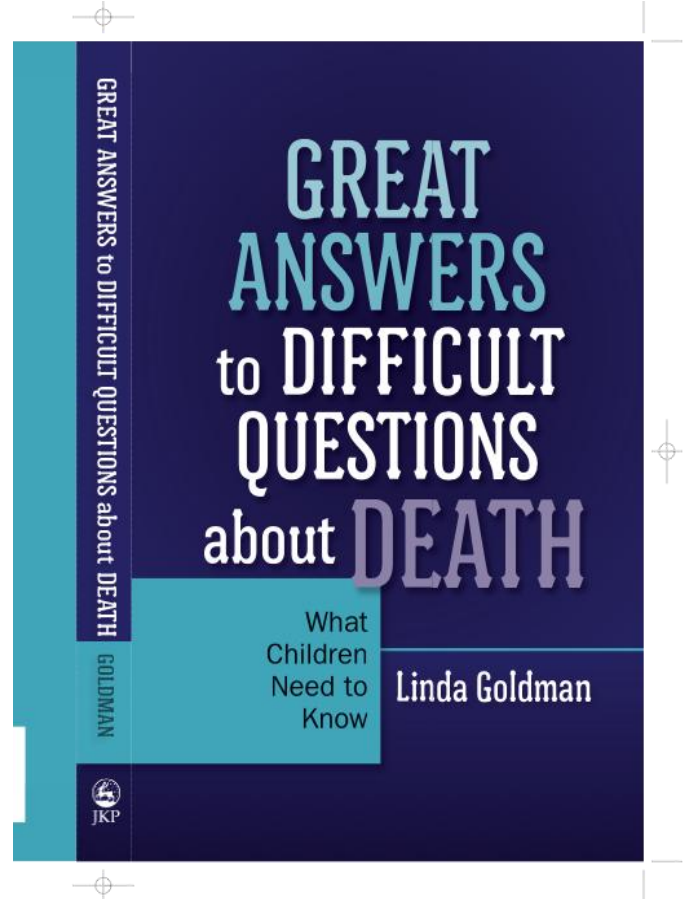


# Responding to Children's Questions about Death

by **Linda Goldman**

Published in Fall 2009 Bereavement Publications, Inc. Living With Loss™  
Magazine

*Excerpts from Great Answers  
to Difficult Questions about  
Death: What Children Need  
to Know. Linda Goldman  
Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
2009*



*Children's questions are a window to their soul –  
and a mirror to their inner thoughts and feelings.*

## ***Death is a difficult topic***

Death is a difficult and sensitive topic to discuss with children. So often adults feel at a loss for words. Without knowing what to say or how to say it, many parents and professionals avoid children's questions. Some refuse to respond at all. Eight-year-old Alice explained a disturbing event. She told her teacher about her dad's death during the very first week of school. Her teacher never said a word. Infuriated and saddened, Alice asked over and over, "Why didn't my teacher ever say anything back?"

Often girls and boys share how angry and alone they feel at being dismissed or ignored when asking questions about the death of a loved one. "Where did my Mom go?" "Why did Dad have to die?" "Did my doggy suffer?" "Will I die too?" are very common thoughts for girls and boys to have.

Responding with care can normalize children's uncomfortable ideas and feelings. Acknowledging their questions is a valuable tool to reassure them and help them feel safe.

## ***Honoring children's questions***

We may feel terrified when confronted by a child with a question about death, and send a conscious or unconscious message inhibiting further discussion. When adults respond to questions in ways that are more complicated than necessary, children can become

overwhelmed. When adults limit replies or refuse to answer - kids get the message. Death is a closed topic – don't ask again.

Joey's mom wanted to know "What to I do when my-five-year-old asks so many questions about death?" One health care professional responded to Joey's mother in this way. "My daughter Emily is five. She also asked too many questions about death. I explained to her she could only ask two questions a day. If she asked more than that she would need to go to her room for a half hour and think about it. This really worked. Within one month's time Emily never asked another question about death." Emily got the message in no uncertain terms – stop asking about death.

Placing restrictions or discounting children's questions will work to extinguish asking them. Our goal is to create an environment where all questions are welcomed, accepted, and responded to openly and without judgment. The purpose of this book is to share simple and direct dialogues about death to facilitate open communication. Comfortable language is a useful instrument for all caring adults to share appropriate responses that are satisfying to young people.

## ***Developmental understandings***

Children re-grieve at different developmental stages. During early childhood they are usually satisfied with a simple definition and explanation. They see death as reversible

and have egocentric ideas involving magical thinking. Many times they believe they caused their person's death.

As they get older they become more curious about the facts of the death, and may come back at ages 8, 9, and 10 and re-visit the death with new interest and inquisitiveness. In pre-adolescence and adolescence they approach their strong need to look to their own age group to find answers.

At this age girls and boys begin to see death is not reversible. Life is finite. Young people begin to form their own spiritual belief system and look to their peers for support and understanding. They feel empowered to become advocates for causes related to their person's death.

## ***Responding to a Question***

Children need to be told the truth about a death in an age appropriately way. They usually know when they are being lied to. So often lies create a secondary loss of the trust of their emotional environment.

There are many ways people die. Often adults have difficulty in finding the precise words to use to explain a fatal illness, sudden accident, murders, suicide, or natural or man made catastrophe. They are surprised when many girls and boys are satisfied with simple

and honest responses appropriate to their developmental stage. Six-year-old Rebecca asked, "How did mommy die?" "She got very sick." might be just enough of a response.

## ***Greg (5): A Case Study***

Five-year-old Greg was sad. His pet gerbil, Jasper, had died. Jasper was lying in the cage very still. Greg started screaming and crying and Mom ran into the room to see what happened. "Something is wrong with Jasper. He isn't moving. I'm scared." Mom had a tear in her eye. "Jasper died sweetie." Greg put his hands over his ears. "No! No! That can't be true."

### *What does dead mean?*

Death means when the body stops working. Sometimes people die when they are very, very, very old, or very, very, very sick, or they are so, so, so injured that the doctors and nurses can't make their bodies work any more. Jasper is dead. It is sad. He will not move, not be warm, and not be alive again.

### *What can't you do when your body doesn't work?*

You can't eat, you can't play, you can't watch TV - you can't even breathe. Jasper has died. His body is getting cold. It stopped working and he can't even run in his cage.

### *But where does his body go?*

Animals and people can be buried in the ground. When you are ready, we can find a box to bury Jasper in. We can put a soft blanket inside with Jasper's body and you can put in something special too.

*Can I put in a picture of me? He would like that. Then he won't feel so alone. Let's put his toy in too.*

That sounds like a great idea. We can decorate the box with things that remind you of Jasper.

*Can we bury Jasper together?*

Yes, it is nice to have a ceremony where everyone can do something. You could say a prayer, light a candle, send off a balloon, or plant a flower. It feels good to do something special after a death.

## ***Concluding thought***

Telling children the truth in age appropriate ways is helpful in securing their trust. In order to communicate we need clear and simple language for dialogues. Preparing answers and dialogues using definitions of death and of specific ways people die can encourage open communication and maintain a level of acceptance for the grieving child.

