: Like Aunt Loreta, do your best to take your child's questions at face value and answer honestly. Say, "Remember how Grandpa used to laugh until his belly shook? He would want us to laugh and enjoy life, too. I bet he's laughing in heaven with Jesus right now!" Or, "We're crying because we miss Grandpa, but Grandpa is okay in heaven."

Sandra was given a great gift. A loving family member saw her distress and comforted her while calmly answering her questions. She was taught that grieving takes lots of different forms and that it's okay for life to carry on.

Will you die? Will I?

My friend Karen's daughter Krystal was 5 and her son Michael was 4 when several loved ones died, including the mother of three of the children's friends.

Michael would sit on the sofa with Karen sharing in her tears of grief. But Krystal played alone. In the weeks that followed, Krystal would periodically tell her mother, "Mommy, sometimes I think bad things." Karen would tell her that was normal and to replace those bad things with good thoughts.

Two years later, Karen arrived at school ten minutes late to find Krystal sobbing hysterically. She had been convinced her mom had died, too.

Looking back, Karen realized that Krystal's "bad thoughts" were fears associated with death, fears she didn't know how to express. Karen and Krystal have been able to process them so Krystal can manage her fears and enjoy life.

What to say: We adults often have a more difficult time talking about death than children do, particularly talking about our own deaths. We are tempted to say, "No, I'll always be here for you," even though we realize that might not be the case. We struggle to answer this question without frightening our children. But in truth, they are less frightened by the truth than by the unknown. So be honest. Say, "We will all die some day, but we hope it's not for a very long time."

Give your children concrete information about what would happen to them if you were to die. Tell them, "If I died while you were little, Auntie Ruth would take care of you," or "When I die, I will want you to have a wonderful life here, and I'll be waiting for you in heaven."

Why does God let people die?

In the book *Children's Letters to God* (Workman), a child named Jane asks, "Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you've got now?"

Don't you wonder that sometimes, too? Most adults have learned to pretend we have it all figured out, to hide our doubts and fears. But death is a huge mystery in so many ways; it's perfectly natural for all of us to have questions about why people die.

What to say: When children ask why people have to die, answer honestly. Say, "Death is hard for us to understand. I trust Jesus when he says his children will live with him forever."

Encourage your children to pour out their heart cries to God. These questions are a natural part of the grieving process, so give your child permission to share her confusion, anger, and pain with God.

When my son Jeff's Sunday school teacher, Merna, told me about Jeff's comment in class that morning, she said her heart ached for these children she loved. She told me how she listened as Jeff continued, "My little brother is in heaven with Jesus. He's not sick anymore. I can see Justin again when Jesus is ready to take me to heaven, too." Merna said there was sadness in his voice and eyes, but even at that young age there was confidence that Jesus loved him, and that made everything all right.

When children are impacted by pain and death, they need our honest, heartfelt answers. As we seek to answer them with gentle truth and the promises of the Bible, we find that God's peace comforts all of us.

Sharon Marshall is author of numerous books, including *Take My Hand: Guiding Your Child Through Grief* (Zondervan). View her website at www.score-ed.com/sharonmarshall/

Children and Loss

A child's age will play a big part in how he reacts to death.

Birth to Age 2: Changes in behavior (eating, sleeping, playing) indicate grief. They don't understand what's happening, but they feel less secure in reaction to emotions around them. They need nurturing and comforting words. Even if your children are young, explain to them why people are sad or fearful. Your words of truth will comfort them.

Ages 3 to 5: Children this age see themselves as the center of the universe. If someone dies, they think they caused it. Guilt is the prime emotion, so assure them that the death of your loved one was no one's fault. If they confess to thinking bad thoughts about the person who died, help them ask God for forgiveness while assuring them that the person's death had nothing to do with their thoughts.

Ages 6 to 8: These children are too old to escape completely through fantasy but too young to go through an adult grieving process. Instead, they will often show signs of depression. Encourage them to write letters or draw pictures in honor of the deceased. Give them permission to cry or express their grief in healthy ways. Help them put words to their emotions and be a patient listener.

Ages 9 to 12: Anger is the dominant emotion for this age group. They know the death is not their fault, but they feel slighted by the one who died, and they are mad! Don't scold them for their anger; teach them how to manage it in productive, positive ways. Journaling can be a wonderful tool for children at this age who need a safe place to unleash intense emotions.

Teens: Most teenagers go through an adult grieving

process—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—but they aren't always mature enough to handle the emotions involved. Their reactions could lead to substance abuse, abusing money and credit, or compromising their values. Keep a close eye on teens and model healthy grief. Create a safe haven for them to talk through their grief by being an understanding listener.

What Grief Looks Like

Children don't always express their grief verbally. So pay attention to their behavior, looking for signs that they're still working through the loss, such as:

- more time spent writing or coloring
- changes in the content or style of their drawing
- increased frustration
- becoming more shy or more talkative
- being clingy or withdrawn
- a change in eating habits
- a shift in their sense of humor
- increased illnesses or fears of sickness
- a fear of falling asleep
- more childish or more mature behavior

If you see any of the following signs, your child may need help from a professional:

- drawings of death or violence
- cruelty to other children
- cruelty to animals
- phantom or copycat illnesses
- facial tics or body twitches
- eyes that cross or won't focus
- obsessive behavior
- lethargy or hyperactivity