

My grandad plants people!

*A simple guide for grown-ups when children
ask questions about death*

One day on arriving to collect my seven year old grandson Jack from school my daughter Julie, Jack's mum, was taken to one side by his teacher.

"Julie, I am concerned about Jack"

"Why, what do you mean?" replied Julie, quite anxious by now.

"He's a little boy with a very vivid imagination. During lessons today I asked the class to write about their home life, and Jack wrote my daddy is a fireman and my mummy works in a hospital ... and my grandad plants people!"

There was a puzzled silence for a while and then it dawned on Julie

"Oh, that's because his grandad is an undertaker!"

On hearing this true story Chris Earl (Jack's grandfather), was inspired to create this booklet.

Chris Earl is a qualified funeral director who has served bereaved families in Plymouth & Devon for 40 years.

Chris works for the Funeral Group of the Plymouth & South West Co-operative Society.



Here is a story of a family just like yours and mine.

Annie through the looking glass

Annie lost her father when she was eight years old. It was a very sad time, but her mum was careful to ensure Annie and her younger brother were included in choosing the songs to be sung for Dad, the flowers and the special place in a field that he would be laid to rest, so that they could visit when they wanted to. Time passed and life moved on, however, when Annie was a teenager she sometimes became very sad and emotional. When asked what it was that made her feel so sad she explained that she felt guilty because she could only remember what Dad looked like if she looked at the photographs of him. So Annie's mum sat her down in front of the mirror and told her to look at herself, her hair was then pulled back and she was told to imagine herself with a bit of a bald patch and a few wrinkles around her eyes, she was then told to smile. "There Annie" her mum said, "every time you want to remember what your Dad looked like, sit in front of the mirror and smile, because when you smile, you are the image of your lovely Dad so it's just like he is smiling back at you".

A colleague at P&SW Co-operative Society Ltd, shared this true story with us



As time goes by...

As time passes and children grow through adolescence, at certain times and on special occasions such as:

Birthdays,



Receiving awards



Getting Married

They may well feel lonely and sad, and often not even understanding themselves why they feel as they do. They may experience again the emotions that they felt at the time of the loss of someone especially close to them.

It is perfectly natural, and at those times a memorial or memory box that they can revisit and spend a quiet moment with, can sometimes help.

Encourage them to share their feelings and allow them the opportunity to remember, perhaps by lighting a candle, getting out a family album or planting a flower.



Introduction

The Co-operative Funeral Service has produced this booklet to assist adults when discussing death and dying with young children.

However, before we can help younger members of our family we need to understand and accept our own feelings at a time of bereavement.

All adults react differently to death, and children are no different. Children feel the loss of a loved one as intently as an adult does, although the expression of their grief may be shown in different ways, through play, drawings or even acting out. Most people experience a number of emotions including pain, sadness, anger, anxiety, loneliness and often a sense of shock, unreality and withdrawal.

All these feelings are perfectly natural and it is important to be honest with children as soon as possible, and not to hide your feelings and pretend everything is alright.



It's okay to cry

Children do not necessarily need to be protected from these emotions, too often people apologise for crying, but by being loving and open, they will understand that the more you love someone, the more pain you feel, tears are a natural part of the healing process.

Death is probably the hardest thing that an adult, let alone a child, will have to comprehend, but talking about it openly can help people of all ages understand and express their feelings.

This booklet is not to be considered as counselling but rather as a particular view to be shared with others who can then make their own personal judgement on how, and when, to apply some or all of the opinions expressed.

On the following pages are a range of questions commonly asked by children, and suggestions of simple answers to them.

Why did someone I love have to die?

Sometimes things happen to us that do not seem fair and especially when someone we love dies.

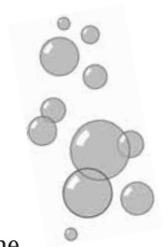
Why do nice people die, and why couldn't somebody else die instead of the one I love?

Almost everyone, no matter who they are, or how old they are, or how good or bad they are, is loved by somebody and will be missed by someone like you and me.



Will I stop feeling sad?

It's alright to cry and feel sad when someone you love dies. It hurts - just like when you hurt yourself if you fall over. At first it hurts very much but the pain will go away after a while. It takes time for your knee to heal, and it hurts less and less each day. It is the same when somebody dies. It doesn't mean you forget the person who died or that you stop missing them. You still love and remember them, and you can create a 'memory box' to fill with your memories, cards, photos, drawings and toys that remind you of them.



