

Talking to Your Child About Death

Objective

To discuss death with your child in an age-appropriate manner.

What to Know

When a family loses a loved, children look to their parents or caretakers for information on what has happened and how the family will move forward. But having conversations about death with your child might feel awkward, overwhelming, or scary. Family members might even disagree on what and how to tell children. You can set the expectations for how the family will stabilize, connect, and communicate. Trust, honesty, and love are the core values that can help your family heal following a death.

How you communicate with your child depends on their age, psychological and emotional development, and maturity. Consider how children view and react to death at different stages. If your family includes siblings of different ages, the conversation should be suitable for the youngest child, so older children may need alone time with you to have their specific needs addressed. Here are some developmental issues to keep in mind:

Toddler (ages 2-4). Toddlers believe the world revolves around them and they think death is reversible. Offer reassurance to toddlers that they are safe, provide clarity about what death means, and comfort them with physical touch.

Young child (ages 5-7). Young children may still not understand that death is permanent. Explain what death means and discuss family beliefs about the afterlife. They are practicing independence and may need to balance that with receiving comfort.

Pre-teen (ages 8-11). Children understand that death is permanent and will have more questions about what happened. Offer honest, simple explanations, and reinforce that the death was not the child's fault.

Teen (ages 12-18). Teens are developing abstract, logical thinking and are more capable of talking about death. Encourage communication and expression of feelings.

Discuss the following points with all children in a manner that is age appropriate:

- death is part of life, and all living things die – including flowers, animals, trees, and people
- death is caused by physical reasons and is not a punishment
- the body does not work anymore because death ends all functions required for living
- death is permanent because body functions cannot be restored

Here are some additional guidelines. Be sure to consider your child's developmental stage.

- Prepare yourself and be thoughtful and intentional with your words.
- Use truthful, simple, clear, and direct words.

- Listen and comfort in a calm and caring way.
- Have conversations in a quiet, private place.
- Ask them what they already know about death.
- Allow them to talk about their story of what happened and be curious and affirming about their point of view.
- Be sensitive to their signals in case they need more information or reassurance.
- Ask open-ended questions instead of yes/no questions.
- Be prepared to discuss and answer repetitive questions.
- Be patient and sensitive to how they process information.
- Ask how they feel and if they understand what is being discussed.
- Judge how much to say and how to say it based on their reactions.
- Address specific issues they ask about, using very straightforward explanations.
- Avoid giving them more details than they are ready to process.
- Reinforce that they are not at fault.
- Share your own grief and how you are coping.
- If they ask about details surrounding the death, share basic information, but avoid graphic details.
- If the death was a suicide, reinforce the importance of talking about mental health. Talk openly about mental health concerns, especially suicidal thoughts, plans, and behaviors.
- Reassure them that they can ask questions any time and that you will do your best to answer them.
- Let your child know it takes time to feel better after a loss.

What to Do

Taking the above suggestions into account, use this worksheet to discuss death with your child.

Write down your child's age(s). _____

Do you have any concerns about developmental stage or maturity? Explain.

Label your feelings and put them into words, and then ask your child to describe what they are thinking and feeling. You might say, "I know you're feeling very sad. I'm sad, too. We both loved Grandpa, and he loved us too." Write down your feelings and things you might say to your child.

Feelings: _____

What you will say to your child: _____

Tell your child what to expect to prepare them for changes in their life or routine. Explain what will happen.

Explain the events that will happen and allow them to participate in rituals like viewings, wakes, funerals, or memorial services. Tell them ahead of time what will happen. What will you say?

You might need to explain burial or cremation. You might say, "After the funeral, there is a burial at the cemetery. _____'s body is in a casket (or coffin) that gets buried in the ground with a special ceremony. This can feel like a sad goodbye, and people might cry." Write down what will happen in a way that your child will understand.

What will you tell your child about what will happen after the service?

Having a small, active role can help your child feel part of things and help them cope. Your child could read a poem, pick a song to be played, gather some photos to display, or make something. Let your child decide if they want to take part, and how. Write down some ideas.

In the days and weeks ahead, encourage your child to draw pictures or write stories about their loved one. What are some other ways you can share happy memories?

Support groups and counseling can help your family if you require more support. Check community resources, or visit these online resources: <https://www.dougy.org>, <https://good-grief.org>, <https://www.griefcounselor.org/resources/helpful-websites>

Whom can you ask for help? What resources might support your family?

You might spend a lot of time talking and listening. Occasionally switch to an activity or topic that helps your child feel a little better. Play a game, do crafts together, bake cookies, or spend time at the park. What can you do?

Healing and moving forward includes remembering the deceased person with love. What are some ways you can help your child preserve their memories?

Note: If a loved one's death was sudden, deeply stressful, or violent, your child may need individual counseling. If your child's distress lasts for more than a few weeks, or if you think your family requires more help, reach out to your child's doctor or your family's therapist.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
