TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

Long before we realise it, children become aware of death. They see dead birds, insects, and animals lying by the road. They may see death at least once a day on television. They hear about it in fairy tales and act it out in their play. Death is a part of everyday life, and children, at some level, are aware of it. If we permit children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information, prepare them for a crisis, and to help them when they are upset. We can encourage their communication by showing interest in and respect for what they have to say. We can also make it easier for them to talk to us if we are open, honest and comfortable with our own feelings--often easier said than done.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Many of us are inclined not to talk about things that upset us. But not talking about something doesn't mean we aren't communicating. Children are great observers. When we avoid talking about something that is obviously upsetting, children often hesitate to bring up the subject or ask questions about it. To a child, avoidance can be a message--"If Mommy and Daddy can't talk about it, it really must be bad, so I better not talk about it either." In effect, instead of protecting our

children by avoiding talk, we sometimes cause them more worry and also keep them from telling us how they feel. On the other hand, it also isn't wise to confront children with information that they may not yet understand or want to know; trying to be sensitive to their desire to communicate when they're ready; offering them honest explanations when we are obviously upset; listening to and accepting their feelings; not putting off their questions by telling them they are too young; trying to find brief and simple answers that are appropriate to their questions. Perhaps most difficult of all, it involves examining our own feelings and beliefs so that we can talk to them as naturally as possible when the opportunities arise.

NOT HAVING ALL THE ANSWERS:

When talking with children, many of us feel uncomfortable if we don't have all the answers. But death, the one certainty in life, is life's greatest uncertainty. If we have unresolved fears and questions, we may wonder how to provide answers for our children. While not all our answers may be comforting, we can share what we truly believe. Where we have doubts, an honest, "I just don't know the answer to that one," may be more comforting than an explanation which we don't quite believe. Children usually sense

our doubts. White lies, no matter how well intended, can create uneasiness and distrust. Our non-defensive and accepting attitude may help them feel better about not knowing everything also.

OVERCOMING THE TABOOS:

Death is a taboo subject, and even those who hold strong beliefs may avoid talking about it. Once death was an integral part of family life. People died at home, surrounded by loved ones. Adults and children experienced death together, mourned together, and comforted each other. Today death is lonelier. Most people die in hospitals and nursing homes where they receive the extensive nursing and medical care they need. Their loved ones have less opportunity to be with them and often miss sharing their last moments of life. The living have become isolated from the dying; consequently, death has taken on added mystery and, for some, added fear. Many people are beginning to recognize that treating death as a taboo does a disservice to both the dying and the living, adding to loneliness, anxiety, and stress for all.

HELPING CHILDREN IN GRIEF...

Accept and acknowledge the reality that grief hurts! Don’t try to rescue the child or yourself from the pain

hoping that it will go away. Child grief work is a healing process and it is work.

Watch out for kids trying to protect grieving adults by assuming the caretaker role. Children in grief can be quite supportive. They also seem to know that the adults are suffering too and may be reluctant to make the adults suffer more by being sad themselves.

Children will often need help in recognizing, naming, accepting, and expressing feelings. It is helpful to suggest physical or creative activities for a child who is in grief, for example, kicking boxes, tearing up paper, writing, painting, and yelling.

Realize that a child's grief may be difficult to recognize. Feelings may be expressed more in behavior than in words. Helplessness, despair, fear and anxiety may be acted out with aggressive behavior. Sometimes anger is directed at the safest person, often a surviving parent. It may not be conscious or rational but the child may feel that the parent should have prevented this tragedy. Talking about these feelings openly usually will mean that the child will work things out.

Some children may go back to earlier behavior, such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, and clinging to parents. This is because the earlier time was a safe time, and

when they feel safe again they will no longer feel the need to do these things.

It is a good idea to establish lines of communication with everyone involved with the child in grief. Grief usually causes difficulty in concentrating so school work may be affected. The balance between understanding the effects of grief and setting realistic expectations should be discussed with teachers, caregivers and other family members.