

“Giving answers and dispelling fears” – dealing with death in times of coronavirus

A CONVERSATION WITH KLAUS FRÖHLICH-GILDHOFF*

How do children deal with death?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: It's highly age-dependent. Very small children, aged up to 2/ 2.5, only sense the “gone”, they sense the absence of the dead person. They don't yet have the linguistic sophistication to express how they are and what they are feeling. They're more likely to display reactions to death or the threat of death in play, for example, or in the form of physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.

When the children are older, from the age of 3/ 3.5, there are simple ideas about death, for example that the dead person is in heaven. They are often unable to grasp the finality of death; children have to grow older before they can understand this fully and relatively promptly. Repeated questioning is typical of this age group: “Why isn't Grandma here now, why isn't Dad coming now?” They then need answers to these questions. At this age it's important to know that children often feel guilty. At ages 4 to 6, they have a very strong self-reference. Because of their stage of development, they feel: “What happens outside has something to do with me.” So it's very important to relieve children of that burden. They're not to blame for the death of others.

How do you answer when children ask why Dad is dead?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: For a start, it's important to give an answer, and not just ignore it. It would be good to explain to the child, in a simple way, that life

is finite, and that if someone dies, for example of the coronavirus, that person was very ill, so ill that his/her body couldn't survive. At the same time, it's very important to make them realise that this differs a lot from person to person, and that not everyone who gets ill will die. On the one hand it's important to give children simple explanations, but on the other hand you always have to dispel their fears, too.

What about primary school children and adolescents?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: Primary school children usually have a clearer understanding of the finality of death. They're also interested in, for instance, the bodily processes that take place. And they understand that death can strike anyone. In adolescents, this understanding grows even further. For example, they understand that the process of dying can be painful, and the concept of “release” means something to them. At this age, questions around the search for meaning also become more important, and they think much more explicitly about whether there's life after death.

In adults, processing often follows specific phases. What is it like for children?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: Although this can be very diverse in children, a sequence does often appear: first there's a shock, then comes the attempt to gain control. In some cases the child regresses, i.e. reverts to an earlier stage

of development, e.g. bed-wetting, not being able to sleep alone any more etc. Here it's important to give support and to show certainty. Then the event will gradually be integrated on an emotional level.

Is it better to address the topic of death openly, or to wait until the child is older?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: If the child has an experience relating to the topic of death, then it's important not to deny this, but also not to dramatise it – that's the other danger. Our task as adults is to keep trying to give the child answers.

And what if the adults themselves are sad?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: Then of course it's much more difficult. But it's still important to tell the child honestly that Dad has died. Adults can articulate their feelings at this point, e.g. “That makes me really sad too, that's why I often have to cry and I'm sometimes in a bad mood.” But what is always crucial here is the reassurance that “I'm still there for you!”

So what's absolutely central is that children need security, they need orientation, they need a person who gives them support when someone has died. If the surviving parent can't do that, then it's important to take an open-minded look at what other adults are available. Maybe there's an aunt, an educator at the child's day-care centre, or their primary school teacher, who can give the child the answers.



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Ill. 1: Children need to be given the opportunity of leave-taking and mourning when relatives have died

How do children cope when, in times of coronavirus, they're confronted with death in their own family, among the people they know, or – as is currently the case in some countries – on the street?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: The horror will be even greater because, especially in the epicentres of COVID-19, they are much more starkly confronted with it than is normally the case. But now the adults are also less able to give support and security.

In spite of this, it's important to try to explain to children, in a simple way, that "There's this serious illness" – and then to offer a horizon of hope: "The serious illness will pass, and we know that though children can catch it, the likelihood of you children dying yourselves is extremely low."

If children suddenly cry or become angry, these can be ways of expressing this threat they're experiencing. Then it's really important to give them support. Or if children play at death, this shouldn't be prevented, but they should be given the opportunity to play it out and to show what is going on inside them.

What is important when we don't have the rituals of collective leave-taking

and mourning that we usually have as a society?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: Then it's important to create places of remembrance and modified rituals. You can put up a picture, perhaps point to a tree and say, "Maybe Grandpa's or Grandma's soul is at rest in there." That way, the child is reminded of the death of their close relative, and has a place where he or she can potentially hold conversations with the person who has died.

What should TV creators take into account?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: It's important for TV creators to bear in mind that children have a wide range of forms of expression. And if these are triggered by such experiences, then it's important to take this seriously, and – I'm happy to repeat myself here – to give space for the expression of feelings.

Wouldn't it be better, in such times of crisis, to stop broadcasting any programmes that have to do with death?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: I think that would be wrong, because it would deprive children of a lot of opportunities for processing. Children will have

to deal with death, and they will be confronted with it – even if it's just a dead blackbird lying on the road. And when this happens, I think it's good if they have the opportunity to show their feelings. They just need to have an adult who accepts this, and doesn't try to explain it away.

What happens if children do not process or integrate the experience?

Fröhlich-Gildhoff: Then there's a danger of a long-term emotional wound. It's similar to a physical wound that remains open and can't heal over. Whenever any small new injury occurs, or if you bump into something, this wound starts to hurt and opens up again. Emotional wounds are extremely vulnerable spots.

The ways children deal with this are quite varied. But it often happens that children become very withdrawn, or very tense, and overreact to trifles. Death is a trauma, an injury in the child's soul. Something that was previously all right – Grandma was alive, Dad was alive – is suddenly no longer all right. If we're then not able to give the child appropriate answers, this emotional injury will continue to be a sore point. ■

THE AUTHOR

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