

Talking to Our Kids about Death

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There is no more vibrant sign of life than a child. Kids beam with joy. They are filled with boundless energy. Nothing seems to slow them down. Of all the things kids are, they are not thoughtless. Of course, they do things without thinking, but their little minds are busy. They are constantly trying to make sense of their world. Part of their world is death.

As parents, we make efforts to shield and protect our children from bad things. There is a dark side to the world that we try to shelter them from seeing. Death is part of that dark side. Unfortunately, even our kids are exposed to the harsh reality of death.

Our kids are sometimes shown death in subtle ways. Death might be portrayed in a light-hearted way in a cartoon they watch. They might see death simulated in a video game. They might act out death by playing “cops and robbers” or “cowboys and Indians.” They likely will hear about death in their Bible studies. And, sometimes, death touches the realities of our kids. A pet may die. Even worse, a friend or family member may die.

Teaching our children about death is difficult. There is a tendency to avoid the topic. In our family, we have tried to be open about the subject. We have always taken our kids to calling hours and funeral services. They have been to funerals for older people and younger people. These experiences have given us opportunities to talk about death with our children in ways that are direct, simple, and understandable. Here are a couple of lessons we can use to teach our children about death.

1. Death is the end of life. Several years ago, a close friend of my parents died unexpectedly. My oldest child was probably two or three years old. After attending the calling hours, he said, “That man was in the bed, but he’s not going to wake up is he?” I said, “No, he’s not.”

Saying that death is the end of life seems simple, but it is critical. Our children need to learn about the preciousness of life. Death is not like what they’ve seen in a cartoon. Death is not like what they’ve simulated in a video game. Death is not like playing cowboys and Indians. These exposures to death only confuse children. Children need to learn the finality of death. When someone dies, they don’t wake up.

“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart” (Eccl. 7:2).

2. It’s ok to be sad. Just like us, kids are constantly learning to process their emotions. Kids need to be reassured that it is ok to feel sad. It’s ok to cry. It’s ok to talk about it. Learning how to process sadness is vital for childhood development. Children also need to be taught that God can comfort them. God cares about our sadness and wants to comfort us.

“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psa. 34:10).

3. We can comfort sad people. Death makes us feel helpless. We cannot do anything to bring back a loved one; however, we can help survivors. We have always stressed to our kids how they can help people who are sad feel better. We go to funerals to tell family members that we are sorry. We do things to help them. We can make food for them. We can make cards for them. Involving your children in such activities will help them learn how to cope with death in constructive ways.

A few years ago, a man in a church in Ohio died unexpectedly. It was winter. A young couple took their kids to the home of the widow and shoveled her driveway. A small act of kindness that made an important difference. Even more important was the lesson this taught the couple's kids.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

4. Everyone dies. The fact that everyone dies is distressing, especially to children. Children can quickly make the connection between death and themselves and or death and their parents. This point needs to be made clear, but does not have to be labored. Rather, we must calm our kids' anxieties by teaching them about Jesus.

"...it is appointed for man to die once..." (Heb. 9:27).

5. We don't have to be afraid of death with Jesus. Everyone is afraid of dying. When our kids express their fears, share your fears with them. But, don't end the conversation with fear. Use a conversation about death to teach them about Jesus.

Jesus came to earth to save us in death. Just like God raised Jesus from the dead. Teach your kids a new word: R-E-S-U-R-R-E-C-T-I-O-N. If we obey Jesus, we will be given a new life with God. And, we will never die again! These are simple truths that kids can understand. These truths are the Gospel.

"Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

Conclusion

Being a parent is not easy. Finding the balance between sheltering and informing is difficult. We must remember that our kids are perceptive. They are capable of understanding more than we often realize. Being honest, direct, and simple in conversations about death will equip our children to understand this difficult part of life.

As Christians raising children, we must use death as an opportunity to shape our children to know, love, and serve Jesus. Jesus gives us hope. Jesus gives us comfort. Jesus gives us something to do to be helpful. Use death to teach them the Gospel!