

## WHAT DOES "DEAD" MEAN? Explaining the Language of Death to Children

Those of you who have helped grieving children know how difficult it can be to explain what "dead" means, but also all of those other new and odd terms we use when we talk about someone who has recently died.

Children overhear us saying, "He committed suicide," or "She's being cremated," or "We need to go to the funeral home to pick out a casket" . . . not the sort of words on your typical grade school vocabulary test.

When we use these words around children, we owe it to them to explain what we are talking about. If we don't, the newly bereaved child is more likely to fear what is happening and to conjure up scary explanations of her/his own. The child whom we talk **over** and not **with** will probably also feel left out and, worst of all, alone in his/her grief.

I have four rules for explaining the language of death to children:

1. **Don't use euphemisms.** For example, saying a dead person is "asleep" will not only mislead a child, but may also cause her/him to believe that the dead person might "wake up" again. Remember, children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don't know.

2. **Use simple, concrete language.** Young children are very literal. Try not to use abstract or complex words.

3. **Don't over explain.** While children deserve developmentally-appropriate explanations about death, they don't need *War and Peace*. Be brief. Let the child's natural curiosity . . . not your need to be understood . . . guide your discussions.

4. **Show them.** Children often don't understand something until they can see it. You will not harm them, for example, by showing them the ashes from a cremation or taking them to the funeral home to look at caskets.

**Accident:** Something really awful happened. (Explain the nature of the accident.) The person's body was hurt so badly that it stopped working.

**Homicide:** Sometimes a person whose mind is not working right kills another person. That is the worst thing a person can do in this world; it is wrong and can make us very mad.

**Miscarriage/stillbirth:** Sometimes when a baby is growing inside its mommy, something goes wrong. We don't always understand why it happens, but it's nobody's fault.

**Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS):** Sometimes (not very often), little babies die in their sleep. Nobody knows for sure why it happens. It didn't happen because of anything anybody did or didn't do.

**Suicide:** Sometimes people feel very sad and don't want to live anymore, so they kill themselves. But killing yourself is never a good solution if you're feeling bad.