

The Children's Doctor



How to help your child deal with a death in the family

Often, the first death a child has to deal with is the death of a pet. Many parents feel the need to rush out and buy a replacement pet before the child has noticed, rather than discuss death and work through the grieving process. However, the death of a pet can help a child to learn to deal with death. They learn that death is a natural part of life and all creatures experience death. It gives them the opportunity to discuss what happens after death. Experiencing the death of a pet can make it easier for a child to then deal with the death of a loved one, such as a grandparent.

By the age of 5 years, most children understand that death is permanent. Young children often have many questions about death. Sometimes they may not verbalise these questions. You should give your child lots of opportunities to ask questions without being dismissed or ridiculed. Some common questions include:

- Why did grandma die?
- Where did grandma go?
- Does it hurt to die?
- Are you going to die?
- If you die, who will take care of me?

Answer his questions clearly and honestly. It's okay to say "I don't know". The more simple and honest you are, the better he will cope.

Some people try to protect children from death by avoiding funerals and not discussing death. Parents may explain that "Grandma has gone away for a long time and we won't be seeing her for a while". Although this is said with the best of intentions, it does not work. In this situation, children may question why grandma left without saying goodbye and wonder whether they were responsible for grandma leaving. The child needs to understand that death is a natural occurrence. Death should not be covered up and hidden. Children need to be given the opportunity to farewell the family member and grieve their loss.

To help your child to cope with the death of a loved one, you need to feel comfortable with your own grief reaction. It is appropriate for your child to see you cry when you feel sad. This will allow him to express his feelings openly also.

Many books are available to read with children to open up discussion about death. Some favourites include “Grandpa Loved” and “Grandma’s Scrapbook” both written by Josephine Nobisso.