



‘Grandpa, where’s heaven?’

Grappling with their own faith questions can help adults talk with children about death

By Jennifer Larson



It was the kind of conversation that no parent wants to have. Reeling from the death of their baby boy, Colin, who was born prematurely, Gretchen and Brian Stroud had to tell their 2-year-old son, Matthew, that he wouldn't be a big brother after all.

The Strouds tried to explain to Matthew in simple terms that the baby had died and gone to heaven—and that they were very sad. But two years later Matthew still had questions. And the questions got harder to answer. He would ask, “Mom, if you can't see God, and God can't give

us Colin back, how do you even know God exists?”

“I was just floored,” says Gretchen Stroud, a deacon at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tenn. “I thought about it for a moment, and I said, ‘God doesn't always do what we want him to do.

That's not how it works. He can't bring Colin back to us but he is there to hold our hands and make us feel better when we are sad.' And he liked that."

Death is part of the natural cycle of life, but that does not mean adults feel inherently equipped to explain it to their children and grandchildren. Parents or teachers of very young children may be able to dodge explaining in detail the events of Good Friday, which make the glory of Easter Sunday possible. But at some point they will have to confront the issue of death and dying within the context of their Christian faith.

What do we believe?

Many adults may be looking for answers for themselves too. They may need to spend time thinking about what they believe, looking for guidance in the Bible and in the resources of Reformed theology. "We need to know what we think first," says Martha Bess DeWitt, director of Christian education at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville.

She suggests taking a look at the chapter on "The Funeral: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection" in the *Book of Common Worship*. It contains numerous passages of Scripture, such as Romans 6:3-4, which remind us that in life and in death we belong to God. The prayers in the service also provide comfort, and some voice a plea to God for help in understanding.

Joan Wagner, a member of Bardstown Road Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Ky., admits that talking about death is tough for her, even after having worked as a Christian education director for many years. As the mother of two young girls, she had to tackle the topic when her mother died of cancer a few years ago. She told her daughters simply that people go to live with God when they die, and their pain is over.



A COMFORTING PRESENCE: Children watch and learn from the way adults face death.

"I try to be careful about not saying something they have to unlearn later," she says.

Church leaders might consider convening a study group to discuss death, dying, heaven and related

asked without giving them a whole lot more than they're asking," says Carol Wehrheim, author of a number of books on children's spiritual development. Sometimes adults have a tendency to provide a detailed

The first step is to listen closely to what children are asking. Don't provide more information than a child is ready to handle.

topics, suggests Elizabeth Caldwell, associate dean and professor at McCormick Theological Seminary. The group could invite speakers to provide guidance.

Children watch and learn from the way adults face death, Caldwell says. "Parents need to think about what they believe and why they believe what they do, and then how they can communicate that to their children."

Too much information

Even young children have questions when someone dies. The first step is to listen closely to what they are asking.

"I've always believed that you try to answer the questions that you're

answer, with more information than the child is ready to handle.

It's important to acknowledge children's developmental stages. Young children are concrete thinkers. Euphemisms for "death" or "dying" can confuse a child who is not yet capable of abstract thought. Phrases like "passed away" or "didn't wake up" may sound kinder to an adult's ear, but they could be misleading or even scary to a child.

"If we say they went away, children may wonder why they don't come back," says Karen Marie Yust, a professor at Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education. "So we need to use the word 'dead,' and that means they won't be coming back."



WONDERING TOGETHER: Parents can admit to children that they don't have all the answers.

Explaining heaven

Conversations about death and dying may lead into the subject of heaven. Even for adults, heaven is a very abstract concept that defies easy description or understanding.

Debby Dugan found herself trying to explain heaven to a 3-year-old when her husband's parents both died within a fairly short time frame in 2008. Her son asked her questions about what happened to his grandmother, and she wasn't sure how to respond.

"So I just kept saying over and

over, 'She's in heaven,'" says Dugan, a deacon at South Aiken Presbyterian Church in Aiken, S.C. She and her

husband told him that he would see his grandmother again one day, which seemed to satisfy him.

"When it comes to heaven, part of what we need to think about as

21st-century people is how much do we think heaven is a particular place, and how much do we think heaven is a state of mind or a spiritual concept?" Yust says.

