

What Does Death Teach Our Children?

by Kathy Slattengren

Death is one of those lessons we hope our children will not have to experience early in life. However, given death is an inescapable fact of life, we know our children will eventually need to deal with it. When and how we discuss death with our children will depend on their ages and the circumstances.

We may be tempted to avoid talking to our children about things that upset us like death. Avoiding discussing death doesn't make it go away but it does make it much more difficult for our children to bring it up with us.

Instead, we can help our children cope with their feelings and ideas about death by being open to talking about it. By finding out what they know or do not know about death, we can begin to address their misconceptions and fears.

For difficult, on-going topics like death, it's helpful to aim for many short conversations over the years, not one big conversation. Children often are aware of death long before we realize it. They see dead bugs on the sidewalk and dead animals lying at the side of the road; they hear about death in stories and on TV. These situations provide opportunities for us to have short conversations about death.

Given the advances in health care, many children's first significant experience with death involves the death of a beloved pet. One mom told me the story of her 11-year-old daughter's cat suddenly dying one evening after getting into some poison. Her daughter was devastated. The daughter asked her mom to call some of her friends and tell them what had happened. Her mom made the calls. Her dad went out and bought a huge bag of candy and some chips for her.

When our children are hurting, it's tempting to try to rescue them from their pain like these parents did. While this mom was trying to ease her daughter's pain by calling her friends, she was also sending an unspoken message that her daughter wasn't strong enough to make the calls herself. Although it would have been difficult for her daughter to tell her friends, she would have experienced her own strength along with the healing that comes from telling others that her cat died.

We want our children to learn that they have the inner strength to deal with difficult times. Watching our children go through painful situations is one of the hardest things for parents to do. It may be easier to avoid trying to rescue them if we remember that learning how to process grief is an integral part of growing up.



Kathy Slattengren is a noted parenting speaker, trainer and founder of Priceless Parenting. [Priceless Parenting](#) provides [online parenting classes](#) which teach effective discipline techniques for positively dealing with misbehavior.

This article is available to be reprinted or republished free of charge courtesy of Priceless Parenting on the condition that the byline, article text and hyperlinks are not altered. © Priceless Parenting, LLC