

Supporting a Sibling Through Bereavement

Explaining Death

Using correct words and avoid euphemisms can help avoid confusion.

“We lost Johnny” can be misunderstood by a child – they got lost at the shopping centre last week so why can’t we just find Johnny?

“Johnny turned into a star” – once again very confusing for a child and sometimes can be distressing for a child on a cloudy night to feel that sense of loss again/repeatedly.

“Johnny went to sleep” – well why can’t we just wake Johnny? And even worse, it can lead to a fear of sleeping.

“Johnny passed away/on/over” – has no meaning to a child.

Using correct words also gives the child the tools to understand what other people are talking about.

Rather than asking questions to clarify, many children unwittingly imagine/carry incorrect beliefs for many years.

Use age appropriate language – obviously the conversation with a 3 year old will differ from the one with a 15 year old. Keep it simple but honest.

Often when a child continues to ask why they are not looking for a different answer but really need to hear the news consistently and repeatedly to help process it.

When explaining death to a young child it can sometimes help by starting with what alive means. “When Johnny was alive he could breath, talk, move, feel, eat, drink...” Allow the child to come up with some things on the list if they can. “Now Johnny is dead he has stopped breathing, stopped talking, stopped moving, stopped feeling, stopped eating, stopped drinking...” Allow the child to again suggest things that now can’t be done.

If the child who died had disabilities that prevented them from talking, walking etc. use examples of what they could do.

If supported and included children can be more resilient than we might expect.

Children often break the intensesness of grieving by playing in between.

6 Common Concerns

- **Can I catch it?** (Is it contagious?) No. You can’t catch it. You are safe.
- **Did I cause it?** No. Nothing you did caused the death.
- **Can I fix it?** No. After you die you can’t come back to being alive. It is forever.
- **Who will take care of me?** If you feel sad you can talk to mum/dad/a special adult friend/teacher or staff at school.
- **Will I die?** You are healthy. You are safe. Most people live about 80 years.
- **Have mum and dad got enough love for me?** This fear can be allayed with words and actions. If fear persists parents may consider extra counselling.

It can be a great relief to a child to have these questions answered even if they have not asked them out loud.

Funeral support

Ask the child if they would like to be involved in the funeral and or its planning. At this time so very much is out of the child's control it can be helpful to give some sense of control back.

Some children choose to talk at the funeral, some choose to write something and have someone else read it. Some choose to draw something and place it on the coffin when they walk in; some choose to have the drawing placed in the coffin beforehand by someone else. Some choose to place something special on top of the coffin knowing they will get it back when the service has finished.

Consider taking the child to the place where the service will be held in the days before the funeral. Explain it will look a bit different on the day of the funeral as it will be have more people there and some of them may be crying and some may not. You can also visit the cemetery or crematorium if it's being used. This can give a child a concrete mental picture of where things will be taking place. Particularly helpful if it's their first funeral.

If a child is particularly young it sometimes helps to have a special person nominated to keep an eye on them and having a backup bag of quiet toys or books.