

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN Lynda Schutte

“I felt left out from the very first day my sister was diagnosed with cancer”

Inside every child there is a story waiting to be told but when that story involves difficult issues such as death and dying, it is neither easy to tell nor easy to listen to.

Children look like little adults. They have arms, legs, noses and mouths. They speak the same language as we do. It is tempting then to suppose that they think as we do. They don't. I believe we have an obligation to strive continually towards greater skill in providing children with the opportunity and freedom to communicate in their own way whether that be through language, play, music, art, imagery, puppets or writing.

Children often have to grow up quickly and they need adults in their life to rely on and help them make sense of the world around them. We must give them time, listen carefully and accept unconditionally what they have to say, remembering too that much can be gained from a 'comfortable silence'. Sick children need to be seen as children first and patients secondly. It is you and all that you bring to a relationship that is important.

The wonderful thing about human beings is that we are all unique and what is right for me is not necessarily going to be right for you. Take what appeals to you and dismiss the rest. Adapt it to suit you as an individual and then go on to experience the world as it is seen through the eyes of a child.

Here are some guidelines in communicating with children:

Remember if there are parents/caregivers involved we must earn their respect and they must trust us and see that we have a genuine sincerity before they allow us to communicate with their children. Without this trust our communication with the children will be limited.

We should approach children equally, openly and naturally, as adults we often want to talk down to children.

Honesty is the best policy. Be direct and explain the facts in age appropriate language.

Create the right environment, position yourself at eye level, and speak clearly and directly.

Use correct terms like death, dying avoid terms like sleeping, lost her, taken from us. Gone or going on a long journey.

Allow children simple choices and empower them to make the choices.

Respect their different cultures and religions.

Respect their privacy.

Remember, whatever mistakes you may feel you make in talking to children about death and loss are unlikely to be as damaging as if you were to try to ignore talking to them. Children's imaginations are far greater than reality, and age appropriate information is essential if children are to trust us.

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