

# Talking with Children about Death and Grief



How do you talk to children about death? It is best to be honest, using age-appropriate language. Here are some other observations and tips that can help adults have sensitive discussions with children who are experiencing a loss due to death:

- Avoid euphemisms such as “went to sleep,” “lost,” “passed away,” or “expired.” Depending on their age and experience, children may not understand these terms as adults do. Use the words “dead” and “dying” to avoid confusing the child.
- Encourage the child to discuss, ask questions and express feelings, but don’t push the subject on the child. Just bringing up the subject lets a child know you are a safe person to talk to.
- Children may distract themselves to avoid emotional “flooding” when you do bring it up. This is normal. They may change the subject, get silly or leave.
- Important adults in the child’s life can and *should* express their feelings, such as crying or anger, in the child’s presence. This helps the child understand that these feelings are OK and can be a way to open up a conversation. You can explain, “I’m crying because I’m sad that \_\_\_\_\_ is sick/died. I really miss him/her.”
- Children may also feel guilty about being happy, laughing or having fun when someone is ill or has died. Reassure them that these feelings are normal, and it is OK to enjoy life.
- Answer children’s questions, but don’t provide unnecessary information they haven’t asked for.
- Be prepared for the child to return to you from time to time to ask more questions—or repeat a question. Be consistent in your responses.
- Use the child’s age and maturity level to decide how much of the details you give.
- You can open the conversation with a question, such as “What do you understand about what is happening/happened with \_\_\_\_\_?” By their response, you can gauge what they already know. Then you can fill them in further and answer questions.
- If they ask you a question you don’t know the answer to, be honest that you don’t know the answer.

*Continued*

## Talking with Children about Death and Grief, continued

### Questions children may ask:

*What caused [their loved one] to get sick or die?*

Death due to age or illness may be easier to explain to a child. Violent deaths, such as suicide or murder, are more difficult for a child to understand. Being honest is important. Also, children need to be told that they did not cause the death of their loved one, nor is the death a punishment to the grieving child.

*What will happen when he/she dies? Where is the body?*

Children need to know what happens to the physical body of their loved one. What a child imagines can be more frightening than reality. You can say, “When someone dies, their body stops working. Their hearts stops pumping blood to the rest of their body and they stop breathing.” You can then discuss with them where the body is and what will happen to it.

*Will it happen to me? Will it happen to you?*

- Reassure children that the illness isn’t “catchable.”
- Be honest: “Sometimes people get a very serious illness, and medicine doesn’t make it go away.”
- You may need to stress that we all get sick occasionally, and we usually get better. You can also say that you expect yourself and the child to live a long time. Children need to know that their needs will be met if their caregivers aren’t able to take care of them. “I expect to live a long life, but if something were to happen, I have talked with \_\_\_\_\_, and they will take care of you.”

Remember that you cannot “fix” this for them. You cannot take the pain away, but you can help in other ways:

- Tell the child you are available to listen and talk.
- Acknowledge that there has been a loss in the child’s life.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Maintain routine and set limits.
- Remember that certain times of the year (holidays, anniversaries, Mother’s Day, etc.) may be difficult.



**How a grieving child may act:** Grief affects everyone differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. As with grieving adults, children will have good days and bad days. A child is likely to show sadness, anxiety, fatigue, anger and fear. They may show anxiety or have fears of being separated from you, being alone or being forgotten. Expression of grief is likely to take place during physical activities such as play and art. Pay attention to this and talk to the child about it.