



Words to Try

Opening the discussion with teens and children

Helping a Child Who is Grieving

The death of a grandparent is often one of the first encounters a child has with death. Here is an example of how to approach and begin the dialogue about the loss with a young child. The format can be followed for any loss if personalized and kept simple.

The Whole Story

Find a quiet place and sit down. Talking as calmly and gently as possible, tell him what has happened. First, build the story: say that a very sad thing has happened—that Grandpa has died—and if necessary explain what 'dead' means. Next, let him know that you will be there to help him deal with this. Explain that he is free to talk about how he feels; that he can ask questions and you will try your best to answer them. Finally, describe what will be happening over the next few days and where he fits in – tell him exactly what will happen to him. Step by step, slowly give the child the facts in words he will understand.

It's OK to Use the Word 'Died'

Explain (*if a person died of old age*) that 'a very, very sad thing happened to Grandpa. He was very, very old; so old that his body wore out and stopped working. Sometimes when a body is old, it doesn't get better when it gets sick. It is not as strong as our bodies and it doesn't get better like we do. The old body stops working and it can't be fixed anymore. The person dies. That's what happened to Grandpa.

'Dead' means the body stopped working and won't do the things it used to do. It won't talk, walk, see or hear. The body can't feel anything – like heat, or cold, or pain. The parts don't work anymore.

If the death was unexpected (such as from heart attack, stroke or sudden illness) say, "A terrible thing has happened and we are all very sad." Describe what happened. "The sickness was so strong and so bad that it wore down the body very fast and he couldn't fight it anymore, so he died." "This doesn't happen very often. He didn't know he was going to die and neither did we. This is why we are surprised and upset."

Conclusion

Tell the child just the basics the first time you sit down together. Tell him only what he needs to know at the moment – that Grandpa is dead; what he died of; and what dead means.

It may be the child will be stunned, unable to do anything but cry. Right now he's probably not interested in a detailed explanation. Later, he will have questions, and if you leave the door of discussion open, he will feel comfortable to come to you for answers.

(taken in part from "How Do We Tell the Children" by Schaefer and Lyons)

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