

WHAT DOES “DEAD” MEAN?

. . . Explaining the Language of Death to Children

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Those of you who have helped grieving children know how difficult it can be to explain not only what “dead” means, but also all those other new and odd terms we use when we talk about someone who has recently died.

Children overhear us saying, “He committed suicide,” or “She’s being cremated,” or “We need to go to the funeral home to pick out a casket”—not the sort of words on your typical grade school vocabulary test.

When we use these words around children, we owe it to them to explain what we are talking about. If we don’t, the newly bereaved child is more likely to fear what is happening and to conjure up scary explanations of her own. The child whom we talk *over* and not *with* will probably also feel left out and worst of all, alone, is his grief.

I have three rules for explaining the language of death to children:

1. Don’t use euphemisms. For example, saying a dead person is “asleep” will not only mislead a child, but may also cause her to believe that the dead person might “wake up” again. Remember, children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don’t know.
2. Use simple, concrete language. Young children are very literal. Try not to use abstract or complex words.
3. Don’t overexplain. While children deserve developmentally-appropriate explanations about death, they don’t need *War and Peace*. Be brief. Let the child’s natural curiosity—not your need to be understood—guide your discussions.
4. Show them. Children often don’t understand something until they can see it. You will not harm them, for example, by showing them the ashes from a cremation or taking them to the funeral home to look at caskets.

I hope the following list of terms and child-ready explanations will help you as you work with bereaved kids. You may also have used explanations of your own that have worked well with children. If so, I’d love to hear from them. Please drop me a note at The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, CO 80526.

Ashes (also “cremains”):

What is left of a dead body after cremation. Looks like ashes from a fire.

Burial:

Placing the body (which is inside a casket or an urn) into the ground.

Calling hours (Also “visitation” or “wake”):

The times that are set for people to come visit the family and view the body before the funeral service.

Casket:

A special box for burying a dead body.

Causes of death

Accident: Something really awful happened. (Explain the nature of the accident.) The person’s body was hurt so badly that it stopped working.

Homicide: Sometimes a person whose mind is not working right kills another person. That is the worst thing a person can do in the world; it is wrong and can make us very mad.

Miscarriage/Stillbirth: Sometimes when a baby is growing inside its mommy, something goes wrong. We don’t always understand why it happens, but it’s nobody’s fault.

Old age: When people have lived a long, long time and get very old, their bodies wear out and eventually stop working.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS): Sometimes (not very often), little babies die in their sleep. Nobody knows for sure why it happens. It didn’t happen because of anything anybody did or didn’t do.

Suicide: Sometimes people feel very sad and don’t want to live anymore, so they kill themselves. But killing yourself is never a good solution if you’re feeling bad.

Terminal illness: Sometimes when people get sick, they don’t get better. Instead, they get sicker and sicker until their bodies wear out and eventually stop working.

Cemetery: A place where many dead bodies are buried.

Committal Service: The part of the funeral service that takes place where the body will be buried. Includes burial.

Cremation: Putting the dead body into a room with lots of heat until it turns into ashes.

Dead: When a person’s body stops working. It doesn’t see, hear, feel, eat, breathe, etc. anymore. The person can never come back.

Embalm: When the funeral home gets the body ready to put in the casket so we can see the body at the viewing. *(While you may be tempted to talk about taking all the blood out and putting a special chemical in, this is most often an example of overexplanation to young children. Of course, if the child asks, then you can explain.)*

Funeral: A time when friends and families get together to say goodbye and remember the person who died. May be held at the funeral home or the church.

Funeral Director: A person who works at the funeral home and helps the family plan the funeral.

Funeral home: A place where bodies are kept until they are buried. Sometimes the funeral is also held at the funeral home.

Grave: The hole in the ground where the body is buried at the cemetery.

Headstone or monument: A stone placed at the grave that marks where the person who died is buried.

Hearse (also “funeral coach”): The special car that takes the dead body in the casket to the grave at the cemetery.

Mausoleum: A special building in which bodies can be buried above the ground.

Obituary: A short article in the paper that tells about the person who died.

Pallbearers: The people who help carry the casket at the funeral.

Plot: The area of ground at the cemetery where the body will be buried.

Urn: A small container that the ashes are placed in after cremation.

Vault: An outside box that the casket is put in for burial. *(Note for adults: Many cemeteries require vaults because they prevent the ground above the casket from sinking.)*

Viewing (also “wake” or “calling hours”): The time when people can see the body of the person who died.

Keep in mind that these suggested explanations are not necessarily meant to be used verbatim. Use language that you feel comfortable with and that you think will make sense to the particular child you’re helping.