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**When your child asks about death**

If you are the parent or caregiver of a young child, then you know this experience: you are going somewhere (usually in a hurry) or doing something really fun, and then suddenly, out of the blue, comes a question from your child that you never saw coming. "Mummy, what happens when I die?"  "Daddy, will I die someday? Will you die?"

We, as adults, are often caught off-guard or taken aback by such questions. After all, it's not a pleasant topic and certainly not one that we want to dwell on. However, it is very important to remember that such questions are a healthy and normal part of a child's spiritual and psychological development. How we react and what we say can go a long way in comforting and allaying fear in a child.

I run into many parents who are almost paralyzed by questions about death. However, taking time to process such questions with our children builds trust and strengthens both their character and ours.

A child's journey is one of trying to make sense of the world around them.  In asking about death, children are expressing curiosity about something that is unknown and may be trying to relieve fear about it.  As author Mary VanClay points out, children become aware of death at young ages as a result of everything from hearing fairy tales to interaction with nature.  Talking about it with a trusted adult gives them invaluable opportunities to process before they at some point in their lives actually experience the death of a beloved pet or a grandparent.

One of the things that I treasure about my work as a children's pastor and with Godly Play is that it provides opportunities for children to think about death in a safe place.  In the Godly Play story, **The Great Family**, about Abraham and Sarah, the storyteller at one point encloses the figure in her hands, explains that Sarah was *full of years* and actually buries her in the sand of the Desert Sack.  It is not unusual after this story and others with similar themes to see the children burying the figures in the sand during the creative phase where the children play with the story materials. This often shocks parents to see their children "playing" death. Children, however, are sensorimotor beings who learn and process play. Through play, they find the words to formulate the questions that come "out of the blue".

When your child asks you about death, here are three things to keep in mind

1. Provide a safe place for them to talk.  Keep your own emotions in check and be patient with their questions.  Don't try to distract them or hurry the conversation to an end.
2. Be honest about what you know and don't know.  A friend of mine, who isn't at all religious, was recently talking to me about this subject and asking me what I told my children about death.  I told her that, of course, I can't provide any scientific evidence about what happens to the soul/spirit when a person dies, but I did tell my children that God promises never to leave or forsake us and that nothing can separate us from his love, not even death. We don't have all the answers, but God did not mean for us to, did he?
3. After your child asks, provide a "playful" (by this I do not mean flippant) way to talk further about death.  Read a Bible story or another story together in which someone dies and talk about it.  Or allow your child to process with play figures such as Playmobil or wooden figures by making up a story together and asking your child how he/she feels when one of the characters die. This can help your child (and maybe even you!) process in a healthy way.

I hope this is helpful and wish you wisdom, patience and a healthy dose of playfulness when your child gets around to asking this question!