EDUCATION

Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Loved One

Allina Health

The following are suggestions on how to help children while a loved one is dying.

Be honest about what is happening.

- Children may be uncomfortable about asking questions, but they still have a need for honest, straightforward information about what is happening.
- If you are not sure what to say, ask your health care team to contact a social worker or chaplain to talk with you.

Give children the opportunity to visit their dying loved one.

- Children deserve the opportunity to say goodbye. If a child does not want to visit, this should not be forced. It is important to ask about what frightens your child about visiting so that you can ease any fears.

  Often, children who are worried about visiting may change their minds if they know what to expect.
- If children choose not to visit, encourage them to send a picture, poem, letter, email, audio or videotape, or other expression of their love with someone who is planning a visit. Be sure to let the children know how much their efforts meant to the loved one.

If children choose to visit, prepare them for what they will see.

- Describe any changes in the dying person's behavior or level of awareness. You can say, "The medicine that helps grandma not feel any pain makes her very sleepy. Even though she cannot talk back to you, she can hear what you're saying and loves you very much."
- Describe any changes in the way the person looks and may feel if the children choose to touch them.

- Describe any tubes or machines the children can see.
- Take a photo of the dying person in the hospital and share it with the child in advance. This is a helpful way to prepare them for what they will see and gives an opportunity for discussion before the visit.
- Make a plan for what children will do during the visit, such as talk to the dying person, touch them, read something they have written or share a memory. This may also be an appropriate time to help children begin the memory-making process. With help, they may choose to start a memory box or photo album, make a book about special times with the loved one, or make a family handprint poster.
- Reassure children that another adult will be with them and they can choose when the visit is over. It is common for visits to be brief, sometimes less than 5 minutes.

Death can be confusing for children. Be alert for any misunderstandings and reassure the children.

- Three questions are common for children when a loved one is dying, whether they can say them or not:
  - — "Did I cause it?"
  - — "Will it happen to me?"
  - — "Who will take care of me?" (If the dying person is an immediate caregiver.)

    It is important to answer each of these questions as soon as possible.
- Sometimes children believe they may catch the same disease their dying loved one has by touching them. Reassure them that this is not possible.

- When talking about death use the words "dead" or "dying" or words that are culturally appropriate. Words such as "sleeping" or "taken by God" can be confusing, especially for younger children.

Children may have a wide range of emotions when a loved one is dying.

- Let children know that there may be times when they feel happy or sad, and that both are OK. Because children grieve differently than do adults, they may ask permission to play and want to resume their routine activities.
- Sometimes children cannot express their feelings and fears so they react by changing their behavior. A child who was toilet trained may have accidents or an independent child may be more clingy. A child also may have more trouble concentrating in school.
- Give children chances to share their thoughts and feelings. Some children may like to draw, write or just talk.

Teenagers can have a difficult time when a parent is dying.

- They are capable of greater empathy than younger children. As a result, they may be more troubled by the pain and physical discomfort of their parents.
- When a parent is dying, the teen is challenged deeply, not only by grief but also by trying to figure out what role they are now being asked to play in the family.
- Like many loved ones, teens feel deeply the "loss of dreams" that goes with the death of someone close.
- Some teens — although they feel emotional pain deeply — have trouble expressing it, especially at home.

- When a parent is dying, a teen may cope by stepping away or becoming overly responsible. The teen may take on adult roles they are not ready for developmentally.
  - — As a teen changes physically, mentally and emotionally, conflict with parents is common. If a troubled relationship is with the sick parent, a teen may have a hard time dealing with the loss due to unresolved issues.
  - — Anger, guilt and regret are powerful emotions that teens may not easily share. As a result, teens may feel these emotions intensely, "stuff" the emotions or act them out.

    Good communication between parents and teenagers has been shown to help reduce anxiety and help teens cope better. Support groups and the support of teachers, school counselors, youth leaders and other significant adults can also be a great help.

The following are general guidelines about how children understand death.

- Infants and toddlers do not understand death but they are sensitive to their surroundings.
- Children ages 3 to 6 view death as reversible and temporary. They believe that people who die will come back.
- Children ages 6 to 9 begin to view death as final.
  - — Children ages 9 to 12 are more aware of the finality of death and their own mortality.
  - — Adolescents have an adult understanding of death as inevitable, universal and irreversible.

For more information about how you can help children understand death and things you can do to help, ask a member of your health care team.

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