How young children understand death – and how to talk to them about it

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"Mummy, what happens after we die?" Many parents have been asked this kind of question, and it is often difficult to know how best to reply. Should you be open about your own beliefs – whether they are religious,

agnostic or atheist? And is it OK to sugarcoat? Recent research in developmental psychology provides some advice.

Death is a fascinating subject to many children, as shown, for example, when they come across a dead animal or plant. Their observations and questions show a healthy curiosity as they strive to make sense of a complex world.

Yet to many parents, death is a taboo subject for children. But children's questions actually provide an excellent opportunity to encourage their inquisitiveness and to support their learning about, for example, biology and the life cycle. However, there are situations when you need to show great sensitivity.

What children know

Most preschoolers do not grasp the biological basis of death and tend to believe that death is a different state of life, like a prolonged sleep. At this age, children often say that only old and ill people die. They also think dead people feel hungry, need air and can still see, hear or dream. To gain a mature, biological understanding of death, children must acquire knowledge of a few key facts about death.

Typically, between the ages of four and 11, children gradually come to understand that death is universal, inevitable and irreversible, follows the breakdown of bodily functions, and leads to the cessation of all physical and mental processes. That is, by the age of 11, most children grasp the idea that all people – including their loved ones and themselves – will die one day and remain dead forever.

However, some young children will understand these components sooner, and here experience and appropriate conversations are influential. For example, those who have already experienced the death

of a loved relative or pet, and those with more experience of the life cycle through interacting with animals, tend to have a better grasp of the death concept.

Another predictor of relatively early understanding is parents being better educated, irrespective of the child's intelligence. This suggests that parents can and do help their child's understanding of death by providing appropriate opportunities and clearly explaining the biological facts during the primary years.

Religion and culture also play an important role in shaping children's beliefs. During their conversations with adults, children often encounter biological facts but also "supernatural" beliefs about the afterlife and spiritual world. Developmental psychologists have discovered that as children grow older and grasp the biological facts about death, they typically develop a "dualist" view that combines biological and supernatural beliefs.

For example, ten-year-olds may recognise that dead people cannot move or see because their bodies have stopped working, but at the same time believe that they dream or miss people.

Honesty and sensitivity

Recent research on children's understanding of death has a number of implications for how best to discuss this complex and often emotionally charged subject.

The most important thing is to not shy away from the topic – don't ignore a child's questions or try to change the subject. Instead, see them as an opportunity to nurture their curiosity and contribute to their gradually gaining a better understanding of the life cycle. Similarly, listening to what children ask and say about death will enable you to

gauge their feelings and level of understanding, and to work out what requires explanation or reassurance. An oversimplified message can be uninformative and patronising, and an overly complex explanation might add to confusion and possible distress.

For example, offering detailed information or graphic details about how someone died or what happens to dead bodies may cause unnecessary worry and fear, especially in younger children. For some children, the idea that a dead person continues to watch over us can be reassuring, but for others it might be a source of confusion and distress.

Another key aspect is to be honest and avoid ambiguity. For example, telling a child that a dead person is "asleep" could lead them to believe that dead people can wake up. Research has shown that children who understand the normality, inevitability and finality of death are likely to be better prepared for, and better able to make sense of death when it happens. Indeed, children with such understanding actually report less fear of death.

Being honest also means acknowledging the uncertainties and mystery of death and avoiding being dogmatic. It is important to explain that there are some things that nobody can know, and that it is normal to hold apparently inconsistent beliefs simultaneously. However strong your religious or atheist beliefs, acknowledge that others may hold very different views. This approach will encourage tolerance of others' beliefs, support children's naturally strong drive to make sense of the world and inspire an appreciation of its wonder and mystery.

Perhaps the most important thing is to acknowledge that sadness is normal, and that it is natural to worry about death. We all feel sad when a loved one dies but we gradually overcome our sadness as life goes on. To ease concern, you could offer realistic reassurance. Point out, for example, the likelihood that they and their loved ones will continue to

live for a very long time.

If a child is coming to terms with the loss of a loved one, or is dying herself, great sensitivity is required. This does not mean being less honest or open. Children manage their anxiety and fears better when they can rely on truthful explanations about the death of a loved one. For children who know that they are dying, it is important to provide them with opportunities to ask questions and express their feelings and wishes.

Whatever the circumstances, children try to fill in the gaps in their knowledge if truthful information is kept from them. Often their imagination can be far more scary, and potentially far more damaging, than the reality.

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