



child out if need be for a break, snacks, or the bathroom. Children who are a little older may be offered the chance to speak at the funeral. They could tell a story, read a poem, or sing a song.

During the days of mourning following the funeral (the *shiva* period), children can be active participants, rather than problems to be avoided. For example, a seven-year-old mourning her grandmother turned her bedroom room into a "Grandma Museum" in which she displayed aspects of her life with her grandma - wool they used to knit together, doll clothes made for her, a quilt embroidered on the occasion of her birth, and books and dolls that been gifts to her. Each item was marked with an index card that explained why it was there.

*Shiva* is also a time when children can be gradually introduced to the concept of comforting someone after a death. If your child has a friend who has lost a loved one, you can teach your child about dealing with death by going with the child to pay the friend a shiva visit. You can teach the child how to give a hug, talk about the deceased, and bake or cook for the family as a way to provide sustenance and caring.

## Heal by Remembering

Jewish tradition teaches us that we can help ourselves in the process of healing from death by active remembering. We remember by having photographs of the deceased around the house and by telling stories about the person. Some children may wish to make a scrapbook about the person who died. Or they may create a family tree that includes both those alive and those who have died.

We also have a tradition of giving charity (*tzedaqah*) in memory of the person who died. Children will relate to ideas such as planting a tree in memory of the loved one or doing acts of kindness (just as the loved one would have done).

During the period of mourning, Jewish people often say the *Qaddish* prayer. Older children can learn the words of this timeless prayer, and both younger and older children can be encouraged to make up their own prayers to deal with the death of a loved one.

## Take Care of Yourself

As a parent you must meet your needs first, in order to be able to give to your children. Although it may be difficult, try to eat well and get adequate sleep. Make sure you have people to talk to who understand your grief and personal dilemmas. Speak to your rabbi, cantor, or others for spiritual guidance and comfort. Seek professional help for yourself or your children if you need further help in coping. You may call upon friends to help you with your children. Ask people to do carpools for you. Other parents can help your children with homework and school projects. Although your children need your attention at this time, they (and you) may also benefit if they spend some time playing and hanging out with their friends.

Let people help you. At another time, you will help them. This is what it means to be part of a caring community.

## Help Your Children Be Resilient

Death is part of life. Your children will survive. They will go on. They will be able to use this difficult time to learn life lessons. They will learn how to be resilient. They will learn how to rely on others for caring, and how to participate in the Jewish faith's teachings about healing from the crisis of death. They will learn that life must be savored and enjoyed to its fullest, that this is the antidote to the reality of death.

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# Talking to Our Children About Death

Adapted from "Talking to Children about Death" by Dr. Nechama Liss-Levinson and used with permission from Jewish Lights Publishing

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## An Unwelcome Intruder in the Life of Children

Death is an unwelcome intruder into the life of children. It may appear with the loss of a much-loved pet, or with death of an adored grandparent. It may force its presence on a child with the accidental death of a sibling, or with the traumatic death of a parent. In any of these circumstances, when families deal with the emotional consequences of the death itself, it is important to remember that death and loss affect children of every age, and their needs must also be attended.

Talking with your children about death is not really different from talking with them about other topics. Be yourself, and trust the process. Above all, be a good listener. Keep the lines of communication open without pushing your children to focus when they are not yet ready. Use reassuring touch as well as words.

Some questions that children ask about death and dying include:

- What happens to you after you die?
- What is heaven like?
- Where do dogs and cats go?
- Why are we buried?

- My grandpa died when I was little. I wasn't sad then, but I'm sad now. Is that normal?
- I went to my mom's funeral. Can she still see me?
- What should I do if my best friend dies?

## Tell the Truth

A cardinal rule in dealing with children is to tell them the truth. Do not make up stories to protect them from the unpleasantness of loss. Do not say, "Grandma is sleeping" or "Daddy went on a long trip to a better place."

Of course, children of differing ages understand the concept of death differently. Some basic ideas you might wish to discuss:

- The beginning of life is when someone is born. At the end of life, a person dies. In the middle, we are all alive.
- When a person dies, the person's body stops working. The heart stops beating. The person cannot eat, walk or talk.
- The dead person will not come back or come to visit anymore.
- Nothing the child did or said could have caused the person to get sick or die.
- Mostly, people die when they are very old. Occasionally, people die before they are old. You may wish to talk with your child about this in more detail, depending on the specific situation you face.



## Don't Be Afraid to Talk about the Soul

Judaism teaches that all people possess a soul, the part that is special and unique in each of us, the part that connects us to the Almighty, and the part that gives us human dignity. At the moment of birth, your soul is connected to your body. The body grows, ages, and eventually stops working and dies. Once this happens, the soul is released to rejoin the universe, perhaps returning to be in God's presence.

It is helpful to explain to children that although we can see the body, we can't see the soul. We can sometimes feel the soul, often through prayer, occasionally through thinking or dreaming. Many children find this concept very reassuring. They are happy to know that the soul of the dead person is still a presence in some way. Even if you aren't certain about your own belief in a soul, you can still present this comforting idea to your child, indicating, "Many people believe ..." or "The Rabbis teach us..."

## Remember That Each Child is Different

At the Passover Seder, we talk about the four children. Our rabbis say that we do this to understand that each child is different, that the questions they each ask reflect their individual personalities, and that we must respond to each of them as individuals.

There is no one right way for children to respond to death. Sometimes, they will be very sad and cry. At other times, they will want to escape from the sadness and just have fun. They may appear angry or cranky. Or they may want to play with friends, to laugh, or to do silly things. Be available for your children to talk with you when they would like to. Read books with them to open the discussion.

Allow them the freedom not to talk about death when they need some space.

Children worry about how the death will affect them personally. If a grandparent dies, they worry about who will die next. If a parent dies, they are naturally concerned about who will be there to take care of them. They may become overly involved with thoughts about illness if the deceased was sick, or about accidents if the deceased died in this manner. They may worry that they will be called upon to fill the role of the deceased in the family. Try to be patient. Try to answer all questions honestly, in a manner appropriate to the child's stage of development. Know that this too will pass with time.

## Give Children the Opportunity to Participate

Children want to be included in the healing activities that make up the traditions around death and mourning. These activities are healing for children also. With adequate preparation, most children can be taken to the funeral and burial of someone they love. It is their chance to say good-bye. Make sure there is an adult friend or family member who can specially watch over each child and take the

