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Helping Young Children Cope With Death and Dying

For children under five years of age, death of a loved one is especially difficult to understand. They do not realize that death is final. They may think they caused it. When comparing death to sleeping, children may become fearful at bedtime. After a death, children may become afraid that their own illness is likely to result in death. They may be angry with parents who they think can fix death like a broken toy. They may fear that death will soon separate them from their parents or that if they act "too good," they will go immediately to heaven. To help children understand death and to eliminate fears:

- Talk with children, listening to them to tell if they are developing ideas about death that are incorrect. Continue these discussions for weeks and months following a death.
- Read to children about death.
- Assure children that they did not cause the death. Encourage them to act out scenes with dolls so you can better understand how they think about death.
- Avoid taking children under the age of four to funerals.
- Make sure that children receive assurance and attention in the time surrounding funerals.
- Do not immediately replace pets that have died. Have a memorial service and help children understand the loss. It is by grieving for the loss that children come to understand death.
- Continue the same household rules and structure around the time of death since this helps children feel secure.
- When a death in the family occurs after a lengthy illness, children are likely to be angry with parents and even express relief that a sibling or parent has finally died. Reflect your child's feelings; be understanding of the natural resentment of the attention that the dying family member received. Only then will your child be ready to grieve.
- When a child is dying, seek guidance from hospital social workers.