

Question: My son's pet goldfish died recently. When he came home from school, he asked me where it was, and I told him his fish got sick and died. He was really upset and had a lot of questions about it that I didn't know how to answer. How can I help him understand without overwhelming him or scaring him?

It is understandable that your child's questions about death might make you feel uncomfortable or unsure. Every family has its own unique way of dealing with big life events like birth and death. By promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges, you can help support your child through this loss and other difficult times in ways that align with your family's values and beliefs and help him become stronger in the process.

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota is one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children. She notes that parents may want to shield their kids from all stress, but:

A childhood that had no stress in it would not prepare you for adulthood. If you never allow your child[ren] to exceed what they can do, how are they going to learn to manage adult life—where a lot of it is managing more than you thought you could manage ... [W]e need to help our children understand how to manage themselves, but not protect them completely from those challenges.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Listen to your child's questions and encourage him to ask more.

Research, like that of Megan Gunnar, has shown that it is neither possible nor helpful to shield children from the stresses and challenges of life. Although it can be difficult, let your child know that it is good to ask you these kinds of questions. Find answers that you are comfortable with and that are easy for your child to understand.

- What is your son asking about? Is he asking concrete questions, like: What happened to the fish to make it die? Where did the fish go after it died? Or, is he asking larger questions about death like: Will I die or will my parents die? What happens after we die? Before responding, make sure that you know what he is asking.
- Before responding, it is also important to know how your child understands this experience. Ask him what he thinks. Most preschoolers seem to understand that death means your body stops working, that you don't eat or breathe anymore and that you can't play or talk. Laura Schulz of MIT finds that when adults resist the temptation to answer children's questions right away, they can have deeper conversations.

- Be honest and use simple and clear language in your answers that fit with your own views of death and of spirituality and religion. Try not to overload your child with too much information. He will ask you when he is ready to know more. You can say something like: "The fish was old and got sick. His body stopped working, and he couldn't breathe anymore."
- It is okay to tell your child that you don't know all of the answers. If your child is interested and you feel comfortable, you can work together to find out more. You can go to the library or look online for information on how fish breathe in water, for example.

Clancy Blair of New York University has this advice for parents:

Talk to your child as you would to any other person whom you respect and love. Try not to talk down or be dismissive. Talk to your child in a way that acknowledges your child and how he or she understands the world. Explain things in a way that makes sense to your child and expands and builds upon his or her understanding.

2

Encourage your child to express his thoughts and feelings about the loss and create a way to remember his fish.

By talking about thoughts and feelings, your child learns how to express his emotions and understand those of others. Let your child know feeling upset about his fish shows that he really cared about his pet, which is a special thing.

- Acknowledge your child's feelings and let him know that you understand. You can say things like: "It's sad to say goodbye to a pet. I know how that feels. You really loved your fish."
- Look for children's books at your local library that deal with the death of a pet. Catherine Snow of Harvard University describes a book as "a platform on which [a] conversation takes place." Read with your child and ask him questions about the story. How does it make him feel? What does it make him think of?

An important way that people, old and young, deal with death is to find a way to keep the memory of the loved one alive. Help your son find a way to do so. This can include:

- Making a picture book with stories and drawings of the fish.
- Looking for photographs of the fish and making them into a book or a slide show on your computer.
- Telling stories about what you each remember about the fish.
- Creating a memorial—such as rocks that your child decorates and puts someplace (such as outside, if that is possible).

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, promoting mental health and emotional well-being in early childhood is tightly connected to healthy relationships:

Ultimately, healthy social and emotional development depends on how children view themselves and the extent to which they feel valued by others.

3

Create a safe and supportive space.

Your caring, trusting relationship with your child provides him with the encouragement and security he needs in order to take on challenges like the death of his pet.

- Take your child's questions and feelings seriously. What may seem like "only" a fish to some people is most likely a meaningful relationship for your child. It is important not to dismiss how he feels so that he can learn from this challenge.
- Be aware that your child is watching you to learn how to handle this situation or others that are difficult. If you feel nervous or upset, it is likely he will, too. Try to use a calm and positive tone of voice to support your child, even when having difficult conversations.
- If your child asks you about his death or the possible death of family members, you can say that that you will take good care of him and yourself so that you stay healthy and safe.

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota conducted a study in which some young children had the power to turn a very noisy toy on and off while the other children had no control over what the toy did. The children who were able to control the toy enjoyed the experience, whereas the children who could not turn the toy on and off reacted with fear. The study revealed that having some control is an essential factor in children's responses. Gunnar concludes:

Having control is the principle variable in determining whether a body responds to stress when situations are potentially dangerous or not, threatening or not.

4

Help your child find ways to manage his emotions.

Feeling sad, confused or scared are completely natural reactions for both adults and children to have when dealing with death. To help your child cope with these feelings, focus on the strategies that he already uses to help himself feel better. When you guide your child in solving problems, he is more likely to then take these strategies in and start to use them on his own.

- Have a conversation with your child about what helps him when he is upset. Does he like to read books, listen to music or cuddle with a favorite toy or stuffed animal? Point out these strategies as ones he can use when he is feeling sad about his fish.
- Does your child love to draw, paint, dance or make music? Encourage him to express his thoughts and feelings creatively. He can write stories or draw pictures about how he feels.

- Model your own strategies for handling stress and difficult situations: "I like hugs when I feel sad. Do you want a hug?"

5

Use your support system.

Nathan Fox of the University of Maryland has found that parents who have friends to turn to are less likely to communicate stress to their children. Whether it is the loss of a fish or other challenges of parenting or life, adults that have others to turn to for support are more likely to manage these stresses best.

- You may want to ask other parents, friends or family members for advice. How would they or do they deal with the issue of death with their children? Take the suggestions that are most useful to you in school and in life.

6

Use your child's pretend play as an opportunity to express his ideas.

When children pretend, they are able to safely deal with emotions like loss, fear and abandonment. In these play situations, your child can "try on" different roles and control the way that things happen. These pretend experiences help your child practice the skills he will need to take on challenges in life.

- Let your child take the lead and watch where he goes with his play. What ideas does he seem to be exploring? Is he re-enacting things from his life or creating imaginary situations and characters? Try to think of ways to build on what your child is doing, like by supplying him with props or dress-up clothes.
- Use open-ended questions that start with "who," "what," "where," "when" and "why" to help your child develop his understanding of complicated concepts at his own pace.