Will I die?

No one knows what happens when you die. All we know for sure is that it will happen one day - to all of us. Don't worry or think about it for very long, as there are a lot more interesting and wonderful experiences to look forward to.

Why do people die?

Dying is a natural part of the world we share. Everything on the Earth including - plants, animals and even people will stop living and die. It is usually from old age or sometimes through illness or an accident.



Does death hurt?

Many doctors tell us that death is not usually painful. If someone dies in an accident, they usually feel no pain because death comes quickly. When someone is poorly or hurt, special medicines can take away some of the pain.



When we die, is it like a long sleep?

When we die, we look like we are sleeping - but we're not really. In life you feel better after your body has rested. When somebody dies, his or her body stops working.



Can I see Grandma?

'Viewing a body' normally takes place at a Funeral Home. If your child decides that he or she wants to view the body, then they need to know something about what it will be like. Grandma will be lying still and not breathing or talking. Perhaps they could make a card or picture that they could place in the coffin. Perhaps they might keep their distance and stay by the door! But in the end, it is their own curiosity that will determine their actions.



When discussing death with children it is important not to make the following assumptions:



- **Children do not understand death** - In fact children of all ages have an awareness of death. Very young children do not understand the reality of going away forever, and may ask when is Grandad coming back? Older children will begin to understand and accept the finality of death.
- **Children will be scared if told the truth** - This is not always the case. Children are reassured by the truth. They need to know that it is alright to cry, feel sad or angry and talk about the person who has died. Often they are scared because of related issues. One example is that they fear remaining parents or other members of their family will also 'go away'.
- **Children do better if given platitudes** - Children understand and accept precise words such as dead and death. It is hard enough for us as adults to comprehend another human being going away for ever as it is for a child trying to make sense of going to sleep forever or to a better place, which could only confuse them more.
- **Children should NOT attend funerals** - This is probably more an adult issue. Adults assume children will be emotionally scarred by the experience, or more simply be afraid the child may be disruptive at the service. Children should be given the choice in attending the funeral and playing a part in saying goodbye to someone they have loved.

The initial stage and questions: Why do some people die when they are very young?

Most of the time people live long, long lives. Sometimes, but not very often, death happens to a young person if they are very poorly or have an accident. We feel very sad when this happens because we want everyone to live a long & happy life.



Why can't doctors & hospitals stop someone from dying?

Sometimes a person gets very sick and despite all the hard work of doctors and hospitals, nothing can keep that person's body working. Always remember that people go to hospital to get better - not to die!



When someone dies are they being punished?

Death is never a punishment. It is almost always natural. Time or illness wear out important parts of our bodies. After many, many years these parts cannot work any more. People die when these parts wear out and stop working.

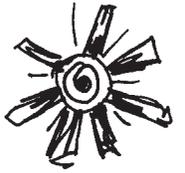
But where DO dead people go?

Many people believe when someone dies it is only their body that stops working. The part that remains is known as the soul or spirit of that person. It's the part that lets us feel and give love and happiness and makes us special. There are many different beliefs about what happens to your 'soul' or 'spirit'.



What happens to a person's body when they die?

When someone dies their body is placed into a coffin, which is a special wooden box made especially for them. The coffin is then taken to a cemetery or a crematorium. A cemetery is a quiet place where the coffin is placed in the ground, this is called a grave. You can visit the grave any time you want to, to remember the person who has died and to place flowers on it. Some people prefer to be taken to a crematorium to have their body turned into ashes that can be buried or scattered in a place that was special to them when they were alive.



What are funerals for?

Funerals can help us to cry and say our goodbyes to someone we love. They are for sharing loving feelings about someone who has died. They give us a chance to remember, with others, the goodness and joy that person brought to our lives and help to begin to heal the hurt we feel, and once you have said goodbye, you just need to remember to carry on with life and have a little fun, the way that that special person would have wanted you to.



Do people die because they are unhappy?

Unhappiness can sometimes make us feel sick for a while. But almost no one dies because they are unhappy. Remember the times when you have been unhappy? Sooner or later you feel better again. You are able to smile and laugh again. Everyone goes through times like this. It has nothing to do with dying.

