GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY TO TALK ABOUT DEATH

STAY-AT-HOME DAD
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than the goldfish is dead. The smaller of our two family fish was discovered floating on its side last week. My son woke from a nap and noticed a limp fish bobbing at the top of the tank. Ethan lived on Bubba’s dresser for one month, along with his fish buddy, Ralph.

Godspeed.

Ethan’s passing led to some questions. Bubba will celebrate his fourth birthday next month. He’s old enough to be curious about death. However, I hardly think he understands the concept. He’ll often point a gun made out of Legos at his brother and say, “You’re dead!”

Two-year-old Peter typically plays along. He falls to the ground in a heap, stays there for about four seconds, then pops up to take his revenge.

But Ethan’s death was not met with the same lightheartedness. Bubba was genuinely concerned when he noticed the fish floating in the shape of a crown.

“Ethan is sick. Right, Dad?” Bubba said.

“Yeah. He’s really sick,” I said. This bought me some time.

Later that afternoon, I snuck upstairs and removed the dead goldfish. Just before plunging an empty cup into the tank, Ralph — the surviving fish — swam to Ethan’s lifeless body and gave it a kiss. Minutes later, Ethan was flushed.

The entire Ludwig family congregated upstairs later that evening. The boys were fresh out of the bathtub and changing into pajamas. Bubba immediately noticed Ethan was missing.

“Ethan is sick, Mom. But, he’s going to get better, right Dad?” he said, relaying the days’ events to The Wife.

“Ethan isn’t going to get better, pal. He died. He’s in heaven now,” I replied.

“But he’ll be better, right?” Bubba said.

“Well, he’s not coming back. But, Ethan is better now in heaven,” I said.

This seemed to satisfy him. Though, we had several similar conversations in the ensuing days, I sensed Bubba was confirming the dead goldfish’s diagnosis and destination.

I called Dr. Margret Nickels later in the week to double check my approach. She’s the director of the Chicago-based Erickson Institute’s Center for Children and Families. Her areas of expertise include understanding early childhood social, emotional and behavioral problems.

Nickels gave me a thumbs up for my handling of Ethan’s demise. It’s common for families to rely on religion to help explain death to children. Using “heaven” is a solid approach since most children can easily understand a change in location, Nickels said.

She then went on to outline several dos and don’ts of explaining death to kids:

Don’t use language that could be misunderstood if taken literally. Saying the deceased “went to sleep” could cause problems at bedtime. Saying “we lost grandma” could confuse a preschooier who may not understand why nobody is bothering to look for the old girl.

Do consider your own feelings. You will have a different reaction if a sibling dies than a toddler will have upon receiving news of an aunt or uncle’s death. Be cognizant of your own grief while helping a child understand theirs, Nickels said.

Don’t try to tell the child how to feel or gloss over the loss. “It’s a bad idea to say, ‘It’s just a goldfish. We can get a new one,’” Nickels said.

Do consider the timing of such an announcement. Probably best not to break the news of a dead dog just before bedtime or on the first day of school.

Don’t force a child to attend a funeral or wake. It helps when children play an active role in the grieving process. But if they’re scared, don’t make them go, Nickels said.

Do keep a close eye for subtle signs of adolescent grief. Avoiding activities once enjoyed with the deceased, suddenly struggling in school or regressing in areas such as potty-training and waking up in the middle of the night.

I may not be waking up in the middle of the night, but I’m going to miss Ethan. I have no doubt he’s in that big carp pond in the sky.

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