



Thoughts on talking with your child about death

Words fail to capture fully the sadness of child or family member's death. This is true for adults. It is both more and less true for children. It is truer because many children do not yet understand the concept of death. They have often yet to transition from an early conception of death as temporary or reversible to an understanding that it is permanent physical state. Some children may have begun to grapple with this, as well as the idea that they themselves can die. In such instances, children feeling and thinking this way often will be full of questions about death. As the adults in their lives, it falls to us to reassure children that such questions are natural and okay, and that they can feel safe asking trusted adults those very questions. How we as adults answer those questions is up to each one of us in our own understanding of what physical death means. The Episcopal faith offers us a vision of an afterlife. As an Episcopal school, St. Michael's answers to the students' questions will align with this vision, with the understanding that this vision is built on faith -- meaning it cannot be proven, and that it is for each person to come to their own understanding of what death means to them.

It is less true for children because in such times, children often have much to teach adults. Psalm 8:2 teaches that, "Out of the mouths of babes" comes security and the strength to overcome that which would otherwise overcome us. We would do well to listen. Children's ability to express often-confounding feelings in simple terms can serve as a light for us all. So, as we struggle for answers, be sure to take time to listen to and simply be with your children. Being close to one another is the best way to help each other.

Basic tips as you talk with your child:

- **Tell the truth and answer questions.**
 - Share information in doses. Gauge what your child needs by giving information in small bits. Ask what questions s/he has. You'll know what more to do based on the questions your child asks. Answer questions honestly. "I'm not sure" is okay so long as it's said with love.
- **Allow your child to talk about feelings.**
 - If this is the first loss your child has experienced, your child may not know how to respond and will be looking for guidance.
 - Be prepared for a variety of emotional responses. Affirm that your child's reaction is normal and you understand the way the child's feels.
- **Encourage written or nonverbal expressions of emotions (e.g., notes, letters, pictures).**
 - Sending these to those affected by the loss can help your "we need to do something," reflex and help everyone feel less loss by feeling connected.
- **Reaffirm that your child is safe and that your child is loved.**
- **Help your child(ren) return to a normal routine when they're ready.**

A few helpful websites:

- [Fred Rogers on discussing death with children](https://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/death.php) : <https://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/death.php>
- The American Psychological Association's [How to talk to children about difficult news](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx): <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx>