

Name

**Kids Today: What They Want to Know About Death**

***by Rabbi Earl A. Grollman***

What if?

What if God never took my father? Would he have taken me instead? What if I never get through this? Will people still look at me the way they did before? Or will I be looked up as a girl with no father? Will life be as easy, or will I have to try extra hard?

What if my kids ask about their grandfather? What will I tell them? That he died when I was just a kid learning the lesson of life? Will they want to see where he is buried? Will I be able to take them?

What if?

Yes, children do ask questions about death. The above were the inquiries of a 14-year-old at Fernside, a Center for Grieving Children in Cincinnati.

When I wrote Explaining Death to Children almost four decades ago, youngsters were then the forgotten mourners. At the time, the whole discussion was a taboo subject. Somehow, many people believed that if death was not discussed, it would magically disappear.

Since that time we have learned that just as we cannot protect ourselves from life, so we cannot protect our youngsters from death. Traumatic experiences belong to both adulthood and childhood.

Where can one turn in tragedy if no one will admit that there is a tragedy? If loss can be acknowledged, we find comfort in what we can mean to each other—even in the midst of lingering pain and loneliness.

Death is a universal and inevitable process that must be faced by people of all ages. Children who are able to participate with their families after the death of someone they love will be better equipped to understand and manage the emotions of their grief. It is in that spirit that I share some of the most frequently asked questions that have been posed to me. It is important to know that in responding to a child’s question keep in mind:

What does the child need to know?

What does the child want to know?

What can the child understand?

It’s okay to admit that you don’t have all the answers: no one does. Even as you share with your children, you will gain fresh insights for yourself. In other words, before you can explain death to children, you have to begin to explain it yourself.

Why do people die?

Dying is part of life. Every living thing in the world-trees, flowers, animals, and people-dies at the end of life. As it says in the Bible, “To everything there is a season…a time to be born, a time to die.”

When do people die?

People die when their bodies no longer work right. Sometimes people die when they are very old. Other people die because they are very sick. Sometimes accidents such as a car crash cause people to die, even young children and babies.

When will I die?

No one can know when you will die. We hope you will live a long, healthy, happy life and die only when you are very old.

Could you die at any time? Could I?

It’s possible that an accident could cause you or me to die suddenly, but because we are well and healthy, we can expect to live for a long, long time. We can help avoid accidents by being careful when crossing streets, for example, and by fastening our seatbelts when riding in a car.

What do dead people do all the time?

(Be factual in answering this question.)

We don’t know what dead people do. We do know that when someone dies, their body is usually put in a casket and buried in the earth, or burned in a place called a crematory and the ashes are scattered. The person who is dead cannot see or hear or talk. Death is the end of living.

Can someone die because you wished they were dead?

No. Wishing someone would die cannot make it happen. Nothing you can do or say or think can cause someone to die. Even if you feel you did or said something bad, you were not the cause of your someone’s death.

Is it okay to cry?

Of course. Crying is a natural way of letting go of painful feelings. Tears are part of grieving for boys as well as girls.

I feel bad. Why don’t I cry?

You can feel sad without crying. Sometimes the death of someone you love is so hard to believe that you don’t cry at first. Some children don’t cry because they are afraid their tears will upset their family members. Others don’t cry because they don’t want their friends or schoolmates to know how sad they are. But it’s okay to cry. Grownups cry too. It’s okay not to cry if you don’t feel like it. Grieving is different for each person.

Who will take care of me if my parent(s) die?

If your father dies, for example, you and your mother will still be a family so you will have someone to take care of you. Many parents make sure that someone in the family who loves you will take care of you in the unlikely event that both of your parents die. They do this by making a will, a legal document that says who is to be your guardian.

Should I go to the funeral?

The funeral says, “thank you” and “goodbye” to the person who died even though that person is no longer alive. It is a sharing time with family and friends. By being present you are able to see what happened to that person. You will want to ask the adults what will happen at the funeral and with whom you will be sitting. You might invite your closest friend to come with you. Of course, you should not be forced to attend if you really don’t want to. Most youngsters are glad they went.

How will I feel?

No one can tell you. Each person grieves in a different way. There is no “normal” way. Feelings are neither “good” nor “bad.” There may be all kinds of emotions: anger, loneliness, fear, sadness, unfairness, denial, guilt. Feelings can change from day to day, even from hour to hour. You need to honestly accept and express these emotions with a family member, a counselor, or even a support group. Most of all, just be yourself.

These are but a few of the many questions that children might ask. No doubt, there are lots more. You are the adult who will listen carefully to their concerns and help them through this difficult and sad time.