

## **When the Birds and Bees stop Flying and Buzzing: How to Talk about Death with a Child** **Ms Iris Hoiting, Project Officer**

Certain topics are hard to address in our conversations with children. One of them is the story about “the birds and the bees”, or rather, where babies come from. A second major topic of life involves the other side of that story—when the birds and the bees stop flying and buzzing, or, what happens when somebody dies. Death is an inevitable part of life and children will experience death at some point in their lives, whether it is when a bird suddenly flies too hard against their window, or when they experience the death of a loved one from their family. In these instances—and in preparation for them—it is very important to have an open and honest conversation about death with children. When children are given the tools to help them understand what has happened to loved ones who passed away, they will better be able to handle the process of a grief and bereavement, ultimately lessening the burden that such processes entail.

For children, death is a difficult concept to understand, since it is abstract. In order to fully understand what the word “death” actually means, a child needs to understand the 5 main components of death: 1) that death is universal, or, that every living being dies, 2) that death is irreversible, meaning that someone who dies won’t return to live again, 3) that bodily functions stop working once the physical body dies, 4) that internal or external events can have a role in causing death, and, 5) that death is inevitable (Renaud et al., 2015). The components “universality” and “irreversibility” are most often understandably by the time a child is 5-6 years old, and by the age of 7-10 a child has a general understanding of all the main components (with “cessation” of bodily functions and “causality” being the last components to be understood) (Renaud et al, 2015; Slaughter, 2005).

A conversation about death, or explaining to a child what happens when someone dies, requires simple, clear, and age appropriate language. For example, when a person dies their lungs don’t breathe in air anymore, and their heart stops beating, their brain stops thinking, their legs stop walking, their body stops working, etc. As children at different ages understand the concept of death differently, here are some age specific strategies for having conversations about death with children and youth<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> adapted from Johnson (1999) as outlined in Kirwin & Hamrin (2005)

#### Babies and toddlers, aged 0 -3 years old

- Adhere to a scheduled routine and, if possible, keep the infant in their own house.
- Provide the infant with extra cuddling and talk to the infant when you hold him/her.
- The infant is in need of a consistent caregiver.

#### Children aged 3-5 years old

- Inform the child in an age-appropriate but honest manner that their loved one has died (use clear words such as "died" and "dead").
- Explain what death is (e.g. "the body has stopped working") and allow space for the child's questions (if you don't have all the answers, that is ok. Just let the child know that you don't know).
- Talk about the feelings that a child might have and let them know that it is ok to cry.
- Be sure to emphasize that the death is not caused by any thoughts/actions of the child.
- Involve the child in the funeral/cremation planning, and prepare the child for the ritual (explain what will happen on that day).

#### Children aged 6 – 9

- As children at this age are already curious, ask what he/she might already know about death.
- Be honest about what has happened (use words such as "died" and "dead") and let their questions lead the conversation.
- Talk about the feelings (including their fears) that a child experiences and let them know that is ok and normal to feel that way.
- Emphasize that the death is not their fault, as a child at this stage might believe that something they said or did caused the person to die.
- Include the children in the funeral/cremation planning, and prepare the child for this ritual.
- Allow children to play, and understand their need for engaging in familiar activities.

#### Children aged 10 – 12

- Be honest with the child and provide them, if needed or wanted, with details of how the death occurred, and answer questions they have.
- Explain and normalize feelings.
- Offer the child a journal to express his/her thoughts and emotions.
- As with every age, provide the child with love, support and understanding.
- Include the child in the funeral/cremation planning, or the memorial service.

### Teenagers (12-17)

- Be honest and talk about death. Answer any question that arises.
- Talk about feelings (also your own) and repeat what they tell you so they know they are heard.
- Let the teenager know it is ok to cry. It is ok for an adult to show their own crying too, as it is only normal to have these emotions.
- Hug the child and let them know how much they are loved and appreciated.
- If it is difficult for the child to talk with their parent/caregiver, encourage him/her to talk with another adult.
- Give the child some private time, and don't be offended if he/she would rather talk with their peers.

To summarize, open communication and clear language is key for easing the difficulty that children experience when dealing with loss. Adults can show their own emotions, as this creates an opportunity for sharing and shows the child that sharing emotions is ok. Don't be hesitant to use clear words like "dead", "dying", "died". Euphemisms suggesting that the person "is gone", "sleeps for a very long time", or "passed away" may not be the most effective way to communicate with children, since it is likely to cause confusion. The child may be afraid to go asleep themselves, or the child may even conclude that their loved one has "left" doesn't want to come back. Analogies to nature can be very helpful, so you might want to refer to the circle of life as a way to convey the universality of death. After all, birds stop flying and bees stop buzzing, and so one day—in most cases in the distant future—people will die too<sup>2</sup>.

### References

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- Renaud, S.J., Engarhos, P., Schleifer, M. & Talwar, V. (2015). Children's earliest experiences with death: circumstances, conversations, explanations, and parental satisfaction. *Infant and Child Development*, 24, 157-174, DOI: 10.1002/icd.1889
- Slaughter, V. (2005). Young children's understanding of death. *Australian Psychologist*, 40(3), 179-186.

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<sup>2</sup> More information on conversation strategies for impending and sudden deaths can, for example, be found here: <http://washington.providence.org/~media/files/providence/inhome%20services/wa/providence%20hospice%20f%20seattle/talking%20with%20children%20about%20death%20and%20dying.pdf/>