



## Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

### **After the Japanese Earthquake and Tsunami Talking to Younger Children About Death**

*Children see and hear many of the same things adults do. However, their understanding of may be quite different. This is particularly true with the death of someone they or their parents may know or even the news reports and conversations going on around them about the thousands who died in the earthquake and its aftermath. Adults can help children better understand a death and its meaning to the family and their friends. This always requires more than simply giving the facts. Rather it is a process of helping them understand a new view on life.*

#### **Things to keep in mind:**

- Your children will look to you for “how to feel” and “how to talk” and “how to think” after a death.
- The age of your children does not always relate to how they understand death.
- Older children do not always “already understand” and younger children may not always be frightened or concerned. There is wide variation in how children even of the same age understand death.
- Even toddlers can understand basic concepts. They will look to you for guidance.
- Sometimes children think death is temporary. They may see characters come back to life on TV and in movies. It’s important not to reinforce this by referring to the person who died as being far away, on a trip, or a long journey.
- Children may feel angry when their loved one doesn’t call or return for an important occasion. They may not even know that is why they are angry unless they are asked or reminded that “Maybe you are missing her/him today?”
- Some children will not want to talk about the death because it will expose feelings of guilt and shame.
- Young children can worry that they somehow caused someone to die. You can assure your child that they didn’t cause the death by something they did or didn’t do.
- Help your child understand why someone they loved died. Offer a brief explanation, using simple and direct language that is age appropriate.
- Children may feel unsafe after a traumatic death because of worry about “what if it happens again? What if it happens to you?” Help them feel safe by reminding them you are here and will take care of them.
- Allow children to ask questions and answer them as honestly as you can without providing graphic details.
- Don’t be surprised by your child’s ideas and fantasies about a death.

### **Practical Suggestions:**

- You can help your child understand death accurately by describing that people (and animals) “die.”
- Offer examples from nature: “Do you remember when we found the dead baby bird?” We wish it hadn’t died, but there is no way to make something live again once it has died.
- Help young children understand that all life functions end at the time of death so they don’t become preoccupied with physical suffering.
- Identify the living functions that stop with death such as thinking being hungry, being afraid, feeling pain, having a beating heart and breathing air.
- Using puppets or stuffed animals to “talk” with your child can be a way to help your child discuss their feelings and thoughts.
- After your child tells you a story about death or dying, ask them how the people in the story felt and how they feel about the story they constructed.
- Don’t encourage your child to sleep in your bed. Tuck them in with a favorite story, a hug and a kiss. Provide a night light if that’s helpful.
- Parents can offer to stay with children until they fall asleep. Be sure to keep the promise. Bring a pillow and lay on the floor until they are asleep if needed.
- Offer a possession of the deceased that they can keep or share as a way of remembering.
- Adults can participate in story-telling with young children. "Remember the time that Uncle Bill came to the beach with us and he let you bury him in the sand? Even though it’s sad to think that he has died, we have that important memory that can help us always remember him. Maybe we can draw a picture together of that day.”
- A “balloon release” is one idea to help children “let go”. Children can make two lists: one list of things they “no longer have” because of the death and another list of things they do still have. The "no longer have" list goes inside a helium balloon and is released.
- Children like adults, can also “get stuck” in their grief. If your child seems “stuck” on the death, consult your pediatrician.

### **Additional Resources**

The Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents:

<http://pittsburghchildtrauma.org/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN):

<http://nctsn.org>

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement:

[www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis](http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis)

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*CSTS is the academic arm and a partnering Center of the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.*