

Children and the Dying Patient

- ✦ Talk to the children before the actual death. This is to help prepare them, it isn't being cruel.
- ✦ Explanations of situations should be done immediately, not later.
- ✦ Remember that children often take responsibility for negative events. Reassure them that they did nothing to cause the death.
- ✦ Children learn that they reap both the joys and the sorrows of family life.
- ✦ Be aware that the patient may want time alone with the child, or the child with the patient.
- ✦ Be careful in framing the death in religious terms (for example, don't say, "God takes the good ones").
- ✦ Use precise terms when talking about death. "Losing" a loved one may make children think the deceased can be found. Being told the deceased has "gone to sleep" might cause sleep problem for children.
- ✦ Let children know that diseases are not always communicable.
- ✦ Allow the child to see the changes in the ill person—this will help prepare them for the death.
- ✦ Allow the child not to be brave.
- ✦ Touch and hold the children while talking to them.
- ✦ Express your own emotions openly, it is OK to cry in front of children.
- ✦ Remember that children distance themselves emotionally—a form of self-preservation. They cannot tolerate long periods of sadness.
- ✦ Allow children to "own" their loss, don't minimize or trivialize it. (for example, don't say, "You didn't see your grandmother that often anyway.")
- ✦ Try to be patient with children—they learn by asking 1000 questions. They may repeatedly ask the same questions for reassurance.
- ✦ It's OK to answer a child's question by saying, "No one knows for sure, but this is what I think".
- ✦ Maintain the same routine as much as possible. This provides stability.
- ✦ Always allow children to participate, allow them to do what they can.
- ✦ Expect (but don't force) that your child will attend the funeral with the family. The funeral is a significant event which helps the child confront the reality of the death with the support of loving adults.
- ✦ Carefully prepare the child for what he will see and hear during the funeral, especially if this is the child's first funeral.
- ✦ Assign one family member to be with the child during the funeral.