

Explaining a Death to Grieving Children from a Faith Perspective

- 1. Intuitive Understanding** Before formal teaching or discussion, children learn intuitively from your non-verbal and verbal actions how to respond to death. They can sense that sadness and grieving are part of our response, as well as faith, hope and love.
- 2. Respect Children's Level of Development** The way children can understand God and our faith is influenced by their level of development. E.g. young children can have a more magical view which doesn't see how death is final, or they may see God in terms of punishment and rewards rather than love. Adjust your teaching according to what they can best understand.
- 3. Sensitivity to how statements about God might be interpreted by children** It's not easy to know how to communicate our faith to those grieving. Grieving children may misinterpret statements such as "God wanted him in a better place," or "God decided..." or "It was part of God's plan..." in a way that leads them to hate or fear God. (Among the most challenging mysteries of faith are those of divine providence and the mystery of evil.) It is probably better to emphasize that God's love is with us through everything, even death, there to raise us to new life and to heal. Our life with God holds mysteries we don't understand; but we know that in it all God's love is always there.
- 4. Sensitivity to what a grieving person can hear** Persons grieving may experience confusion in their faith and strong, conflicting, feelings about God, e.g. anger, doubts and questions. Those in intense grief may reject your statements of faith. At times your best sharing of our faith is simply your supportive presence. Retain your faith, but be sensitive to what a grieving person can hear. Middle and High School students do much of their grieving with each other. Get a sense of where they are at and tailor your faith response to that. Often, their grief can be well expressed in a simple ritual.
- 5. Share our faith in your demeanour, in ritual, and in symbols.** Ritual prayer is like a good routine; it gives cues to behaviour and belief. Lighting the prayer table candle and praying the Our Father; reading a passage from Scripture; remembering the one who has died in our morning prayer, having a monthly remembrance prayer—these are all rituals. They don't require a lot of speaking or preaching—the action itself expresses and nourishes our faith. Remember in gratefulness the life of the person who has died. Pray that they rest in peace and for their friends and family. Do this with calm, simple ritual prayer that gives a safe and healing framework.
- 6. Grieving is our natural, God-given way to respond to loss.** Children can see in an educator's sadness that it is good to grieve what we have lost, the loss of those whom we love. They can also see in an educator's faith, hope, and love that grief and loss are contained in God's love. Jesus encountered death with both grief and faith. Our prayer and ritual is one way of respecting grief, and balancing it, putting it into the broader context of our faith, hope, and love.
- 7. Basic understandings for children** Death is natural, it is final; God loves each of us no matter what happens; we hope for resurrection to new life.
- 8. Children need to be able to grieve and to be able to find support in coming to terms with loss.** Recognize that children need to find ways to express their grief and to understand it and to understand that it is a normal part of being human.
- 9. Be aware of your own grief** Our own process of grieving is ongoing throughout our lives. It ebbs and flows; it can experience closure and then can return in a different way. Being aware of our grieving thoughts and emotions and bringing them to God can help us set clearer mental

boundaries between the particular loss being grieved by children, and our own on-going grief for other personal losses.

10. Bring your grieving and concerns about how to deal with your students to God. You're only human. Bring to God this difficult part of your mission as an educator. Collaborate with and support your colleagues in it.