



Andrea Campbell, PhD, LPCC

(505) 983-3331 [www.AndreaCampbelPhD.com](http://www.AndreaCampbelPhD.com)



# Reporter

*Psychologist urges: Be honest with children, and let them cry.*

BARBARA P. SEIDEL  
Staff Writer

**C**hildren deal with death every day, yet we rarely speak openly with them about death and mourning, said one area counselor.

Andrea Campbell, a psychologist who heads Family Counseling Center of Beachwood, said children "see death every day in living color on television."

"They see it in the cartoons. They see it in nature ... the loss of a pet, even of lightning bugs when you save them in a jar and wake up in the morning and find them dead," she said.

Yet the reaction of most adults is to think, "If children don't understand it, it won't hurt them."

"As adults, we favor honesty in discussing the biological aspects of birth, but when it comes to death, we avoid speaking about it," said Campbell, "I think we avoid it because we think we have to know all the answers."

Secrecy about death isolates children, she said, particularly when someone in the family is terminally ill.

"Terminal illness should be discussed as soon as possible by an adult the child trusts," and children should be informed of the death of a loved one as soon as possible, she said.

One of the worst mistakes, Campbell added, "... is giving children "half-truths."



ANDREA CAMPBELL uses a variety of dolls and toys to help children deal with grief. Children also use art to express their feelings, the psychologist said.

"An example is telling them that grandfather is very sick and went into the hospital, hoping the child forgets grandfather," she explained.

"We don't ever say he died. It tells children to forget bad things rather than dealing with them, and also, that hospitals are bad places.

"Another myth is that grandmother's going on a long journey," she continued. "What's confusing to the child is that everyone's crying. And if grandmother's going on this journey and (doesn't come back), the child feels abandoned and angry.

"Another one is that God took sister away because she was so good," said Campbell. "That does two things. If God took sister because she's good, then the child believes if he's bad, he'll live. And, if God took sister, then you can't trust God.

"The other one is that God took sister be-cause he loves her," said Campbell. "There-fore, if God loves the child; he's going to take him, too. "

"Another one is saying grandpa just went to sleep," she said. "That puts a child in a ter-rible position. They think if they go to sleep, they won't wake up.

"Another one, and this is very important, is 'Don't cry,' said Campbell. "It's unnatural. We need to express tears and grief. People of all ages and sexes and allowed to cry.

"People are afraid to cry in front of chil-dren. It's healthy. 'Tears are wordless ex-pressions of loss and love."

The best way to help children deal with death is to encourage them to express their feelings, and to use physical contact, such as a hug, to comfort the child, she said.

"They act like they don't care, a certain heartlessness. They're pretending it didn't happen," she said. "The family thinks the child is taking it very well. Actually, the child's in pain.

"Or, they'll develop physical symptoms, such as stomach pain. They may also develop anger toward the deceased and think the de-ceased didn't love them enough to stay alive.

"Another is anger at other people, which takes the guilt off themselves," said the psy-chologist. "Children believe they have a primitive magic. They think if they think a particular thought, it will happen.

"So if they get angry and wish someone dead, and it happens, it's their fault," said Campbell. Adults do this too, because the in-ner child never grows up ." Children also idealize the deceased, or be-gin acting and talking like that person, she said.

To help children deal with death and grief, Campbell often lets them draw pictures to express themselves. She also utilizes a vari-ety of toys and dolls to encourage children to act out their feelings.

"If parents allow children to grieve along with the parents, it won't be necessary to see a therapist," she said. "It's when a child is not allowed to deal with death that help is needed. Death is just as much a process of life as birth is."