

## 2. Teaching Your Child About Grief and Death

### At a Glance...



Parents will gain skills in helping their children deal with death.

### Time Required



45 minutes

### Core Concepts



- Children are curious about death.
- Adults need to discuss it with them by using the right words and concepts.

### Objective



- Parents will practice one appropriate way to talk to their children about grief and death.

### Materials



- ❑ Picture from a magazine or book of a child crying or with a sad look on his or her face (not included)

- ❑ Flip chart and markers or chalkboard and chalk
- ❑ Pencils and paper for participants
- ❑ A prize for the winner of the "Cakes of a Different Color" game (for example, a free publication from the UT Agricultural Extension Service, a fancy pencil or pen, or a candy bar)
- ❑ *Helping Children and Youth Cope with Death* (UT Extension publication SP 567)

### Instructions



1. Before teaching this lesson, you will need to order copies for all participants of *Helping Children and Youth Cope with Death* (SP 567) from your local county Extension office.
2. Read and become familiar with the material in the Extension publication and in this lesson before teaching the lesson.
3. For the Ice Breaker, write the riddles on the chalkboard or flip chart before class.

## Ice Breaker



### Cakes of a Different Flavor

Before class begins, have a pencil and paper for each participant. Write the following riddles on the chalkboard or a large sheet of paper:

#### What would you call a cake for...?

1. Gabriel?
2. The baseball player who sacrificed himself?
3. Someone who lives off another person's generosity?
4. A geologist?
5. A weight watcher?
6. A monkey?
7. Little Jack Horner?
8. A gossip?
9. Anita Bryant?
10. Someone who acts crazy?

#### Answers:

- |                    |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| 1. Angel Food Cake | 6. Banana Cake |
| 2. Bundt Cake      | 7. Plum Cake   |
| 3. Sponge Cake     | 8. Spice Cake  |
| 4. Layer Cake      | 9. Orange Cake |
| 5. Pound Cake      | 10. Fruit Cake |

- Give each participant a pencil and paper.
- Ask them to solve each of the riddles.
- Collect the papers as soon as each participant completes his or her quiz.
- Award a prize to the first person who gets all of the answers correct, or the person who gets the most correct by the end of the game.

## Facilitator's Script



Hold up the picture of the crying/sad child and say...

We would protect our children from the pain of losing a loved one, if we could. We would take away the hurt, but we can't. It is impossible to shield children from death. As much as we would like to pretend that children don't understand what is going on, they do. Children grieve. And how they grieve throughout their lifetime depends greatly on how we teach them about death, involve them in family rituals of grieving. Children need to be guided through the experience.

Death sometimes enters a child's world by taking away a parent, a brother or sister. Children also experience painful losses of much-loved relatives, friends and pets.

It is important to explain death to children -- starting at a very early age. Young children are curious about death, but many adults hesitate to discuss it with them. Yet, it is through such discussion that we know what children understand about death. What they understand will affect their reaction to it.

The topic of death should be discussed with children **before** they have to deal with it on a personal basis. By using the death of such things as a bug, butterfly or fish, we can help a child understand the meaning of death. For example, if you find a dead bug, you could use simple language to point out that the bug is dead and will not be able to walk or fly anymore. Another example would be when a family pet dies. The children can feel that the body is cold, it doesn't move, and it doesn't have a heartbeat. They can plan a funeral and participate in the burial. By guiding children through such experiences, you not only teach them the facts about death, but you also help them develop healthy coping skills towards it.

**Did any of you have to deal with death when you were a young child? Do you remember any adult trying to comfort you or explain to you what had happened?**

Let the participants discuss this for a few minutes. Note any comments that show the correct way to deal with the situation. Also note any inappropriate ways. As you proceed with the lesson, try to point out correct and incorrect ways to deal with children and death.

Here are some points to remember as you teach your child about death:

1. **When you discuss death, use language that is familiar to your child.** Children operate in a concrete world. They need simple words to explain death. Avoid vague expressions such as "He passed away," "She went to sleep," or "He went to a better place." Such expressions can be confusing to young children and may arouse fears. For example, a young girl who was told that her dead grandfather had "gone to sleep" suddenly became afraid to fall asleep. Finally, she was able to explain, "I don't want to fall asleep like Grandpa did and never come back."
2. **Listen to your children and allow them to ask questions freely.** As a parent, you may not have the answers or may not even have comforting words to offer a grieving child. However, you can listen and answer questions honestly even when the only possible answer is "I don't know."
3. **The age of the child will determine how you explain death to him or her.** Preschoolers need help understanding what "dead" means, what caused the death, and what happens to the body. School-aged children generally understand the meaning of death but may need help understanding its cause and circumstance. For example, when someone dies in a car accident, children may wonder exactly what happened to the body to cause the death. A simple explanation may be enough: "When Andrew's head hit the dashboard, it injured his brain so badly that he died right away."

If children ask more questions later, address them sensitively, yet honestly. If you don't know an answer, guide the child to someone who does. Remember that children grow up with the loss. Often they will ask for more information later in their lives.

Give the participants a copy of the Extension publication "Helping Children and Youth Cope with Death," and discuss the understanding of death at various ages. Encourage the participants to take this booklet home and put it in a place where they can find it in case they might need it later.

4. **Children may not respond to grief immediately or in a way you might expect.** Children's behavior will reveal their feelings. Grief includes many feelings; some of the most common are disbelief, numbness, guilt, anger and intense sadness. Children may use many defenses at the time of death. Thus, their feelings may be delayed. Because young children often don't have words to express their feelings, their grief may not always show.

When the person who has died was a main part of the child's world, anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in loud play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards the surviving family members.

Parents should be aware of normal childhood responses to a death in the family. They also need to be aware of signs when a child is having difficulty coping with death. It is normal during the weeks following the death for some children to have off-and-on periods of grief. They may even choose to believe that the family member is still alive. However, long-term denial of the death or avoidance of the grief can be emotionally unhealthy and can later lead to more severe problems.

Ask the participants to pair off and role-play how they would talk to a child about death. Let one person be the parent and the other person be the child. Then change roles and do the exercise again. Give the participants about 5 minutes to do this exercise.

Call the group back together and ask them to list which comments were the most comforting to them and which caused them to feel uncomfortable.

Was this exercise hard for you to do? Remember that it is easier to talk about death by using a "teachable moment" -- that is, when someone or something that the child doesn't really care about dies, such as a bug -- than to wait until a child has to deal with death in a personal way.

## References

- Hara, Jan. (1992) *Understand the Grief of Children*. Pacific Northwest Extension Publication: Oregon, Washington and Idaho.
- Sahlein, Nancy H., and Kerner, Ron. (1992) *Coping with Death and Grief*. New York: The Bureau for At-Risk Youth.
- Saxby, Erica. (2000) *Helping Children and Youth Cope with Death*. Agricultural Extension Service Publication, The University of Tennessee.

**Notes...**