



TOPIC 5

CONVERSING ABOUT DEATH AND DYING WITH CHILDREN

Children who receive bereavement support and information about death cope better than those who are shielded from discussions about death and grief. (Martinceková et al., 2020).

Proposing a conversation or a concrete activity about loss, death or grief may allow children to express what they want to know and how they feel.

Children process and understand loss, death or dying differently depending on their age and developmental stage. You can refer to the resources section to understand better the various stages of childhood regarding grief and adapt the conversations at their level of understanding.

By approaching conversations about death with sensitivity, honesty, and openness, you can help children develop a healthy understanding of this natural part of life and support them as they navigate their feelings and questions.

TRY THIS

In the face of the loss of a near one, you could suggest the "Memory Box" exercise to children to encourage them to share and celebrate joyful memories of deceased individuals while opening a discussion about death.

Start the session by explaining that each person has special memories, and we are going to create a "Memory Box" to celebrate these moments.

Ask the children to think of someone they loved who is no longer with us. It could be a grandparent, a friend, or even a pet.

The children decorate their memory boxes with drawings, colors, and words that represent joyful memories associated with the person they have chosen.

On sheets of paper, invite them to write or draw specific memories they cherish with this person. Encourage them to focus on happy and positive moments.

Once the memories are created, the children place their drawings or writings into their memory boxes.

You may give each child the opportunity to share a memory if they wish. This is optional to avoid any pressure.

Using the memory boxes as a starting point, discuss death sensitively. You may ask open-ended questions about how each person feels while sharing these memories.

How do you feel when you think about death?

What words do you associate with death?

Do you have any questions about death?

This exercise provides children with a tangible way to celebrate positive memories while gently introducing the concept of loss and grief. It also encourages sharing and emotional expression in a safe environment.

Module 1:

Let's talk about death and dying



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...at the end of life



REFLECTIONS

- You may prefer to use simple and honest terms to explain death and avoid using metaphors that could create confusion.
- Encourage the child to ask questions and respond clearly and age-appropriately. It might be better to avoid providing too much information at once.
- If necessary, use gentle examples to explain challenging concepts. For example, discussing the life cycle of plants can help illustrate the temporary nature of life.
- You may consider ensuring that the child feels safe expressing their emotions and showing them that it's normal to feel various emotions about death.
- Try to be an attentive listener and let the child share their thoughts and emotions without judgment.
- Using age-appropriate books, drawings, or videos can help explain death visually and comprehensibly.
- Children may need to hear the same information multiple times to fully understand. Be prepared to repeat your explanations.
- You may try to avoid making promises you cannot keep, such as guaranteeing that no one else will die.
- You may consider that each child will react differently to discussions about death. Some may ask many questions, while others may prefer to reflect silently.
- You may consider expressing and sharing your own emotions. The child will sense them and find coherence, understanding that feeling grief or sadness is normal.

TIP FOR TRAINERS

This exercise is intended for children. However, you can conduct a similar activity in a training group and invite each participant to bring a memory of a deceased near one. You might begin the session with a roundtable where each person can share the chosen memory while allowing them the freedom to choose whether to share.

You could then suggest anticipating questions that children might ask in the face of grief (refer to additional resources: "Answering children's questions about death").

You may facilitate a sharing of experiences if some participants have previously had to respond to children's questions about death and discuss the challenges they encountered.