

Talking to Children about Death and Suicide

Talking to children about death is, like all hard topics, a conversation which needs to recur throughout childhood at different times and at different levels. The best preparation that a parent can make is to create an open and nonjudgmental home where questions are encouraged and treated with respect. When teachable moments arise, it's your privilege as a parent to communicate God's love and care to your child.

Young Children

Conversations about death with younger children will necessarily be brief, addressing their specific questions and concerns. Children struggle to understand the permanence of death and may ask repeatedly when the deceased person or pet is coming back although you've told them they will not return. It may be difficult to patiently and compassionately repeat your answer, but that's what you need to do.

The world of a young child is egocentric. Most children don't yet have the ability to view an event from another person's perspective. Their questions and fears concern themselves. They may wonder whether death could happen to them or to their own parents. Tell your children the truth about this when they ask. It is a natural opportunity to explain the Gospel and that God has an even better home for us to go to after we die. You should also explain that for most people death occurs in old age and that it is not something they will probably face for a long time.

If the death occurred very close to them, children will often wonder if they had something to do with it – if it is a result of their actions or a punishment for something they have done. Parents should calmly and lovingly communicate: "It's not your fault. Death is something that happens to everyone in the world, and it had nothing to do with anything you said or did." Even if your child never expresses this fear, it is worth addressing. When your child seems to have lost interest in the discussion, let it go, knowing that there will be other occasions when the time is right.

A young child probably does not need to be confronted with the reality of suicide unless they are asking that question specifically. Death is enough to take in by itself. However, if the child asks you what the word means, address it directly and simply. "Suicide is when someone hurts themselves and they die." You can tell them that this is something which hurts God and their family an awful lot, and it's something that you would never do. If it seems appropriate to give them a little more information, you could explain that someone who dies by suicide has an illness which mixes them up so that they can't think clearly. This is not an illness which you can catch, and it is very rare. If you, the parent, or anyone else in your family ever got that kind of sickness, you would go to a doctor and get help for it so that you would not die.

Young children can become overwhelmed, especially when others around them are expressing scary feelings like anger, sadness or fear. They need help regulating their own emotions. If you see that your child is thinking obsessively or is unable to calm down, then you can step in and help to comfort and distract them, skills they will eventually learn for themselves. You can talk to them about your own feelings in limited ways. For example, it is good to tell them that you are really sad about a loved one's death and for them to see you cry occasionally and appropriately. But they must also see that you are still in control of yourself, still trusting God, and still taking care of your child.

Older Elementary-Aged Children

Conversations with older children are going to be factually similar to conversations with younger children. Take a little more time, use a little more detail and age-appropriate vocabulary. Older children can understand and may want to discuss the theological implications of death and suicide. This is a good time to explain to them that God forgives ALL the sins of His people, including suicide. There is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from His love (Romans 8:38, 39). At the same time you should make it clear that suicide is murder, that is not an option for your family, and that anyone who begins to think those thoughts has an illness and needs help to get better. Give them suggestions of people they might talk with to get that kind of help (pastors, youth leaders, counselors, relatives). Let them know they can talk to you about it.

Older children are more ready to explore their own feelings about events, and parents can help them develop healthy ways to do this. Again, it is a parent's job to help kids recognize and manage their own emotions. For example, they may evidence anger at inappropriate targets such as siblings. If you can see that they are feeling angry, you can help them figure that out: "I see that you are really angry right now, but maybe it's not your sister's fault. Do you think you might be angry about what happened to _____? Sometimes it makes me angry, too." You have just helped your child identify his emotion and find its object, and you have normalized anger as acceptable and human. Just talking about it can help a lot.

You can also guide your child toward more constructive ways of coping with their emotions. Drawing pictures, at any age, is a favorite way for counselors to illicit the emotional impact of events. Play is another tool which helps children gain a sense of control over traumatic situations. Puppets, dolls or pets may become the actors for a child's internal dramas. Exercise is generally a great way to cope with stress, and just getting outdoors can help change your mood. You can talk about the ways that God comforts His children with His words and His blessings and then provide some of that comfort for your kids. Treats like a bubble bath, favorite music or movies, or having pancakes for dinner can be consoling to children and to their parents. All of us, especially children, need regular breaks from grief and trauma.

Finally, when talking with children about death and suicide, it is very important for parents to guard their own tongues. Children do not have the maturity to filter what you say and communicate it to others appropriately. If you tell your child that Uncle Ed drank himself to death, be aware that your child may regale Aunt Edith and Cousin Beth with an exact quote! Avoid judgmental statements and intimate details with your children when those things might bring harm to others.

In all these ways you are giving your child life skills which he or she will use in many different circumstances. Talking with children about death and suicide is an opportunity for parents to clarify their own thoughts, to deepen family relationships, and for Christ to be glorified in your home. As a parent you do not have to have all the answers. It is enough for you and your child to talk about the questions. God doesn't give us all the answers either, but He is always ready to meet our questions with tenderness and compassion. Someday, you and your child will meet Him face to face, and you will both find out the answers together.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13