

Talking to Children About Death

Children & Grief

You know your child better than anyone else, but you may be feeling unsure about how to talk to them about death. This topic is difficult for most adults, especially when a history of losses has affected us. Our earliest experiences with death shape our perspectives well into adulthood, and our personal histories and cultural influences affect how we portray issues of death and dying to children. Here are some tips to help guide a discussion about death with your child.

1. **Act naturally.** This can be a very stressful and difficult topic to discuss. Try to act naturally when discussing death with your child. Be mindful of your tone and body language. Children read our cues- if you seem tense and upset your child may internalize very negative associations with death and dying.
2. **Be direct and avoid euphemisms.** Use words and terms that are simple and accurate. Explain that the person has died. Saying “the illness/disease/accident made their body stop working” is a good way to begin. As adults we use euphemisms because we may have negative associations with direct language surrounding death. Euphemisms such as *sleeping, passed away, resting, loss, etc.* may make us feel better but can add to a child’s confusion about death.
3. **Follow your child’s lead.** After giving a simple explanation, allow your child to guide the conversation. Give them the chance to ask questions, and before answering, be sure that you understand what your child is asking.
4. **Be honest.** Sometimes the simplest, most honest response is difficult during an emotional time. Children need honesty to feel secure. We want to answer all of our children’s questions and it can be hard to tell a child, “I don’t know.” This can be empowering and reassuring to your child, however, for them to know that no one has all the answers and it is normal for them to feel confused.
5. **Your child may need help understanding what “dead” means.** When a person dies, they are not alive anymore. The body has stopped working and the person cannot talk, breathe, walk, move, eat, grow, go to the bathroom, or do any of the things that s/he could do when they were alive. The person does not return.
6. **Children’s understanding of death is developmental.** Children’s understanding of death develops according to their experience and age. A young child may think of death as temporary or reversible, rather than permanent and irreversible, a change in understanding that typically happens between the ages of 6-10. Images from cartoons or movies may confuse a child’s perception of death as permanent as well as the use of euphemisms.
7. **Children generalize.** If the person died in a hospital, the child may assume that everyone who goes to the hospital dies. Similarly, if the person was sick before they

died, the child may assume that whenever someone gets sick they die. It can be helpful to explain to children that sometimes the body gets so sick that even doctors can't make it better, and that most people die after living a very long and healthy life.

8. **Children may have feelings of guilty and responsibility.** Children at any age may have feelings of guilt or responsibility following a death. A child may believe that they directly or indirectly caused someone's death. A child may feel guilty about something they said or did (or did not say or do) months or even years prior to the person's death. This may make us very uncomfortable but it is important to allow the child to express these thoughts/feelings and help them to understand the reality. It may be helpful to explain to your child that having regrets after someone died is normal but that doesn't mean that you did anything wrong or contributed to their death in any way.
9. **Share your own grief.** Appropriately share your own feelings with your child. Children learn by example, and receive permission and acceptance to grieve themselves when they see an honest expression of emotions from adults.
10. **Reassure your child of their own safety and your continued presence.** Any death reminds us of our own vulnerabilities so your child may need these reassurances several times in different ways. Depending on who has died and the child's relationship to the person, they may want to know who will take care of them if something should happen to you.