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upcoming presentations

Managing Separations

Tuesday 14 September
7:30-9:00pm

For some children (and for some parents) the moment of separation is a threshold to independent discovery and adventure. For many others, it is met with anxiety, grief, even dread. Psychologically healthy separations teach children how to say goodbye, feel their feelings, but know that they are safe; and that their connection to those they are leaving persists. In this presentation we will examine the meaning of separations from a developmental point of view and discuss how to help your child learn to manage the broad array of feelings they produce.

@ Recess Urban Recreation
470 Carolina Street
San Francisco CA

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The First Existential Crisis: Talking to Kids about Death

Q: *My partner and I talk very openly with our 4.5 year-old daughter and 3 1/4 year-old girl twins about death and dying since I lost my mom to breast cancer when I was a teenager and in both of our childhood experiences death was not something anyone wanted to talk about. Therefore, we've been open to talking about grandma dying long ago, and that she was sick. We also don't shy away from some books that deal with death and have simple discussions that we all die, it's natural, but reinforcing it won't happen to anyone in our immediate family for a long time. Well, our worry is we're overdoing it. They now talk very openly and with everyone about dying. More concerning, is that when they are angry with someone in the family, they say, "You're going to die soon!" or "I hope you die now!" The most unsettling is that one of our twin girls says loudly when she has been disciplined that, "I want to die!!!" Have we overdone it? What's the best reply when they say these things to each other, or about themselves? We're so worried that they are now obsessed with this topic and we've caused some intense fear of dying.*

A: When children first grapple with the idea of death, whether it is occasioned by the need to understand a reference they have overheard, a significant loss in a family, or the passing of a neighbor's goldfish, they are considering an idea that runs counter to their fundamental expectations and assumptions. Young children live in world of becoming. As they learn and grow their experience is one

of gradually gaining understanding and agency in a world that, from their point of view, has always existed, waiting for them to arrive on the scene. Their young lives are so full of change that they tend to experience all else as static and fixed.

Most kids are somewhere between 3 ½ and 4 years before they have the cognitive maturity necessary for the nascent recognition that everything and everyone around them is in the process of changing all the time. It is usually about this age that a child will arrive at an awareness of the life cycle and confront the mystery of death. This necessitates a paradigm shift – perhaps the first existential reorganization. It is a shift away from the notion that the world is filled with static others who will always be there, toward a sense that things and people are changing independently of the child; and changing so profoundly that they may simply stop being as they are.

This recognition is, of course, both fascinating and disturbing for children (as it is for many adults). Parents often want to spare their children the confusion and despair involved, but to do so is to thwart a natural developmental expansion, one that children need to undertake in order to meet the next set of tasks and experiences in store.

Of course, circumstances do not always wait for development; many kids encounter the idea of death well before 3 ½ years old and as a result relate to it through a developmental lens that is not well suited for processing such perplexing concepts. This isn't detrimental to children; it simply means they will interpret (or more precisely, misinterpret) death based on a less mature frame of understanding. As long as this does not lead to more anxiety than a child can cope with, it's not harmful.

As is the case for most children trying to wrap their minds around the idea of death, your daughters sound like they are experimenting with applications of an incomplete understanding. A few things stand out to us about what you have described: First, the loss associated with death is not likely to be as poignant for them as it would be if it was experienced first in association with a direct loss. This will make it easier for death to be more fascinating and less dreadful to them.

In addition, you are not describing any behavior that sounds like an expression of fear. Your girls are not avoiding the topic of death; they are not hesitant to consider the possibility of it occurring (even to themselves or those dearest to them). On the contrary, it sounds like your girls understand death to be a very ultimate sort of not-being-part-of, and they are invoking the concept

when they feel the need for an expression of ultimate weight. Despite your understandable despair at the language you are hearing in their conflicts or laments, you can take comfort in the fact that they are relaxed enough with the idea of death to use it creatively. This ease is not associated with obsession. So, we would encourage you not to be concerned about their dramatic use of macabre pronouncements – from a psychological point of view in any case.

From a social and relational point of view you do want to help them understand that wishing death on a loved one, or on oneself, is not a helpful way to express dismay or anger. The simplest way to do this is by restating what your daughters are really saying. So, when one of them hisses, “I wish you were dead” at a sister, you can respond, “No, what you mean is you are so mad at her that you feel like saying something really serious and upsetting.” Then you can tell her you are not okay with family members wishing death on one another – not because death is bad, but because it is permanent and you don't want anyone in your family to go away (this includes saying, “I want to die!”). Basically, put some parameters around the subject. You can make it clear that it's all right to talk about death, but not to use it as a threat. Once those parameters are established, you can enforce them in the same way you would any other rules. Those sorts of distinctions will help maintain the concept of death as a mystery to be respected, grappled with, but not feared.

Finally, keep in mind that, as with all things, part of what makes the D-word so interesting is the way that you react to its use. Aim to strike a tone with your responses that's in keeping with the tone you are trying to bring to the subject of death in general: open but serious.

A good way to reinforce this is through the use of stories: Talk about your own thoughts and wonderings about death when you were young. Tell stories of little girls who get mad at their sisters and say things that get them in trouble with their moms; and about little girls who get so upset that they say the biggest things they can think of to let everyone know how upset they are. And, by all means, if you ever did anything similar as a child, now is the time to confess and reflect. Your openness and direction have protected your children from the anxiety-provoking silence that so often surrounds topics that are difficult for adults: they are demonstrating their facility with the subject. That same quality of openness and direction will be your best means of guiding your girls to that sweet spot between reverence and fear that we all seek in the presence of such weighty topics.

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