

Children learn about death in different ways. They have vivid imaginations and can develop negative behaviors towards death if not dealt with properly. Inappropriate ways to describe death to a child under age of 12 include the use of euphemisms such as “Mommy went to heaven”, “Nanny went away”, or “Daddy is sleeping.” The problem with euphemisms is that they tend to confuse the child. A child who is told that “Daddy is sleeping” believes that daddy would wake up again, since people wake up after they go to sleep. The problem arises when daddy is put in a casket and buried, which more often than not creates a fear of sleeping so as not to be put in a box! I remember two years ago attending a funeral of a fallen soldier where his son was told he was sleeping. The child walked up to the casket in the church where his father was laid and started shaking the corpse trying to arouse his father from his sleep. Imagine the wave of emotion the misunderstanding created! It is better to help the child understand that the person has died. Being honest, simple and direct helps more than ‘beating around the bush’. Using the correct words and language is preferable to using euphemisms, albeit difficult for adults.

Other inappropriate ways include trying to avoid the subject or postponing the explanation of death and dying when it comes to the loss of a pet or somebody not too close to the family. This makes explanation a lot more difficult when it comes to the death of a loved one and the acceptance of the reality of death perplexing. It is a lot easier to tell them the truth. It eliminates misunderstanding and helps the child trust more.

Another issue is trying to avoid emotion; that is trying not to cry in front of the child. Do not hide emotions. Explain feelings as a way to help children understand their own, but keep expression of strong, dramatic feelings for private times with other adults as this will cause more harm than good. Offer avenues of comfort to the child when they show emotion.

Being straightforward with the child is the best approach in describing death to a child. Using appropriate words and language according to the level of the child is better than using euphemisms in explaining death to a child. Be simple and when answering questions that may arise from the child concerning death.

Works Cited

Leming, Michael R., and George E. Dickinson. Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement.
Belmont: Wadsworth, 2006.