How to Explain Death to a Young School-aged Child

Recently I received a phone call from a mom whose six-year-old son was afraid to go to sleep at night. For the past two months the child insisted on falling asleep in the parents' room while holding one parent's hand, and if the parent carried him to his room after he finally fell asleep, he would wake up every few hours to return to their room. No one was getting good sleep. In addition, his mom was concerned that he often seemed angry during the day.

Turns out that two months ago the boy's grandfather died. The boy and his toddler-aged sister had attended the grandfather's funeral and at the viewing his younger sister, upon seeing her dead grandfather in the coffin, kept saying, "Grandpa, wake up, you are missing your party! Why can't Grandpa wake up?"

When children are confronted with the death of a family member, friend, or pet, it is very important to **never refer to death as "sleeping."** Children are very literal and so it is better to say something like, "When people are dead, their bodies do not work, they do not breathe or move," but do NOT use any sleep analogy. This can cause them to be afraid to fall asleep and not be able to wake up.

This child's mom was concerned that her son "seemed angry a lot of the time" and was difficult to get along with. This behavior change is very normal and was occurring for two reasons:

1) **When children feel sad, they often appear angry.** The child is still mourning the loss of his grandfather. In addition, his parents also are grieving and children perceive their parents' moods. The child misses his grandfather and it is normal for him to feel sad about this. Children often express sadness with anger, so the parents need to be sensitive to this.
2) **When children are sleep deprived, they become short tempered.** This child was staying up until midnight or later before falling asleep in the parents' room, waking up in the

middle of the night, and waking up at 7:00 am for school. School aged children need on average about 9-10 hours of sleep or more to function optimally.

I advised the mom to have a casual conversation during the daytime about death. She could start by saying something like, “You know, I was thinking about Grandpa’s funeral. Remember how your sister kept saying “wake up, grandpa?” I wanted to make sure that you knew that Grandpa was not asleep. He was dead and his body wasn’t working anymore.” Then wait and see if he asked any more questions. If he asked why he died, the parent should give a simple but truthful answer. In this case, Grandpa had cancer, so parents could say, “he had an illness that his body was too old and weak to fight off.” It is also fine for the parent to say, “I am sad because I miss Grandpa.” Again, answer questions if they come up but be very concrete and simple in your answer. If the child says, “What if I get sick? Will I die?” the parent could answer, “No, you are young and strong.”

The other important part of helping this child is getting back to good sleep habits. (I refer you to our forthcoming podcasts on sleep for baseline good bedtime habits.) This child may have been afraid of dying in his sleep or just may have developed a bad association with sleep. He clearly associated his parents with safety. I recommended that a parent sit on his bed in his room until he fell asleep. The bedtime would be moved about 15 minutes earlier each night until they arrived at a more appropriate bedtime. They were to tell the child that they would not leave until he fell asleep. If he awoke during the night and came into their room or called out for his parents, one of them was to sit on his bed again until he fell asleep. The parent was not to talk or interact during this time of falling asleep. The goal was to create a positive, safe association with falling asleep.

After a few days of the child falling asleep within about 15 minutes of sitting on his bed, tell him that the new rule is that one parent would sit NEXT to his bed until he falls asleep. Keep repeating this and wean farther away every few days (ie sit in the middle of his room, sit in the doorway, etc) until he is able to fall asleep on his own. Remember to give lots of praise the next day, small tangible

rewards are okay for each accomplishment.

By acknowledging his grief and also by using behavior changes to help restore good sleep at night, this child’s daytime anger gradually resolved.

Julie Kardos, MD and Naline Lai, MD

©2009 Two Peds in a Pod®