

KIDS ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS
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The fire started on a bitter cold Friday morning in January. The wind chill outside was around 70 degrees below zero. Alarm clocks would not go off to wake people for work and school for more than an hour.

“Bob” and “Sally” were sleeping in their room upstairs. “Angie,” their ten-year old daughter, was also asleep in her room across the hall. No one is quite sure what happened. Neighbors reported the sound of an explosion. When the fire department arrived minutes later, the house was fully involved with fire.

Firefighters found Bob lying on the frozen ground below his bedroom window. His back was broken from the fall. They found Angie in her bed. Her mother was on the floor next to her. Sally was dead at the scene. Angie was life-flighted to a major burn center. Bob was taken to intensive care at the local hospital. Late Sunday morning, Angie died at the burn center. The funeral home I work for as bereavement coordinator handled both funerals.

I was asked by Angie’s elementary school principal to speak at an assembly early Monday morning. Normally, I work with high school kids. It was a little different to find myself in a room with more than 300 children in grades K through 5. I talked to them about telling and writing stories about Angie, drawing pictures, and writing notes for her. Literally hundreds of pieces created by these children would be on display in the funeral home by the time of the service. Then I told them the most important thing they could do was ask questions. I told them, “The only dumb question is the one you don’t ask.”

Later, I met with a group of Angie’s classmates. One girl took my hand and asked, “How did Angie die?” “What would you like to know?” I asked. Some wise person long ago taught me to find out exactly what a child is asking before you answer.

“Did she burn? Or did she die from the smoke? Did she hurt bad when she died?” Kids ask tough questions, but it is important to tell the truth. If you don’t know, say so, and don’t make anything up. State the facts as you know them in language the kids will understand. If you need to go beyond that, make sure the child knows the difference between what you actually know and what you believe.

“That is a tough questions and I don’t know everything you want to know. This is what I know. Angie was unconscious when the firemen found her and did not wake up on the way to the hospital. Doctors here decided to send her to a special hospital where people had a better chance of helping her. The doctors gave her medicine to keep her

from hurting. It turned out her burns were too serious and Angie was not able to get better. That is why she died.”

“That’s what I know. It helps me to believe that Angie was asleep when the smoke came into her room. I believe the poison in the smoke made her sleep deeper. I believe the poison from the smoke kept her from hurting. If it helps you to believe that, that’s okay.” The little girl next to her also had tears in her eyes. “Why did Angie’s daddy leave her there?” she asked in a whisper.

Kids ask really touch questions. For a ten-year old, Daddy is all powerful. He can do anything for his children. What do you say to this one? I tried to buy time to think.

“What’s your name?” I asked her as I knelt down to look her in the eye. “Allison.”

“I don’t know why Angie’s daddy didn’t save her, Allison. But I do know he is asking himself the same question.”

Allison wasn’t buying. She looked me right in the eye and said in a voice strong enough to echo through the room, “*My daddy would never leave me in there with the fire!*”

Adults have a difficult time dealing with children’s pain, especially where death and grief are concerned. We want to shelter them from it as much as we can. Many of us believe that elementary and preschool age children are too young to understand and that they really do not grieve at all. Many adults feel it is cruel and inappropriate to traumatize kids with talk of death or exposing them to funerals. But children actually understand things better than most of us realize. They need to grieve and mourn just as much as adults do. When adults claim to be protecting their children, they are really protecting themselves from issues they find too painful to deal with.

Kids are remarkably straight-forward about things. The youngest children are smart enough to know when something is wrong. They have an incredible curiosity and they ask tough questions. Their minds cannot tolerate an incomplete or unsatisfactory answer. Imagination fills in the gaps. The stuff supplied by imagination is often much more upsetting and traumatizing than reality. They want to know the facts. More important, I believe they need to know. The knowledge helps them understand what is happening. It also lays the foundation for coping skills they will need as adults. When we try to shelter them, we may be doing them more harm than good.

Asking questions is the child’s invitation to us to help them learn. When we let them know it is okay to ask, they often amaze us with their desire to know. Some of their questions will be cute and make us smile. Some will seem gross and in bad taste. Others will be the tough ones we ask ourselves and have trouble answering. Every question will represent the child’s struggle to understand and to make sense of what is happening.

Some years ago, I found four-year old Alexis lying on the floor, carefully examining the bottom of her aunt's casket. The casket was sitting on a "church truck"—the collapsible, wheeled cart caskets are placed on when away from the funeral home. Alexis knew how to ask questions.

