



**Well@Work Podcast
Season 2, Episode 16:
Healthy Family Conversations:
Talking to Young Children About Death and Dying**

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith shares developmentally appropriate ways to explain death and dying with young children and offers some strategies to help them process their grief.

While death is a normal part of life, COVID-19 led to many unexpected deaths. As of February 2022, more than 925,000 deaths have been attributed to COVID. Many of these deaths have impacted children, more than 167,000 children lost a parent or caregiver to COVID in the US by the end of 2021. As a result, many children may be grieving and look to adults for explanations and help to explain what they are feeling.

People die, often because of illness or age. Some who become ill are able to recover, but many are not. As adults, we are able to understand that, but children may not. Young children or those with a young developmental age may not understand that someone who has died will not be back again. They may not have the tools or skills to express their feelings of loss and grief. And they may ask questions that are difficult for a parent or caregiver who is grieving to answer. Additionally, customs and cultural beliefs about death and dying mean that many are unaccustomed to talking about grief, loss, death, and dying. Today I will share some developmentally appropriate ways to explain death and dying to young children, offer compassionate ways to answer questions they may have, and share some coping strategies to help young children process their grief.

A child who is grieving may move rapidly between emotions, sad and crying one moment, the next off to play. Young children often use play as a way to process their feelings and you may see pretend play about death or dying. Children with limited language skills may not talk about the death, but you may see a regression in developmental milestones, that is they may lose gains made in potty training, start to rely on their pacifier again, or have trouble with self-soothing. Some children feel that the death is their fault, brought on by something that they said or did to the loved one who has died. Or they might feel abandoned by the person who has died because they don't visit or play with them anymore. Some may become anxious about death, asking if or when they will die, worried that a caregiver might die, seeking reassurance that they are safe and will be looked after.

About a year ago, a friend of mine named John lost his cousin James to COVID. Recently, John shared some of the challenges his family has faced. James' death has been very hard for everyone in the family to process. James often helped John and his wife Andrea with their daughter Gabby, who is 4, and they all miss him. Even after so much time

has passed, John worries because Gabby still seems sad about James' death. She doesn't always feel like doing the things she usually enjoys and she won't let John out of her sight. John and Andrea can't understand why Gabby sometimes seems fine and then suddenly she's clinging to Andrea and saying she misses James. Recently Gabby's preschool had a day of remembrance for students and their families who have experienced the death of a loved one from COVID, which the family attended. While Gabby played with the other children, John and Andrea listen to child mental health professionals share some ways that they can help Gabby process her grief. Here are some of the things that they learned.

Tip 1: discuss things openly. It is especially important to be clear and honest. If someone ill is hospitalized, talk openly with young children about what is happening. If the person is not likely to get better, explain that the illness might lead the person to die. Instead of using a euphemism like "passed away," be clear and concrete. Explain that the person's body no longer works and that they have died. You might say "grandma's heart stopped beating, that's something that happens to people when they get old." Or you might say "Aunt Jeanne got really sick from COVID and she didn't get better, she died, and we won't be able to see her again." A preschool aged child, like Gabby, may have already begun asking about dying in order to develop the tools needed to process complex emotions like grief, but they may have more questions after a loved one dies. Younger children may need more explanation; it might be challenging for them to understand that the person who has died will not come back, leading to frequent questions about where the person is. These questions may come up at challenging times, but do your best to answer the questions clearly. Some of the questions may be asked repeatedly, try to answer them consistently, the child is developing an understanding about the finality of death.

Tip 2: be honest about your emotions. Children take cues from adults and may look to you to understand how to express their emotions. If your child sees you crying, explain your feelings. Some children may benefit from understanding how to express those feelings, so you may say "I'm crying because I miss my friend and sometimes when I'm sad I cry." These are challenging times to have to answer questions, it may be helpful to offer a suggestion about how to respond, you might say "I am sad, but you can help by sharing some of your favorite memories of grandpa to cheer me up."

Tip 3: create a memorial. Work with the child to create a tangible memorial for the person who died. Some dedicate an area of the home to loved ones who have died with photos or mementos that can be visited when a child feels they need to. Others create a memory mailbox where a note or picture can be left for those who are missed. Create a scrapbook that a child can easily reach and look through with copies of treasured photos. A photo locket or laminated picture for their pocket may also help children feel connected to the person who has died.

Tip 4: offer strategies to deal with big feelings. Movement is an action-oriented way to deal with emotions that are difficult for young children to express. Dancing, stomping bubble wrap, running hard, taking a walk, or even ripping up paper can be an effective way to release those big feelings. Belly breathing can help young children learn the regulating



power of deep breathing. Sesame Street has a great video called “Belly Breathe” to teach this. The link is in the episode notes.

Tip 5: know when to ask for help. Many children recover and adjust to the death of a loved one or other important person with time and support, but some may not recover as well and may develop more complicated grief. Speak with a mental health counselor or the child's pediatrician if you find the child is showing signs of distress, like being preoccupied with the way a loved one died, losing interest in things they once enjoyed, or appearing withdrawn.

Our grief is unique, every person reacts differently to loss. Grief is cyclical, there are days that pass with less sadness and some that are filled with sadness and pain. There is no timeline for you or a child to get over the loss of someone. Offering young children the tools to express their feelings and teaching them healthy coping strategies can provide them with ways to process their grief on their own timeline. Thank you for listening and remember to stay well at work and well at home.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.