

NEWS FROM LYNNE PABST

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Understanding Children Understanding Death

I already shared how to talk with children about COVID19. Unfortunately, as the pandemic goes on, we need to be prepared to talk with children about death. Not only will children hear adults or the News talking about death statistics, it is probable as time goes on that someone in their church or their community will die. The sad fact is that someone they know may succumb to the virus.

The main developmental fact to remember is that young children lack the concepts to understand death in its entirety. Because of this they easily accept death but then make errors in their thinking about the dead person. In order to fully understand death, one must be able to apply three concepts about death.

- *Death is permanent.* It is a process which cannot be reversed. This concept may develop between the ages of 3 and 5 years, but for some may not be completely established until around 7 years of age.
- *Death renders a body non-operational.* Once dead the body cannot move, walk, or talk. This concept is not established until 7 years of age or later.
- *Death is universal.* At some point, all living things die. Most struggle with this until a later age—9 years or later. Some teenagers still believe they are invincible, and death will not come to them.

A young child's concepts or lack thereof impacts their theological understanding. When hearing the story of Lazarus or during Holy Week the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus, children as a result of their level of cognition may not fully grasp the mystery, miracle and power of the events.

- If there is no concept of permanency, there is no understanding that death is different from sleep. Seeing an illustration in a Bible a young child may ask, "Why was he sleeping in a cave?"
- If there is concept of permanency but not of being non-operational, the power of God over death is lost because a dead body can still function. Lazarus was dead but he walked out of the tomb on his own. Jesus was dead but is still able to walk and talk with the disciples.
- If there is concept of permanency and non-operationality but not universality, the child starts to see the power over death being exhibited for Lazarus and Jesus but does not take it on as something which applies to every individual and to self. So personal understanding of life after death is still not part of their faith system.

Once all three of these concepts are in place, a child is able to understand the true power God has over death, the Easter miracle and the gift of Salvation.

When a very young child is told someone has died, that child may simply go about what was being done as though nothing had happened. This may hurt the grieving parent. But that parent must not be upset. The child's response is a result of not having any of the concepts of death. A slightly older child may acknowledge that it is sad, but then ask questions like, "What is grandma doing now?" "Can I see grandma?" "When is grandpa coming to see us again?" "Why didn't Mrs. take her cat with her?" "Will we see Mr. in church this week?" "How will he be able to eat if he is in that box?" These can be unnerving for the parent. But it is natural thinking for that child. While the child acknowledges the death, the person is still seen as functional so grandma could call on the phone or send a birthday gift. A still older child might make a comment, "I am sad grandma died. But I know you will never die." "I'm never going to die because it makes people sad." "Grandma died because she was old. Young people don't die." These comments again can be unnerving to the parent who is working through their own grief and not understanding the child's level of thinking. Because children think differently about death than adults do, children grieve differently.

In talking with children about death the first pointer is **to realize that children do not view death as adults do and therefore grieve differently than adults.** After that, use many of the same pointers you used when talking about COVID 19:

- listen carefully,
- respond age-appropriately,
- answer questions honestly,
- give only facts which are needed,
- accept the sincerity of questions even if they are odd,
- use accurate language and not metaphors like sleep or passed away,
- prepare children for what will happen in the days after the death,
- provide emotional assurance and presence,
- and never laugh at a child's understanding of death or response to death.

Below are some children's books and websites which may help.

Children's Books on Death:

Buscaglia, L. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. NY: Henry Holt, Co., 1982.

dePaola, T. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973.

Mellonie, B. and R. Ingpen. *Lifetimes: The Beautiful way to Explain Death to Children*. NY: Bantam Books, 1983.

Meng, C. *Always Remember*. NY: Philomel Books, 2016.

Stickney, D. *Waterbugs and Dragonflies*. NY: Pilgrim Press, UCC, 2004.

Varley, S. *Badger's Parting Gifts*. NY: Lothrop, Lee& Shepard Books, 1984.

Wise, M. *The Dead Bird*. NY: Harper Collins, 1958.

Websites Talking with Children about Death:

<https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/exceladocument.pdf>

<https://www.macucc.org/files/websites/www/Talking+About+Death+with+Children.pdf>

https://www.webmd.com/palliative-care/talking_to_children_about_death#1