"What are you looking for, Alexis?" I asked. "The doors," she said. "What doors?" I asked. "The doors where the wheels go." She thought the church truck worked like the landing gear on an airplane. Alexis spent most of the day with me. She even rode to the cemetery with me. The trip was one question after another: "Where are her legs? Are they really going to put her in a hole in the ground? Is there a night light in there? I would be afraid of the dark. How will she get out? Is there a bathroom down there? Won't the dirt get in her face? Will the worms get in there? Is the casket like a space capsule?"

Kids who came to Angie's and Sally's funeral were a little older. Their questions were just as interesting:

"How long does it take to make a skeleton?" "What is embalming and what does it do?" "Where does the blood go?" "Did you take their eyes out?" "Do you close the lid (on the casket) when you go home at night?" "Have you ever embalmed someone who was still alive?" "How do you know they are really dead?" "How many ghosts live at the funeral home/cemetery?"

Prepare young children in advance. Prepare them for funeral home visits and the service by telling them what they will see and hear. Tell them that people may be very sad. Some of them may be crying. Assure them that you will be with them. Let them know you want them to ask questions. Ask, "Is there anything you want to know about what is happening?"

Find out exactly what the child is asking. Giving a long, complicated answer to the wrong question can be worse than no answer at all. Before you answer, ask them, "What would like to know?"

Tell the truth. If a child asks a question you don't have an answer for, say so. Don't make something up to try to comfort them. You might say, "I don't know. Let's find out together." Follow up with a phone call to your funeral director, minister, or someone else who may be able to help. Some questions can't be answered. You might say, "That's a good question. I wonder about that, too. What do you think?" Coming up with an answer is not as important as two people—one big and one little—sharing the search and talking about their loss together.

Use the "real" words. Avoid clichés and euphemisms like *passed away*, *crossed over*, *gone on a trip*, or *gone to sleep*. When you talk to kids—even preschoolers—use the words *death*, *dead*, and *dying*. People are *buried*, not *laid to rest*. A mother at a workshop I did recently disagreed. She thought these words were too harsh for a young

child to handle. The harshness is really an adult issue. For the child, the words have no emotional impact. They are just new words. Giving a special, unique name to a special, unique experience actually helps foster understanding.

Keep it concrete. Children do not move in a world of abstract ideas. They live in a concrete world filled with understanding based on what they can see, hear, taste, and touch. They think in pictures and experiences. When answering the tough questions it helps to keep the things we *know* through our senses separate from the things we *believe* with our hearts. Kids will grasp the concrete more easily and that will provide the bridge to teaching what we believe. “Jason, this is what I know about how your mom died . . . I *believe* with all my heart that she is in Heaven.”

Keep it short. Give short, specific answers to specific questions. Find out if you are on the mark. “Is that what you were asking?” Always invite more questions. “Is there anything else you have been wondering about?” “Remember, if you think of anything else, come see me. We’ll see if we can figure it out.”

Remember the power of imagination. A child’s mind will not tolerate an incomplete or unsatisfactory answer. Imagination not only supplies missing information, it also draws conclusions and provides an interpretation of the events. The child may believe they caused the death by their thoughts or actions.

Sometimes we can use the power of imagination for healing. Remember Allison? “My daddy would not leave me in the there with the fire!” she insisted. Was she imagining that Angie’s daddy was a monster, or that Angie had been bad? Or was she imagining that her own daddy *just might* leave her? This is terrifying stuff for a ten-year old. So why not replace that horrible imagination picture with another one that is both realistic and more comforting. This is what I said to her:

“Allison, I’m afraid we may never know the answer. Sometimes when I am trying to figure out things, I imagine what I might have done. Can you imagine with me? Imagine we are in the house and the fire is between us and Angie and her mom. We can’t get to them from here. But if we jump out the window, we can rum around the house and get them from the other side. So we jump. But the ground is a long way down and it’s icy and hard. We land wrong and get hurt. We can’t move. We can’t do what we wanted to do. We can’t go around to the other side of the house and get them out. I really don’t *know* what happened. But do you think it could have happened this way?” Her answer was a smile and a hug.

Be patient with your child. Just like adults in grief, children take time to comprehend and adjust. They will ask the same questions over and over. They will seem overwhelmed by grief at one moment and filled with giggling childhood energy the next. They will warm your heart and drive you crazy.

Finally, don’t forget to cuddle. Children from infants on up need to touch. When preschoolers and elementary age kids are asking the tough questions about death

and grief, hold hands while you talk. A big hug may be more important than any magic words you may have tried to say.