

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Contemplating some conversations creates butterflies in my stomach. Talking about death with my children falls into that category. What a comfort these two articles are for me! They offer practical tips for real-life situations. This is one of those columns that will go into my “saved” folder for reference later. I pray that it’s personally useful for you too!

—Nicole Balza

HOW DO WE DISCUSS DEATH WITH OUR CHILDREN?

AS I SAT IN church earlier this year listening to the pastor talk about the peace and joy my grandma was experiencing in heaven, I was feeling those emotions too. She lived one hundred years on this earth, after all, and she was ready to be done here and start the next life. I found myself almost smiling as I pictured her reuniting with family and friends who had gone before her. Then my nine-year-old daughter started crying—and I lost it. I went from smiling to sobbing in seconds, moved powerfully by the grief of a child.

How can we help in those moments when a child we love has been affected by death? Here are a few suggestions I have found helpful as a parent navigating the experience of loss.

TALK OPENLY

This may sound strange, but I love that as Christians we talk about death. A three-year-old during a children’s sermon will tell the pastor confidently, “Jesus died for my sins!” And when asked where she will go when she dies, that same child will shout, “Heaven!”

We don’t tiptoe around death. It’s not a taboo subject as it can be for so many. And that’s good. Talking openly about death takes away some of its power. Use the words die and death rather than searching for some sugarcoated euphemism. If you have the opportunity to take your children to a funeral, don’t shy away from it. Talk to them about what to expect and guide them through the experience. Speak matter-of-factly about death as inevitable, solemnly speak about death as the result of sin, and unswervingly mention the gift and reality of eternal life after death because of Jesus.

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MODEL GRIEF

Sometimes in an attempt to be strong for our children in the face of death, we may unwittingly give them an unhealthy model of grief. It’s powerful for our children to see that adults grieve as well. When I noticed my daughter crying while we were singing a hymn in church a while ago, I took her out of the sanctuary into the church’s gathering space. We sat in a chair together, and she told me that whenever she sings “In Christ Alone,” she thinks about her Sunday school teacher who died unexpectedly. I told her I too was feeling sad about her teacher that day. We sat on that chair and cried together until the service ended.

ENCOURAGE EXPRESSION

Coping with death may not always involve crying, however, and it’s important that our children know that there are many ways to grieve. Maybe they want to write down some of their memories or feelings. Maybe they want to draw a picture of the person or animal who has died. Maybe they feel angry or tired or just want to be alone for a while. After a teacher at one of our high schools died unexpectedly this year, I sat in a classroom where all the seniors had assembled. At first the mood was quiet and somber, but then one by one, the students, through their tears, started sharing their favorite stories and memories of their teacher. By the end of the hour, my side ached from laughing so hard. What a beautiful way to grieve!

BE THERE

When one of our dogs died early from cancer, two of my

children especially struggled with her death. They asked why she had to die, and I told them I didn't know. We cried and held each other and talked to God about it together. Your children don't need you to have all the answers about death. They just need to know that you are there to give them a hug and listen as they share their thoughts, feelings, and even their doubts. Listen first, and then go together to Jesus, who gave us the ultimate answer to death with his life.



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SIN AND DEATH saturate our fallen world. Sadness, pain, and confusion affect children and their parents when a loved one dies or tragedy strikes. What do we say? How can we help?

FOCUS ON GOD'S PROMISES

Above all, remember that Christian parents are blessed to share the certain hope of eternal life for those who died in faith in Jesus. Talk to your children from a young age about sin and its consequences—including death—but then remind them of their baptisms and reassure them with the fact that our Savior Jesus died and rose, making death a believer's doorway to heaven.

Romans 6:23 begins solemnly, "For the wages of sin is death," but concludes with the joyful words, "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." You can share more reassuring promises from the Bible like John 5:24; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57; and 2 Timothy 1:10. Sit together and read the amazing resurrection accounts of the young man of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:49-56), Lazarus (John 11:1-44), and Easter Sunday (Matthew 28, Mark

16, Luke 24, John 20). Pull out your hymnal and sing Easter hymns (*Christian Worship* [CW] 438–471). Walk through the Christian funeral service, which includes a remembrance of baptism (CW pp. 274–277) and pray together for God's peace (CW p. 257). "I know that my Redeemer lives! What comfort this sweet sentence gives!" (CW 441:1).

DON'T GLOSS OVER THE PAIN

Even for a Christian, death still brings separation and sorrow. Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus; it is natural to grieve and miss our loved ones. We can rejoice in Grandma's heavenly victory but still be sad. Children need to know this to understand their sorrow and the tears they will see in the eyes of their parents and others around them. In this earthly life, there are dismal days, but God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Can we talk about family pets for a moment? When a beloved pet dies, it might be a child's first close death experience. Our pets may be only earthly blessings. However, comfort can be found as your family thanks God for the gift of Snoopy or Snowy and all of the blessings that came through that pet's life. Through her tears, one child even pointed out that her dog's unconditional love reflected God's even greater undeserved love for us. We can also use this time to talk again about sin's curse and point our children to the only solution to all of life's difficulties—Jesus!

Sin and death are not easy topics, but how blessed Christian parents are to share: "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).



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ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR EMOTIONS.

PLAN TO ATTEND THE FUNERAL, WHICH PROVIDES COMFORT.

TALK ABOUT DEATH.

TALK ABOUT THE PERSON WHO DIED, ESPECIALLY PLEASANT MEMORIES.

LOOK FOR PICTURES AND KEEPSAKES TO KEEP THE MEMORY ALIVE.

DON'T GIVE WRONG INFORMATION ABOUT DEATH.

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Taken from *Patient Parenting* by John Juern, available at nph.net.