

WHAT TO DO WHEN DEATH ENTERS THE LIFE OF A CHILD

CLICHES TO BE AVOIDED

The following cliches are inappropriate to use with grieving children. It is important to remember that a child thinks in literal terms, and therefore what we say is what the child will believe. Always tell the child the truth about death. To lie about it, especially if the death is multiple and/or traumatic, as in a murder/suicide, is to plant the seeds of confusion and distrust. The truth will always present itself eventually. Answer all questions simple and honestly, without elaboration.

INAPPROPRIATE: "Grandpa went to sleep last night and is now in heaven."

CHILD'S RESPONSE: Fear of sleep. Fear of dark. Nightmares.

APPROPRIATE: "Grandpa died last night. This will be a sad time for all of us, but we will get through it together."

INAPPROPRIATE: "God loved Daddy so much that He took him to Heaven to live with the angels."

CHILD'S RESPONSE: Fear of God. Fear Mother will also die. Fear of love. Rejection of spiritual values.

APPROPRIATE: "We believe that Daddy is in Heaven with God and that God knows how very much we miss Daddy."

INAPPROPRIATE: "Grandma went on a long trip and won't be coming back."

CHILD'S RESPONSE: "Why didn't Grandma say goodbye before she left? Doesn't Grandma love me? Is that why she left without saying goodbye? Where did she go?" Fear of loss as Mommy and Daddy leave for a while (i.e., to work or for shopping). This is basic abandonment.

APPROPRIATE: "Grandma was very sick and the sickness made her die. We believe that because she was such a good Grandma, God said she could come and be with Him in Heaven."

INAPPROPRIATE: (Overheard after the death of a child). "Well, you know what they say, only the good die young."

CHILD'S RESPONSE: "If the good die young, I don't want to die so I won't be good." or "Does that mean that I am bad?"

APPROPRIATE: "How sad that such a young child died. I wonder if there is anything I can do to help the family?"

INAPPROPRIATE: "You must always be a good little boy/girl, because Daddy is watching you from Heaven."

CHILD'S RESPONSE: Paranoia. Fear of making mistakes. Extreme guilt feelings when they are naughty coupled with an inability to "make it up" to the deceased parent. Feelings of loss of privacy (i.e, everything is open to scrutiny.)

APPROPRIATE: "Daddy's love for you can never die. He is not with us like he used to be, but we will always remember and love him very much."

INAPPROPRIATE: (Overheard after the death of a child). "Well, you know what they say, only the good die young."

CHILD'S RESPONSE: "If the good die young, I don't want to die so I won't be good." or "Does that mean that I am bad?"