



Think of the Children

A widow and mother writes books for children explaining serious situations using her own experience with her kids.

BY TANYA KENEVICH



When a family death or serious illness occurs, one of the first things that go through a family's thoughts is how they will explain it to younger children involved. Although many websites and various other resources provide information on how to better explain these serious events to children, Tiffany Williford decided to utilize a more "kid friendly" way through the books she has created.

Williford's late husband was admitted to the hospital the night before their daughter's first birthday. He had collapsed in the bathroom after coming home from work and was later diagnosed with colorectal cancer. During this time, Williford's oldest daughter kept asking questions about what was going on.

"At first, we thought the right approach was to not say much because it was a heavy topic," said Williford. "[But] we noticed that not explaining what was going on was causing more concern or uncertainty." Because of this, she decided to create a book that explained what was happening to her late husband. She called the cancer an "owie" and also explained the other situations her daughter was seeing, including hair loss, chemotherapy, fatigue and sensitivity to light.

"I talked about how sometimes Daddy has the energy to play and sometimes he does not, how we cannot jump on Daddy when he has his chemo pump on, how Daddy can't go outside too much because a lot of sun is not good for his skin," said Williford.

Her late husband was so impressed with the story that he told her she had to try to get it published, even buying her a computer so she could contin-

ue to make stories. The end result became *Daddy Has an Owie*; Williford also published *Mommy Has an Owie*.

Although Williford's husband would, sadly, lose his battle with cancer after three-and-a-half years, the books became popular and continue to educate children on what they are experiencing. "After publishing *Daddy Has an Owie* and *Mommy Has an Owie*, I kept having families, medical professionals, ministers and pastors ask me for a book on the death of a loved one. They would tell me of young children with a parent or loved one who passed away," Williford said. "At the same time, my youngest was starting to ask me more questions about her father's death. I had the conversation many times with my oldest, who was 4 when her dad passed, but now I needed to have the conversation with my youngest, who was 12 months when my husband died."

In turn, Williford wrote two more books: *Daddy Is an Angel* and *Mommy Is an Angel: Explaining a Parent's Death to a Child*.

Through her own experiences, Williford learned a lot about how to better explain these situations to children. "When it comes to difficult topics like a serious illness or a death, kids need to hear the same answers or explanations over and over again to get understanding, to get some form of comfort and reduce anxiety from the unknown," she said. "I even think hearing the same answer to a question gives some kids security."

She also learned that kids are sensitive to changes, moods and things we are going through as adults. When they are unsure about what is going on, it can create anxiety and fear. "Providing them with some degree of knowledge and understanding brings them comfort and opens the di-

alogue in the household. My girls continue to ask me questions as it pertains to their dad's cancer and death. We read the books still and they ask questions – sometimes the same ones as before and sometimes new ones," shared Williford. "It is hard enough for us as adults to understand serious illness and death; children are dealing with this right alongside their parents and loved ones. The books help bring understanding to their level and make them comfortable enough to have an open dialogue with their family."

In addition, Williford feels that we as a society don't give enough credit to children and their understanding of serious events. "Realizing how intuitive my daughters are has been a shock to me. They pick up on everything!"



she said. “The times I have not known the right words to explain what is going on or attempted to shelter them, I am shocked after talking to them what their level of awareness and maturity is.”

Using books like this can be powerful resources for funeral directors and the families they serve as well, Williford believes. “I think *Daddy Has an Owie* and *Mommy Has an Owie* are great books for explaining a parent’s cancer or serious illness during the battle and afterward. Even after a loved one has passed, a child is still trying to understand what cancer is, what a serious illness is, and relate it with why that caused

their loved one to not be here anymore,” she explained. *Daddy Is an Angel* and *Mommy Is an Angel* are great books to explain a parent or loved one’s death to a child. I mirrored the books after how I explained my late husband’s death to my girls. Even though their dad is no longer here physically, I wanted to let my girls know he will always be with them.”

Added Williford: “I think it is important for children to have that security that the love they have for their loved one does not go away and their loved one does not stop loving them just because they are no longer here physically. With the book’s whimsical il-

lustrations, it makes heavy topics a little lighter.”

The reactions to Williford’s books from both children and adults show how great they are with explaining serious issues. “I have been surprised by how many adults enjoy reading it. It’s shocking that some people have said [the books] have been comforting to read and they read them frequently, even though they are not dealing with the issues in the book. I didn’t expect elementary schools to buy them for guidance counselors or to help with social-emotional learning,” Williford said. “Churches use them to hand to families to extend support during illness and grief. Families grabbed all the copies in the hospital gift shop, and they sold out. Families across the country buy them to help their families during a difficult time.”

For Williford, the success of the books has been wonderful, but the enriching power of their content and their help to others has been the true prize.

“For me, writing each book and seeing how it has helped the families and professionals who reach out to me has been healing for my own grief. I haven’t had much control over my circumstances; it has been a hopeless feeling, like many of the directors and funeral staff reading this article see families feeling every day,” she said. “It has been nice to be able to do something, and it has been healing to help my children have a better understanding of their dad’s cancer and death through the books.” ☰

For more information on author Tiffany Williford and her books, visit daddyhasanowie.com.

Tanya Kenevich is a New Jersey-based freelance writer who has covered funeral service since 2008.



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