

Breaking the News: Telling a Child About a Death

Project Chai/Chai Lifeline

Telling children about the death of a close relative is always a very difficult thing, no matter if the loss was expected or sudden. When a death occurs the adults in the child's environment often find that they don't know what to do. Who should tell the child? When should the child be told? And most importantly- what should be said? The natural tendency of many parents is to want to hold off on talking with the child until they feel calmer and more in control. Unfortunately, time is of the essence because the child needs to hear about this from someone close, preferably a parent. It is important that the child hears directly and clearly what has happened and doesn't pick up on bits and pieces of information which then may be misinterpreted.

What to say?

The child should be told the truth directly, that someone has died. Sometimes adults try to buffer the news and say that the dead person is going to have a big sleep or go on a long trip. This is quite confusing and can cause children to be afraid to go to sleep or to go on a trip. A parent may wish to say that the person who died is going to heaven or will be with Hashem. This can be a comfort both to the parent and child.

Encourage your child to ask questions. This will help you gauge what the child has understood. Often children have concerns that are difficult to anticipate. However, when a parent dies there are almost always two concerns that the child will have: "What will happen to me? Will the remaining parent die too?" These questions need to be addressed. The child needs to hear clearly that the remaining parent will take care of the child and the child will not be alone. While the parent cannot reassure the child that he or she will never die, it is certainly truthful to say, "I hope I will be with you for a very long time, until I am very old." If this death was a sudden one, explain how rare this is and reassure the child that you and he will not die at any minute.

While sharing feelings and thoughts with the child in an age appropriate manner can be very helpful for both the child and yourself, it is important to do this when you are feeling somewhat calm. If you are feeling totally overwhelmed and out of control, it may be helpful to share with another adult rather than overwhelming your child as well. There is no rush, and conversations about the deceased and sharing feelings of sadness and loss can always be revisited at a later time.

Children display a wide range of feelings relating to the death. Often children may be confused, angry, or filled with guilt feelings. Saying something like, "I am feeling so sad right now," can be a way to help label a feeling and help the child acknowledge it. Letting the child know that it is okay to cry, and allowing the child to see you crying is okay.

Children's Reactions to Death

There is no one single way that children react to hearing about the death of a close relative. Children react in a variety of ways to death. Certainly the age of the child and the relationship of the child to the deceased will impact on the way they react to learning about the death.

Young children may show very little reaction and may ask to return to what they were doing before, be it coloring, playing with lego or watching TV. They may act as if nothing has happened. It is important not to be upset by this or think that they are unfeeling or uncaring. They need time to assimilate what they have heard, and each child will do it in his own way. Play is the child's "work" and very often through play they will begin to work through what has happened. There are so many feelings that both children and adults experience at a time like this. Helping them to label their feelings, and modeling for them talking about their feelings can be very helpful. While it is hard to know exactly how any given child will react, it is important to follow the child's lead. Answer questions, allow them to return to everyday pursuits, or just snuggle on your lap.

Guilt feelings often accompany the loss of a close relative. Not infrequently they think that they may have caused the death by not being quiet enough, getting angry, having mean thoughts towards the person who died or misbehaving. It is most important for the child to be reassured that he or she is not responsible for the death;

Attending the Funeral:

One of the questions parents often ask is, "Should my child attend the funeral?" While there is no one correct answer, there are certain guidelines that can help you make the right decision for you and your child. The age of the child is one factor in the decision. Preschool children generally do not attend funerals as they might find them confusing, scary, and they generally don't have the attention span it would require. School aged children can attend the funeral, but should never be coerced.

Before the child attends a funeral he or she should be briefed, and an adult should explain to them exactly what will happen, and what they can expect. It is important to assign an adult (not the parent or other mourners, but a close family friend, aunt or uncle, teacher, etc.) with whom the child feels very comfortable to be with the child during the funeral. The assigned adult should let the child know that if at any point he or she wishes to leave the funeral, that is possible, and the adult should be prepared to do so. Depending on the child's age, you should ask whether they would like to have a friend or two accompany them as well.

If the child decides not to attend the funeral, do not make him feel ashamed or bad about that. Let the child know that you will take him to visit the grave in the near future, when the child is ready.

Crisis@chailifeline.org
855-3-CRISIS

Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox
Director of Interventions and Community Education, Project Chai

Zahava Farbman, MSW
PhD Candidate
Associate Director Project Chai