She suggests starting by talking about how the person who died is with God. "We are with God when we are alive, and we are with God when we're dead, and that doesn't change."

Heaven can be described as a place with "God's constant love and presence," DeWitt says. We can acknowledge that we don't fully understand heaven, but we do know what the Bible says: heaven is a place where no one is thirsty or hungry, where no one mourns, hurts or dies (see Revelation 21:1-4).

Before diving into a complicated conversation about heaven, Yust

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says, try asking the child what she or he thinks. "Part of our job is to see if they've already got ideas about it, because if they do, we can start there. If they don't, we can focus on feelings

GOOD GRIEF 4 ways to help children cope

Finding ways to remember the person who has died can help children work through their grief.

1. Explore children's books about death, dying and grieving. such as Marc Gellman's and Thomas Hartman's *Lost and Found: A Kid's Book for Living Through Loss*, Judith Viorst's *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, and Kathleen Bostrom's *What About Heaven?*

2. Make a memory book or album. Children can collect items that remind them of the person who has died and put them in a special box. Or choose

pictures and create a digital photo album through an online service like Shutterfly.com.

3. Attend the funeral or memorial service. This may not be advisable for very young children, but older children may find it comforting to attend a worship service and say "thank you" to God for the life of the one who has died.

4. Seek counseling. Just as many adults find solace in talking about their grief, children may benefit from talking about their feelings with a counselor, church school teacher or other trusted adult.

or ideas about, say, what it means to be in a place called heaven.”

“Sometimes you can turn it around and wonder together,” Caldwell says. “You don’t have to stop in shock that you don’t have the right answer.”

It’s OK to cry

Grieving is natural. Adults can reassure a child that it’s okay to cry and be upset—and to miss the person who has died. It’s okay for adults to cry and be sad too.

“I think you have to be really willing to show your own grief,” Wehrheim says. “Because that’s how [children] learn to grieve.”

Parents can tell their children that God is with us as we grieve, Yust says. “God’s still there. God cries with us. And God will be with the person who died.”

After Colin’s death, Gretchen and Brian Stroud hung a small shadow box on a wall in their living room. The box contains a cast of Colin’s footprints, so that they can remember the small boy who will always be in their memories, including Matthew’s.

“We have always been very open about the fact that he had a brother and that his brother died,” Gretchen says. “And if he asks about it, I say that he died and he is in heaven.”

“We’re still talking about it three years later, and my approach has changed as he’s gotten older,” she says, adding that she has been as honest as she can with her son about her sadness and his questions.

But she also is careful to look for the joy that comes with being Matthew’s mother, letting him know that she loves him and is glad that he is her son. “I don’t want Matthew to ever feel he’s not enough.”

Jennifer Larson is a freelance writer and member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tenn.



Jesus died and rose again

How do we explain the Easter message to children?

Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are hard enough for adults to grasp. So how does one explain all that to a preschooler who wants to know what Easter means?

The acronym **CHILD** offers an easy shorthand way to approach this and other difficult subjects:

- Consider the child’s age and developmental stage.
- Be **H**onest.
- Be **I**nvolved.
- Listen to the child and respond to the specific questions he/she is asking.
- Do it over and over again.*

When children are very young, it’s okay to gloss over details of Jesus’ violent death on the cross and bodily resurrection, says Martha Bess DeWitt, director of Christian education at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tenn.

“It’s simply more than you know they are capable of thinking about,” she says. Emphasize that Easter is about celebrating the presence of Jesus. “We celebrate that Jesus is with us forever, which is the whole point of the resurrection. Nothing can take Jesus away. Jesus is always with us.”

As children grow older, begin to approach the fact that Jesus died, but without dwelling on the details. Use statements like “Jesus died but he was alive again” when explaining the resurrection, suggests Karen-Marie Yust, a professor at Union-PSCE.

Very young children may not understand enough about how the world works to grasp exactly how miraculous Jesus’ resurrection is. But once they gain a better understanding of death, adults can discuss the events in more detail.

Another way to approach the story is to say that some people were angry with Jesus, and bad things happened as a result. Children can understand how anger got in the way of people’s right relationships with God and each other—and how wonderful it was that God made things better with the resurrection.—Jennifer Larson

*From *Alive Hospice in Nashville, Tenn.* (www.alivehospice.org)