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Talking with Young Children about Death

by Robert Needlman, M.D., F.A.A.P.

In the wake of tragedy, many parents are concerned that their young children will begin to think about death and to ask difficult questions. They ask themselves, What can I say that is reassuring but not phony? How can I avoid scaring my children while also helping them to cope with a terrible, upsetting reality? Following are some insights and suggestions as to how to handle such a difficult subject:

- **How children understand death.** Young children comprehend death differently than older children and adults do. Up until about age seven or eight, most children are unable to form ideas about "forever" or "never"; they are much too tied in to the present. If they have heard about heaven or hell, they imagine them to be like places they have seen on Earth, rather than in any abstract sense. They try to understand death in terms of things they know, such as "going away" or "going to sleep." Unfortunately, these ideas can lead to misconceptions that increase children's fear or sense of insecurity.
- **Dealing with the numbers.** It's hard for adults to imagine death on the scale of the devastation we have been witness to in New York City. Children have an even harder time fathoming the tremendous numbers. It probably is not helpful or worthwhile to try to explain, other than saying that many, many people are dead, and many, many families and children are very sad. We feel sad because they are so sad, and we care about them, even though we don't know them personally.
- **Don't dodge the issue.** If your children ask you about death, it's important that you answer them directly, rather than trying to avoid the issue. If you deflect the question or put your children off (for example, "you're too young" or "we'll talk about that later"), it's inevitable that your child will still have questions, and perhaps misconceptions, about death. Added to whatever notions they have will be the idea that death is so scary and terrible that even their parents are afraid to talk about it!
- **Use the word "death."** Euphemisms like "going to sleep" or "going away" or even the commonly accepted "passed away" can be confusing for young children. Also, by avoiding the word "death," you unintentionally make the thing even more frightening than it is. If saying "death" is hard for you, try to use it in talking to yourself, or to adult friends, so that you can feel less uncomfortable with the word.
- **Wait for your child to ask.** While it is important to talk to children about the subject of death, it usually doesn't help to offer lots of explanations if your child isn't ready to hear them. Either your child will just tune you out, or he will become confused. A child may let you know he is thinking about death nonverbally--for example, by drawing pictures of people lying down or by making things blow up in his play. If this happens, you can gently ask, "Are you thinking about death?"

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- **Deal with your own emotions, but do not try to hide them completely.** The deaths of so many people, so close to home, is upsetting to everyone. Many thousands of us will have close friends or relations who died in New York or in the other scenes of terror. If you are feeling personal grief or extreme upset, it's important to find adult supports--friends, relatives, clergy, or professional counselors--so that you can begin to cope. Young children should not have to be the main emotional supports for their parents. They have enough work dealing with their own emotions.

On the other hand, as a parent, you do not need to pretend that you are not upset, sad, or angry. By letting your child see that you have strong feelings, you make it OK for the child to accept her own feelings, too. By handling your feelings appropriately, through talking and other nonviolent modes of expression, you teach your child how to deal with sadness and tragedy in the most powerful way you can--by being a model.

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