



Talking to Children About Death

Helping a child deal with death and dying can be very challenging. Most children have neither the life experience nor the intellectual or emotional development that allows them to understand death as adults do. But children need to process grief in an age appropriate way. Most important is giving information to children and listening to their responses.

Explaining how we feel when someone we love dies can also be helpful. Tell the child this emotion is grief and it is very normal to be very sad when we hear the news. This may also be a good time to talk about the family's beliefs about the afterlife.

Each child is unique. One may seem unfazed by the news, while another may express extreme emotions. Regardless of their reactions, children need to understand the situation if they are to successfully grieve and accept the death of a loved one.

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Each age group may need a different approach as you discuss death and dying.

- Three to five year-old children rarely understand the concept of forever. They may see death as temporary, reversible, or a restricted form of existence.
- By ages six to nine, children begin to understand death is final, but they may think it happens only to other people.
- Between ages nine and twelve, many children understand that death is final, but they may possibly see death as distant from themselves.
- Adolescents are forging their own identities. Many do so by pushing their parents away. Such distancing from family is part of normal separation.

How to Help a Child Understand Death.

- Take the initiative to begin the conversation. Depending on the child's attention span, your conversation may be brief, but try to ensure that it's not interrupted.
- Explain the importance of what you want to say. For example, "I want to talk with you about something very important."
- Be truthful. Telling "white lies" only confuses a child.
- Ask what they think will happen. You can explain the nature of the illness and the possibility that the child's loved one may die soon.
- Ask what they want to do. Maybe they would like to tell their loved one something. Children often have incredible ideas that can make this time very special.
- Address their fears. Assure them you will be there for them. Children need the security of an adult who will care for them.
- Emphasize that it's not their fault. Use clear, direct explanations of what happened so they don't assume their actions or thoughts caused the loved one's illness or death.
- This may be an excellent time to teach a child the basics of what it means to physically die. Explaining that the heart stops, that the person stops breathing and that he or she cannot talk or feel are important teaching points.
- Deal with questions. Answer only what the child is asking. Do not belittle the questions, and let the child know they can talk to an adult any time they want.

- Answer as best you can when children ask "why?" No one has all the answers, and an "I do not know" might be the best and most honest response.
- Include them. Let children visit and maybe even help you care for their loved one. A child's understanding and healthy acceptance of a loved one's death can grow from seeing, doing and participating in the care of that person.

How to Help Prepare a Child for a Funeral.

- Give them a detailed explanation of what happens before and during a funeral, including what the venue will look like, what happens to the body, and how the attendees will behave.
- Be sensitive to their reaction; there may be fear, even panic, in anticipating the event.
- If the child doesn't attend, plan carefully who will be with them during the funeral. Later, discuss the funeral with them.
- Talk about the burial or cremation. In age-appropriate terms, explain what the burial and cremation processes entail.
- If young children are attending a service, pack some quiet activities for them if they become fidgety or need a break. Some funeral homes provide this.

If a child is faced with a situation where they have to deal with the death of a loved one, they are doing so at a time in their emotional development where they may be ill-equipped to grasp what has happened and cope with the ramifications. But children can be surprisingly resilient; with the right support and the right approach from the adults around them, it is possible for children of all ages to find their own, age-appropriate way to successfully grieve and come to terms with the death of someone they love.