

How to Talk to Kids About Death and Grief

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Loss is difficult for all of us, and children are no exception. They need a powerful network of love and support to navigate grief. Children’s first experience with mortality often comes with the death of a grandparent or a cherished pet. The death of a pet is significant and can be as painful as the death of a family member. In the wake of any bereavement, kids need honesty, comfort and someone to listen to their thoughts and ease their fears.

“It’s normal to want to protect children from the pain of loss,” says Jenna Glover, PhD, a pediatric psychologist. “But avoiding the topic can make them feel even more alone and confused than they already do. It’s important to talk with kids directly about what has happened and how they feel about it.”

“Children are resilient,” adds [child life specialist](#) Megan Fisher, BS, CCLS. “When they learn difficult information in a developmentally appropriate way, from a safe person, they can process the information, express their emotions and emerge stronger.”

While a child's ability to understand death varies depending on their age and emotional and developmental level, as well as the closeness of the lost loved one, here are some general guidelines for how to help kids deal with death. Read on to learn how children in different age groups understand death, react to it, and ways to help them process their grief.

Tips for talking to children about death

Parents and caregivers should talk to their children directly about death and loss. It's OK to talk about death itself and the many feelings that come with grief and loss, especially if they were close to the person or pet.

Begin by explaining what death is and what it means based on your family's values and background. When speaking with your children, identify a safe space and time. It's also important to use a warm and gentle tone. Establish eye contact and get on the child's level when talking to them.

Think about what your child already understands or thinks is happening, so you know how to gear your conversation. Let them lead the conversation by asking, "Do you know what is happening?" Remember to only answer their questions, or given them just enough information to help them understand. Often times, adults explain or share too much information, and this can lead to confusion. For example, some children understand the finality of death better than others. Tailor your language to the child's level. (More on this below.)

Be clear and concrete

Avoid using abstract words or euphemisms for death, like "fell asleep," "passed away" or "went away." This can be confusing, especially for younger children, as it may make them think that their loved one will eventually come back.

Instead, explain death in clear, simple terms, such as, "She is dead. Her body has stopped working." Using concrete words and terms is important, like:

- Explain that the word "died" means that the body stopped working, that doctors couldn't fix it, and that the loved one won't be coming back.
- Explain in the context of well-known life functions (for example, how the person no longer breathes, eats, thinks or feels).

Include children in the process (if they want to)

When someone dies, it can be helpful to include children in mourning rituals such as funerals, memorial services and any activities to commemorate the loved one. For many children, having a ceremony and continuing to visit a grave on special occasions, such as holidays or times when they especially miss them, can help provide closure and aid in the grieving process. That said, it's important to offer this as a choice because not all kids will understand or benefit from attending these rituals.

Explain what is involved in the funeral or ceremony ahead of time, including who will be there, where the body will be, and that many people may be crying or feeling sad.

Feelings and questions are OK

It's OK to let your child see your emotional pain. Crying is a natural reaction to grief, and it may help your child feel more comfortable sharing their own feelings.

Explain to your child that strong feelings are part of grief and that they can come and go for a long period of time. These feelings include sadness, anger, fear and even rage. Be sure to normalize these feelings and encourage them to feel and express their feelings in safe, healthy ways.

Honor children's questions about death and ask them what they think. This can help you understand their knowledge about death.

Be patient

Be patient with your child. They may need to have the same questions answered several times, or they may have more questions later.

Give your child space and time to process their feelings. This could include creating a special place for feeling their feelings and holding an object or picture that reminds them of their loved one.

And remember, grief is a process that takes time. Be available as they process what the death means to them.

Ask for help if you need it

Watch for signs that your child may need help coping with the death of a special person and consider reaching out to a counselor or therapist to provide additional support. These signs include:

- Extreme behavior changes (such as being withdrawn or aggressive)
- Change in school attendance or school performance
- Changes in sleeping, eating and mood

Take care of yourself, too

Remember to take care of yourself during this difficult time. You can help your child best when you are calm and rested. If you need more help with your own grieving process, or you're struggling with depression or feelings of overwhelm or hopelessness, reach out for support from a mental health professional.

Helping children grieve: ages 6 to 9

How do elementary school-aged kids understand death?

Around age 6, children are beginning to understand the finality of death. Generally, 6- to 9-year-olds:

- Begin to understand that death is final and irreversible.
- See death as possible, but only for others; for example, "It only happens to 'old people.'"
- May have a hard time talking about feelings regarding death.
- May show their anxiety and fear of death by becoming fearful of the unknown or of separation from family and friends.

What are some normal responses to death for this age group?

- May blame themselves for death and experience guilt.
- Trouble concentrating, including difficulties at school.
- Changes in behavior, such as increased aggression or withdrawal.
- Physical symptoms, such as headache or abdominal pain.
- Trouble separating from family members or caregivers.
- Difficulty returning to school.

How can I help my child understand and process their grief?

- Be honest and use concrete terms to describe death.
- Answer questions truthfully. It's also OK to answer, "I don't know. Let me find out."
- Maintain daily routines and provide opportunities to play, draw, or write about experiences or feelings.
- Encourage your child to take part in family good-bye rituals, including funerals and memorial services.
- Explain what is involved in ceremony, including who will be there, where the body will be (for example, in a casket) and that people may be crying or feeling sad.

Ways to memorialize the loved one who died

- Encourage your child to express their feelings and create opportunities to share memories about the special person who has died.
- Write a goodbye letter to the loved one or a poem about them.
- Make and decorate a memory box that includes photographs, drawings, descriptions of favorite memories or special moments, or what your child will miss most about the loved one.
- Make a scrapbook with photos, drawings, letters, or words about the loved one.
- Older children may want to write about their feelings in a journal.