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## Talking to Children About Death | Heather Yardley, PhD

"Mommy, I don't want you to die!" As parents, we try our best to protect our children from death, which is an unfortunate reality of life. But children are exposed to death in many ways, from the news to video games to their favorite books or movies (Frozen, anyone?) And sooner or later, we will get asked something like, "Are you going to die?"

So, how do we talk to our children about death and dying in a way that won't scare them but respects their curiosity?

### CHILDREN ARE AWARE

First, it's important for parents to understand that talking about death is important, even if it is a tricky subject to deal with. Children are aware of death long before we might realize it, and we can encourage their communication by showing an interest in what they have to say.

At the start of a conversation, find out what your child already knows or thinks about death. Keep in mind that how a child views death depends on the child's age and experiences. For instance, preschool-age children usually see death as temporary or "fixable" rather than permanent, and this is what we would expect. As children get older, they start to understand that death is final and that all living creatures die.

### LET YOUR CHILD LEAD

Second, when talking about any difficult issue – death included – let your children communicate when they are ready. Children should be allowed to ask questions as they come up with them, and parents should listen when a child comes to them and needs to talk.

You can also help your child feel more comfortable by letting him or her know that it's okay to come back with more questions and talk to you again in the future.

### IT'S OKAY TO NOT KNOW

Third, answer questions the best way that you can. Provide simple, easy-to-understand answers that fit with your child's knowledge and level of understanding. If you have spiritual beliefs, incorporate them into your answers as you see fit.

Remember, you are the expert on your child and have good instincts on how to answer questions. If you don't know an answer or if you are unsure how to answer, it's okay to let your child know that you aren't sure.

### ASK A PROFESSIONAL FOR HELP

If you think that your child is struggling with grief or adjusting to the death of a loved one, seeking professional help from a counselor or therapist is always an option. These types of professionals can help you and your child with these important issues.

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