



Talking with a Child about Death and Loss

General Guidelines

- Speak simply and honestly. Explain clearly that death is the end and the person will not come back.
- Use concrete words like dead, died, or the body stopped working. Avoid the use of metaphors such as, “Daddy went to sleep,” “We lost mom,” “Grandpa passed away,” “Annie went for a long trip,” “He went to sleep.”
- Talk about the loss whenever your child brings up the subject. Do not force your child to talk about the death. Children can only process so much information at a time and what they can’t understand now may be brought up later.
- Let their questions lead the discussion. They’ll let you know when they are ready for more.
- Be patient with repeated questions.
- “I don’t know” is an okay answer to your child’s question. Ask them, “What do you think?” to give them permission to express their own thoughts and concerns.
- Don’t assume that children are too young to understand death or be impacted by it.
- Children grieve the secondary losses (different homes, new schools, new routines, etc.) that come with the loss of a loved one. They may seem more focused or upset about these than the death loss.
- Children are quick to blame themselves for the death and can secretly carry this guilt so reassure them they did not cause the death through their thoughts or actions.
- Be honest with your child about who will take care of him or her in the event of your death.
- Let your child know that crying is okay. Don’t be afraid to cry in front of them...it gives your child permission to cry.
- Try to maintain routine, rules and limits in order to provide a sense of security for the child.
- Their world can feel turned upside down so give them lots of choices to feel a sense of control.
- Children are perceiving the emotions around them...label them, describe them, discuss them.
- A grieving child needs to feel secure and taken care of with consistent hugs, kisses, and warmth.
- Help them find ways to express and comfort themselves such as art, reading, writing, music, and physical activities.
- Children grieve more intermittently than adults...one minute they are sad and the next minute they are playing and laughing.
- Children will revisit losses over their lifespan so what can seem like a step back is actually part of the process.
- Help your child recognize their support network so they have multiple people to turn to when in need.

Ages 2-6

- **Use simple language**
Truthful words like “dead,” “dying,” “died.”
“Death means not moving, not breathing, no seeing, and not feeling,”
“The person’s body does not work anymore,”
- **Tell the truth**
Be honest about what is happening
Talk about what they may hear
- **Provide a space for questions**
It’s okay to say that you don’t know
Explore what the answer may be together
Do not volunteer complex information
- **Allow All Feelings**
Encourage expressing feelings
Anger, sadness, crying
- **Express Yourself**
Share your feelings to let them know you are feeling too
- **Be Patient**
Children may ask to hear “the story” repeatedly
Children may ask the same questions again and again
- **What Ifs**
The child may be worried about other family members
Talk about who will care for the child
Provide reassurance
- **Exposure**
Limit time exposed to media, if there was media attention
Exposure may increase nightmares and worry
- **Outlets**
Continue with your daily routines as much as possible
Be flexible with what you child may need
Find time to express what’s going on inside

Ages 7-12

- **Answer questions promptly, simply, and to the point**
At this age, children may ask questions that may be “morbid,”
Give simple information to understand their reaction
Don’t be too graphic, as this may cause mental anguish
- **Guilt**
Children may feel guilty due to thoughts that they may have caused the death
Discuss these feelings and help them clear up misconceptions
- **Anger**
Children may feel anger toward the person who died for leaving them
Allow children to express these feelings and let them know its okay to have them
- **Worry**
Worry may arise of who will care for them or their siblings or friends
Offer reassurance and discuss how many people live to old age
- **Sharing**
You are grieving too, don’t be afraid to share your feelings
Expressing emotions helps the child see that it is acceptable to express their own emotions

Adolescents

Naturally changing hormones, mood swings, and bonds with their peers challenges an adolescent's role. It may increase the intensity of grief at times, making it harder to deal with the loss.

- **Talk about normal grief reactions**

It is normal to feel many emotions

Provide movies, books, music that they can identify with during this time

- **Express themselves**

Encourage teens to express themselves in ways that they feel is right as long as the behavior is not harmful to themselves or others

Suggest: journaling, art, sports, music

Model appropriate expressions of emotions yourself

- **Assurance**

Assure the teen that they do not have to take on an "adult" role now

Encourage engaging in their normal activities when they are ready

Provide support of what they think is best for them

Common Children/Adolescent Questions About Death

What does it mean to be "dead?"

Dead means not alive anymore. It means that they stopped breathing because their body doesn't need to anymore. Their heart stopped beating and their body doesn't work anymore. They don't eat or drink.

Use your spiritual beliefs to talk about what that may mean to you and your family.

Why do things or people die?

It is the cycle of life. For example, a leaf will be born on a tree and grown and get big, but in the fall, it may fall off the tree. It stops growing and dies.

Just because they are gone, does not mean they are gone from our lives. We will continue to remember them, and do things to remember them by.

Will I die?

All living things die, it is the cycle of life. But most people die when they are very old.

Will you die?

Yes, but know that many people live for a long time. If I were to die, ___ will care for you.

What happens after you die?

No one really knows. I think ___ happens. What do you think?