



Books as a Resource for Children

Books can provide a valuable resource for parents to help their children gain a better understanding of death. Today, most public libraries and bookstores carry a wide selection of children's books on the subjects of dying, death, loss, and grief. In order to use such books most effectively, it is important to give careful consideration to several factors.

First, it is essential to realize that books will not magically answer all questions or solve problems. Nor will any insight gained from the books replace the work that adults and children must do together in order to help children reach an understanding about death. Books can introduce topics and provide a structure and some guidelines that can stimulate a discussion, but personal interaction is most important.

A second consideration is to understand how children perceive death. Children's intellectual understanding of death and their emotional responses are related to their developmental (not chronological) level. Up to the age of five, children often view death as a type of sleep or departure, but do not see death as final or irreversible. Between the ages of five and nine, children may see death as final but also personified, such as a "bogeyman," as well as something from which one can escape by running fast enough or hiding long enough. Children over nine usually perceive death as permanent and as a biological process, and have ideas and responses to death that are similar to those of adults. A child's age and developmental stage is important to consider.

It is valuable to be straightforward and honest with children, and to give explanations based on reality. Concepts should be in simple terms that children can understand easily. Depending on intellectual development, it is useful to begin slowly and introduce one new concept at a time. Most children need continuous review and reinforcement in order to process and assimilate new information. Honesty, openness, and directness help to provide a child with the inner strength needed to develop effective ways of approaching life as it really is and not as the child may imagine it to be.

Adults should read a book first before reading it to a child in order to understand and feel comfortable with the ideas it presents. It should be determined whether there are any parts in the book that would be confusing, uncomfortable, or frightening to a child. If so, ways should be considered to approach those parts in order to eliminate or reduce any fear or anxiety. It is a good idea to stop at various places throughout the book and talk. It is especially important for young children and children with short attention spans to discuss and immediately clarify specific points. It is worthwhile to try to stimulate a discussion after reading the book. Often children will begin talking and asking questions, but if a child appears to not have any response, try asking pre-planned questions such as the following:

- What did you think of the book?
- Did the book remind you of anything?
- Have you ever thought about death?
- Are you afraid when you think or talk about death?

Honesty is important as feelings are shared and discussed. The expression of emotion is normal and healthy, and adults who set an example as a role model for children give them the freedom to express their own feelings and emotions. Since a child is usually more concerned about how events will effect him or her, rather than how the events are caused, it is important to provide an atmosphere where the child feels loved and secure and has the reassurance that s/he will be protected regardless of what happens. Children should be encouraged to talk about feelings, thoughts and fears, and helped to understand them.

It is not realistic to expect to provide children with all of the necessary information about death. Nor can all questions be answered at once. However, by providing a child with the opportunity for open and honest discussions based on reality, s/he will feel comfortable to approach a caring adult when further questions arise.

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