



Don't Use the 'D' Word: Exploring Myths about Children and Death

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Dying and death are natural processes in the circle of life. Yet, our experiences of these processes have changed dramatically over the last century. Most responsible for this change is the advancement of modern medicine. We have come to expect that new drugs and treatments will save our loved ones. But when death occurs, we see it as a medical failure, not as a natural process. This myth, that death is primarily a medical event as opposed to a natural one, can contribute greatly to the alienation of individuals who are dying, and deeply affect those who are grieving.

Children experiencing the dying of someone close to them are particularly vulnerable. Many myths adults hold about children's ability to cope with death can make children feel alone and alienated. Although current research advises being honest and inclusive with children, these myths permeate the health care disciplines. As a result, families are often prevented from receiving the guidance they need. Here are five common myths adults often hold about children and death.

Myth 1: Children should not be at the bedside of the dying.

Historically, children have always been at the bedside of the dying, and in many parts of the world, they still are. Yet, in the West, children often are not involved in the final stages of a family member's life. One reason for this is the reluctance of many adults and health care professionals to expose children to the process of dying, often out of a concern for their well-being. Ironically, especially in recent years, we have condoned the increase in children's exposure, through various forms of media, to violent, sudden death.

Excluding children from the bedside of a dying friend or family member can have unintended effects. Children are deprived of the opportunity to share their loved one's final days and to say goodbye. Many children will imagine scenes that are much worse than the reality of seeing the dying friend or family member. By preparing them for what to expect, we give children the chance to witness the dying process firsthand, in the presence of supportive adults. This experience can go a long way toward helping them understand what is happening and will support them in their grieving process for years to come.

Myth 2: If a child isn't talking about the impending death, neither should we.

It's common for adults to mistakenly believe that it's best to allow children to initiate conversations about the illness or dying of someone close to them. Even very young children will often try to protect the adults closest to them from experiencing feelings of sadness. As a result, children may not try to discuss topics they think will cause such feelings. Therefore, it's important for parents to take the lead in starting these conversations. Let children know it can help to talk, even though the topic may be sad. Children benefit from knowing it's okay to discuss dying, and that caring adults are in their lives with whom they can share their thoughts and worries.

Try to create an environment where children know they can ask any question they may have. Don't feel you have to have all the answers. Children can benefit from learning that there are some questions even adults can't answer. "Wondering" together about some of life's unanswerable questions can be a powerful experience for both parent and child.

Myth 3: It's best to avoid the "D" word.

Adults often avoid using the words "dying," "death" and "died" around children in an effort to protect them. Instead, we may say, "passing" and "passed away." These terms are abstract and difficult for children to understand.

We may also use indirect phrases, such as "dad will never get better" or "your sister has just gone to sleep." Using these phrases may convince a child that a father will live on in his current state for years, or cause some children to fear falling asleep. To prevent confusion and help children understand death, it's best to avoid all euphemisms. Use the word "death" and explain it as something that happens when a body stops working and will never work again.

Myth 4: We need to protect children from emotional pain.

Most parents instinctively try to protect their children from emotional pain. However, it's not possible to protect children from the reality of a family member's dying. Instead, it's more helpful to think of our role in such situations as preparing our children for a death, rather than protecting them from it. Children benefit from simple, honest and age-appropriate information about an impending death. Such information helps them feel included in this significant life event. We also foster their trust by demonstrating that we are not keeping the truth from them.

Like adults, children benefit from being able to say goodbye to a family member or friend who is dying. They don't need to be distracted from their feelings of grief. Children need caring adults around them to grieve with them and let them know that their feelings are natural and healthy. By preparing them for a death, instead of trying to protect them from it, we can help children develop coping strategies they will be able to use throughout their lives.

Myth 5: A child will think about dying and death all the time.

Many adults are tempted to withhold the news that a family member is dying because they're concerned that the impending death will consume a child's thoughts, leaving little room for the joy of childhood. Yet, most children grieve differently from adults. They have a wonderful capacity to balance joy and sorrow simultaneously. It's not uncommon for parents to be surprised by how quickly children can transition from feeling devastated to wanting to play, even when faced with the impending death of a parent.

Children naturally regulate the amount of time they spend experiencing intense emotions, taking breaks from their feelings by playing and continuing to enjoy life. Children grieve in "chunks"—alternating between joy and sorrow in a way that few adults can.

Dispelling the myths

Supporting children who are grieving the dying of someone they care about is a challenging experience for parents, especially when parents are in the midst of their own intense grief. The many myths about children and death that permeate our culture send mixed messages to parents. They also provide little guidance on how best to support children during the dying process.

Dispelling these myths will not change the reality of the death, but it can shape the child's story about that death and support them in their grief process for years to come.

Resources

For more information on conversations about death and dying with children and youth, see the following resources:

- [Videos for](#)

- KidsGrief.ca
- YouthGrief.ca
- [My life, their illness – An activity workbook for children ages 6-12](#)
- [Talking with children and youth about death](#)
- [Understanding death and dying: Ages and stages](#)
- [When to Tell the Children: Preparing Children for the Death of Someone Close To Them](#)
- [Programs and Services \(for assistance in your area\)](#)

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