

Let The Children Say Goodbye

Our first instinct as parents is to protect our children, but sometimes we may protect them to the extent that they aren't allowed to grieve or even grow. There is no right or wrong, and it will always be a difficult decision. We never want to see our children crying or suffering if we can prevent it, but are we really protecting the children or are we protecting ourselves from dealing with emotions and difficult topics?

In the hope that others may have an easier time in helping a child grieve, here are two separate and unrelated stories about how children deal with death.

A friend of mine told me a very touching story about her granddaughter, Sally. She was about seven years old and was very close to her brother. Bobby was a chronically ill child who couldn't eat or speak. He was a few years older than his sister, and he had become ill just before she was born, eventually needing a feeding tube in his stomach. Since Sally never knew Bobby before he became ill, with the innocence of a child, she accepted him as he was. Bobby lay in his daybed day after day watching his surroundings and nothing more. Sally knew which television programs he liked by the expressions on his face, and she would read books to him when there was nothing good on TV – even though she didn't know how to read yet.

One night, Bobby died peacefully in his sleep. The next morning, Sally's mother rushed Sally over to a neighbor's house so that she wouldn't see her brother had died. The doctor came and pronounced him dead, and the funeral home took his body away. Later that day, Sally's mother brought her home and told her the bad news. She ran to the daybed, but Bobby wasn't there. She cried and wanted to see him. Sally was so upset that her mother decided it would be too traumatic for her to go to the calling hours or to the funeral. Sally became depressed, and her hair fell out in bunches over the next few weeks. She went to school, but she wasn't the bright and cheerful child that everyone loved. Her mother took her to the doctor, but no physical symptoms were found. The doctor thought that all she needed was time to adjust.

One morning, Sally found her mother weeping and asked her what was wrong. She hugged Sally and told her that today would have been Bobby's tenth birthday. Sally insisted that they make a cake for Bobby, and her mother agreed that it was a good idea. Together they made the cake, and when Mom started to light the candles, Sally screamed, "No, wait! We have to take the cake to Bobby."

Secretly, Mom had wanted to visit the gravesite that day, and she thought that enough time had passed for Sally to be able to handle it. They lit the candles at the cemetery, and Sally ate her own piece of cake and one for Bobby even though she was already stuffed after the first one.

Mom said a prayer with Sally and then told her that it was time to leave. Sally cried and did not want to go. She said to her mother, "You never let me say goodbye to Bobby, and now I need twice as long." After that day, Sally seemed a happier child. She could finally let go and deal with the loss of her brother. Her hair grew back, and they were finally able to go on with their lives as a family.

The other story is my own personal experience with my son, Christopher. He is six-years old (going on thirty it seems sometimes). When the phone rang one night, it was a call announcing that my husband's Aunt Betty had passed away.

We drove to New Jersey with Christopher and tried to explain as best we could what had happened. This was the first time that death had come up in his life, and we weren't sure exactly how to deal with it. On the drive there, his comments were: "Everyone is going to be sad without Aunt Betty. Everyone is going to miss her. We need to help Adie (his little cousin) because she doesn't have a Grandma anymore."

We had decided to leave Christopher with a babysitter because he wasn't close at all to Aunt Betty, and my husband wanted to be able to focus on his grieving mother. We assumed there would be a babysitter available for the other children in the family, as well. To our surprise, there was no babysitter, and other family members fully intended to take their children to the calling hours as well as the funeral. They had called everyone to the house, children and adults, to see Aunt Betty and say goodbye before the funeral home came to take away her body. So, we ended up taking Christopher with us to the funeral home.

Everyone was going up to Aunt Betty's casket to say goodbye, and they were lifting the blanket that covered her legs. When everyone talked about Aunt Betty, there were tears, but smiles, too. Christopher asked many questions: "Is everybody sad?" "Where does the body go when the box is closed?" "Where does the brain go?" "Is Aunt Betty with God now, and if she is, why is her body still here?"

Christopher wanted to touch Aunt Betty, too, and he was really curious about what was so fascinating under the blanket. My husband was very firm on his feelings about not allowing this, because one of his worst childhood memories was of touching his father who had died. He had been traumatized by the cold and hard feel of his father's skin. But Christopher was relentless. I think he was more curious about what was under the blanket than anything. He really was not emotional about Aunt Betty, so I decided it would be alright for him to go up to the casket. As we walked up to the casket, I explained what her skin would feel like.

Christopher touched her hand and looked up at me. Matter-of-factly he said, "You were right, it is kind of hard." He then lifted up the blanket to find many pictures of all of the children and grandchildren tucked neatly underneath.

On the way back from the calling hours, Christopher informed me about what was in the other dark rooms at the funeral home, like the fat man with glasses with nobody visiting him – except, of course, my son.

There were many more questions after the funeral: "How old are people when they die?" And, "Why didn't Aunt Betty go see the doctor and get some medicine if she was sick?" As he looked up at me from his bed, he said, "I hope you never die." I just hugged him and told him that I would take care of him as long as I could. That must have reassured him, because he fell right to sleep. For weeks afterward, I expected nightmares, but there weren't any. There seemed to be that innocent acceptance of death as a normal part of life. The innocence of a child can accept reality by seeing it much better than by being told about it.

It is important to allow time for questions, grieving, and fears to be expressed. Each child needs to be allowed into the secret of the circle of life. I wrote a children's book called *Grandfather's Shirt*, published by Centering Corporation, that explains the circle of life in terms that children can understand. My favorite passage from the book is,

They walked out to the garden together. "Look at all these flowers," Dad said. "See how Grandfather planted them in a big circle?" Peter nodded. "Life is like this big circle," Dad continued. "This year it's a beautiful flower. In the winter the flower dies, but the seeds are left behind. The seeds can be planted next year to make another beautiful flower. You and I are the seeds Grandfather left behind when he died. Grandfather lives forever through us and our memory of him.

Writing this book has helped me as a nurse and as a mother to figure out for myself what death means to me. Though I was protected as a child, now I can see how natural life and death are. My own memory will live through my children and then their children.

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