Talking To Kids About Serious Illness And Death

One of the least likely subjects to come up in conversation with a child is the topic of serious illness and death. Yet many children come in contact with these topics through their families, their friends’ families, schools, and even the media. How we help our children deal with these matters has a lot to do with how we, ourselves, deal (or don’t deal) with them. Although we may wish to shield our children from the often harsh realities of life, these “realities” involve an emotional process which goes on in one way or another. Here are some suggestions to help guide that process to a healthier resolution:

- Consider your own philosophy about serious illness and death. Maintain (as in the case of spiritual beliefs) and modify (as in the case of taboo subjects) your approach to these matters before approaching your child.

- Regarding illness, consider the person who is ill. What do they want to focus on (i.e., the intact joys of life vs. discussing their fears about illness or death). This is helpful in understanding what your child is likely to encounter and may guide you in preparing them for visits.

- It is better to talk than to avoid. Although it may be tempting (and at times appropriate) to protect children from frightening details, that won’t stop their questions. Avoiding the topic altogether may only magnify these fears and distance your child from their most important means of support -- you. The use of play and drawing may facilitate talking with younger children.

- Remain age appropriate. If you have children of different ages, speak with them individually, as they are certain to have questions based on their level of understanding. Let their questions guide the depth of your discussion.

- Ask questions to determine your child’s view of the situation. Especially with very young children, their view of the world can be much different and less logical than ours: “Grandma died in the hospital. Now Mom has to go to the hospital. Maybe she’ll die there, too.” Knowing what they fear can help you provide appropriate information and comfort.

- Use resources available in books or previous experiences. These often involve metaphors and actual life experiences (i.e., “lifecycle of a raindrop”, loss of a pet, etc.) and can be very helpful for younger children.

- Do not be afraid to show emotion or uncertainty with your child. You are a model for how to deal with these matters. There may be questions that have no answers. It is better for a child to know that you, too, have feelings and questions than for them to feel ashamed or frightened by their questions or
emotions. Children may also derive a sense of connection to the family and purpose by providing comfort to you.

- Comfort can come from that which is stable. Returning to predictable routines will offer comfort during times of change and unpredictability. Do not be overly surprised if children regress to previous behaviors or routines.

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