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Family Focus

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may say, "I'm very sad to tell you that Grandpa died today. We will miss being with him. You had fun playing with him and going to the park with him. He was such a wonderful Grandpa." If you have religious or spiritual beliefs that can help explain and provide comfort, frame them in the simplest terms possible. For example: "Grandpa is now in heaven with Uncle Steve."

Avoid comments like "We lost Grandpa," or "he died peacefully in his sleep." Young children interpret things literally, and you don't want to instill fear in your child that you or she may get lost or go to sleep and not wake up.

Rather than giving too much information that may overwhelm your child, wait and allow her or him to ask questions. Your child may ask you if you are going to die too. This is a common reaction upon hearing of the death of someone else. You will want to provide reassurance that you expect to live to an old age like Grandpa and that you will be around to take care of your child.

Explain to your child that she or he may be sad or upset at times when your child is missing Grandpa, and that you and others in the family will also be very sad and may even cry sometimes because you will miss him so much. You need to prepare your child so that he or she doesn't become alarmed or afraid of any emotional reactions to Grandpa's death.

If your child asks a question about Grandpa within the first few weeks or months while you are still in deep mourning, try to answer calmly. If you show intense emotion, he or she will most likely avoid bringing up the subject again and risk upsetting you.

Young children show deep emotions more behaviorally than verbally, so watch for signs of regression such as sleep issues, bed-wetting, heightened fears, or an increase in meltdowns. Keep some photos of Grandpa displayed and share happy memories of him so that your child can gradually come to terms with their loss. Over time encourage your child to draw pictures of him and find age-appropriate books on the death of a loved one to read together.

While you want to help comfort your child, you also want to normalize their life as much as possible. Include activities to help your child feel better such as outings or art projects or cooking together.

Many parents want to know if a young child should attend a funeral or celebration of life. In general, your child won't be upset if he or she misses out on this event, but may well be upset to see an actual burial or many people crying. If your child tends to be fearful in general, witnessing distraught family members could heighten his or her fears and insecurities. In addition, it will be in your own best interest (and ultimately your child's) if you can experience the ceremony and mourn as you need to without having to be concerned about how your child is doing.

This decision is a personal one. If you are in mourning and it will be more comforting for you to have your child with you, or if you have no one close to take care of her or him while you're gone, you can plan ways to make it work. You can let your child know what to expect ahead of time so he or she will be more prepared. You can bring toys for your child to play with while he or she sits with you. And you can solicit a close relative or friend take her or him to another area to play or have a snack, especially at the grave site.

If you know that your child will be deeply affected by the absence of someone close in his or her life, finding a good therapist who works with young children via play therapy will be invaluable. In my next column, I will discuss how to help your older child cope with the death of a loved one.

Happy New Year! I hope this year will be a happy and healthy one for everyone in our wonderful community.

Sadly, some of us experienced loss personally or indirectly during the past year. We've witnessed multiple tragedies in our community, state, country and world. It is sometimes difficult to assess how our children are affected by these events, but we do know that the loss of a loved one can affect them deeply.

My work as a therapist invariably involves helping people go through the mourning process when someone close to them dies. If you have suffered the death of a loved one, it is important to seek support if needed, for your own sake and in order to be able to help your child. Even though it may be extremely difficult, you will need to be able to set aside your own grief at times, since parents are essential in helping children cope with loss.

When a loved one dies, a child under the age of 6 typically will not recognize that this is a permanent situation or have a realistic concept of death. Children this age tend to view death as a temporary condition. A child doesn't like to be separated from someone close to him or her, and this factor may be the extent of his or her grasp of death. Some children will express sadness, while others won't react much at all.

It is important to communicate in ways a child can understand, and at the same time be reassuring. You

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