

Family Matters – choice of titles: “Death matters” or “The last thing we talk about?”

I’m writing this article on Good Friday, when many people in the Christian world remember the agonizing death of Jesus on the cross. Crucifixion was death by asphyxiation, as the torn and beaten arms worked to lift the weight of the body to enable each excruciating breath. As I write, many people are fighting their own battle to breathe, as coronavirus ravages their lungs. I don’t know what the world will look like when this article will be published but we do know that many people will die, and nearly everyone will know someone who has died during this global pandemic.

This is a tough reality. It’s a tough reality for us, for our children, and for the elderly and vulnerable. It’s even tougher when we’re not prepared for it. Families who can talk about death together, both before and after it happens, are able to process their thoughts and feelings in much more open and healthy ways than those who are afraid to talk about death.

#### Talking about death with children

Use a natural springboard to talk about death, such as when a pet dies, when you find a dead creature on a walk through the woods, or when someone you know dies. You can ask your child what death means to them, because they will often have some ideas of their own. This helps you to check any misconceptions or muddled ideas they have, and you can tell them what death means to you, and what you believe about death.

Many Bible stories include death and grief, but we often glide over them, rather than exploring the important issues with our children. This can inhibit us from being honest about the pain of loss, and the natural sadness and grief that we feel when someone dies. Stay with the story of the death, ask your children what they think their family members thought and felt when they died, and how they might like to be comforted.

Some children’s books can help you to explore the experience of what happens when someone you love dies. “I Miss Grandpa” is a book written for Adventist children to help them understand death and resurrection. It also includes some practical ideas for helping children with their grief.

#### Simply honest

Use straightforward language when talking to children about death. When we say we’ve “lost” someone, children think they’ll be found again. The term “passed away” makes no sense to children, and even saying that someone has “fallen asleep” can make children feel frightened to sleep in case they die, too.

What they need to know is:

- When someone dies, they are no longer breathing and living, and we won’t be able to talk to them and see them again.
- When someone dies it makes us feel very sad, because we loved them so much.
- We will miss them for a very long time, and it is normal to feel sad about that and to cry.
- In between crying together for the person who we can’t see and talk to anymore, we can still laugh together and enjoy the good things of life.
- There will be a funeral, which is a church service where their family and friends will come, and we will say goodbye to the person for the last time.

- Their body will be put safely in a wooden box, like a treasure.
- The box is buried in the ground. Or it sometimes it is burned. Either way the body becomes like dust. But that doesn't matter because God can bring anyone back to life again.
- Jesus was brought back to life after He died, and He was taken up to heaven to live with His Father.
- One day Jesus will come again. He will bring those who loved Him and who loved other people back to life. He will take them to heaven to live with Him forever.

If your children ask questions about death, answer them as honestly and simply as you can. It's Ok not to have all the answers, and it's Ok not to tell them everything. But don't lie to them.

#### Talking about death with adults

It's not just children who need to talk about death – adults do too. Yesterday nearly 1000 people in the United Kingdom died from the coronavirus. Many of them died in intensive care units without any relatives and friends to hold their hand. So, my husband and I talked about dying alone in the hospital. Although we would want to be together if one of us was dying, we both understood that this would not be possible during the pandemic. I told Bernie that no one must never feel guilty for not being there if I had to die alone. As long as I was able to, I would think about those I love, and that would comfort me. Of course, we hope that this won't happen, but I know how important it is to have some good conversations about death long before it happens, so that you're able to talk about it more openly and confidently when you really need to.

Even before the pandemic we had told each other about our wishes for organ donation, resuscitation options, and whether we would prefer to die at home, in the hospital or in a hospice. We have also given each other permission to remarry if one of us dies, so that neither of us needs to feel guilty if that's the choice we make.

#### Talking about funerals

This year we had a family funeral for an elderly relative. As we planned the service, we realized none of us knew his favorite hymns, or which passage of scripture he would have chosen. We weren't clear about all of his life story, or what his wishes would be about the service and the gathering afterwards.

My adult daughter was listening to all the discussions. Later she asked me what I'd like to happen at my funeral. It wasn't a sad conversation at all. I told her the songs I would like and my favorite chapters in the Bible. Later I sent her an email with all the information in one place, and I attached the story of my life that I had written for a project. If it's too difficult to talk about funeral plans many years in advance, write your wishes in a letter that your family members can open at the appropriate time.

Wherever possible, let children come to the funerals and burials of those they love. Ask for a service outline in advance and explain everything that will happen during the services so there are no surprises. Some children might like to read a Bible verse, or play some music, but give them the option to let someone else do it if they decide they don't want to at the last minute. Some children might like to gather flowers from the garden for the coffin, or to write a letter or poem for the person who has died.

Not the last thing we talk about...

Death might seem a strange thing to talk about when everyone is young and well. But it's never too early to have healthy conversations about death and dying, and what kind of funerals you would like. If it feels too scary to talk about death, pray about your concerns and ask yourself why you find it so hard. Write your ideas down, a little at a time, and use what you have written to help you talk about death when it is a good time for you. Encourage your spouse and family members to have healthy conversations with you about death and their wishes.

Death is a natural part of life and being human. God cares about every aspect of our lives. He is compassionate and understanding. He remembers that He made us out of dust, and that we are fragile (Psalm 103:13-18). His love for us is everlasting, in death as much as in life. And best of all, one day He will personally wipe away every tear of grief from our eyes (Rev. 21:4).

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<sup>i</sup> Holford, K. (2004). *I miss grandpa*. Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press.