



When Your Child Asks About Death



THE CHALLENGE

Your six-year-old asks, “Are you going to die someday?” Startled by his question, you wonder: “Is my child old enough to understand the answer? How can I talk to him about death?”*

* Although we refer to the child as a boy, the principles discussed apply to girls as well.

Chapters 34 and 35 of the book *Learn From the Great Teacher* can help your children learn what the Bible teaches about death. The book is available for free download at www.jw.org. Look under PUBLICATIONS > BOOKS & BROCHURES

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Children do think about death. Some even play games in which someone pretends to die. Therefore, death should not be considered a taboo subject, and you should welcome any questions your child may have about it. By occasionally talking openly about death, you help your child learn how to cope with the loss of a loved one.

- Talking about death will not cause your child to have morbid thoughts. Rather, it will help him alleviate fears. However, you may need to correct some misunderstandings. For example, some experts say that many children under the age of six do not view death as final. In their games, a child will be “dead” one moment and “alive” the next.

When they get a little older, however, children begin to grasp the seriousness of death—a fact that may cause them to have questions, concerns, or even fears, especially if a loved one has died. Therefore, it is vital that you discuss the subject. Mental-health expert Marion Haza points out: “A child will develop anxieties related to death if he feels that he is not allowed to talk about this subject at home.”

- You need not worry excessively about what to say. According to one study, children just want to “hear the truth expressed in kind words.” Be assured that a child will usually not ask a question unless he is ready to hear the answer.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Take advantage of opportunities to talk about death. If your child sees a dead bird on the side of the road or if a beloved pet dies, use simple questions to encourage him to talk. For example, you could ask: “Does a dead animal suffer? Is it cold or hungry? How do you know that an animal or a person is dead?”—*Bible principle: Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7.*

Do not hide the truth. When an acquaintance or a relative has died, avoid using confusing euphemisms such as “He has gone away.” Your child might wrongly conclude that the deceased will soon return home.

Since a young child might think that death is contagious, assure him that he is safe

Instead, use simple and direct words. For example, you might say: “When Grandma died, her body stopped working. We can’t talk to her, but we will never forget her.”—*Bible principle: Ephesians 4:25.*

Reassure your child. He might think that his actions or thoughts *caused* someone’s death. Instead of just saying that he is not responsible for what happened, you could ask, “What makes you think that it is your fault?” Listen carefully, without belittling his feelings. Also, since a young child might think that death is contagious, assure him that he is safe.

Draw out your child. Talk freely about loved ones who have died, including relatives whom your child has never met. You might evoke fond memories of an aunt, an uncle, or a grandparent and relate amusing anecdotes. When you openly discuss such people, you help your child understand that he need not avoid talking or thinking about them. At the same time, do not force your child to talk. You can always broach the subject later, when you feel the time is right.—*Bible principle: Proverbs 20:5.* ■

KEY SCRIPTURES

“There is . . . a time to be silent and a time to speak.”
—Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7.

“Each one of you speak truth.”
—Ephesians 4:25.

“The thoughts of a man’s heart are like deep waters, but the discerning man draws them out.”
—Proverbs 20:5.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONVEY

If a loved one has died, you can help your child overcome inordinate fears about death by making sure he understands the following:

- He is not going to die.
- If something happens to you, he will not be abandoned; relatives will look after him.
- Once dead, a person is no longer suffering.
- The deceased person will not be forgotten. You might say, “You cannot see Grandma anymore, but you can keep memories of her in your heart.”

Remember, saying *nothing* to your child will not reduce his anxiety. On the contrary, it may only serve to give his imagination free rein.